

Locating “I think, therefore I am” in the *Meditations*

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## Abstract

“I think, therefore I am” (*Cogito, ergo sum*) suggests a “naïve” interpretation whereby anyone who argues as follows is certain of their existence.

I think.  
Therefore, I am.

Curiously, the famous line doesn’t appear in the *Meditations*, while it does in Descartes’ other works. Does the naïve interpretation, while a plausible reading of the other works, misread the *Meditations*? In this thesis, I claim that the *Meditations* should be naïvely interpreted by defending this position against three central objections.

Objection 1: Nowhere in the *Meditations* does the meditator assert that *cogito* is certain. I respond that the meditator does assert the certainty of *cogito* in the first meditation as he doubts his beliefs. This happens when he makes judgments about what he is thinking such as: “I have no answer to these [skeptical] arguments” and “my habitual opinions keep coming back.”

Objection 2: Even if the meditator claims *cogito* in the *Meditations*, he never accounts for why *cogito* is certain, which he must do if he uses it as a premise. I show that an argument for the certainty of *cogito* can be reconstructed by examining how the meditator doubts his beliefs. The idea behind the argument is that for the meditator to doubt his belief system it’s necessary that he is certain that he thinks, in particular, that he is certain about what his beliefs are and their amenability to doubt. In short, the certainty of *cogito* is built into the method of doubt.

Objection 3: The naïve interpretation of the *Meditations* is false since Descartes says that the cogito is not an argument. For, he says that the cogito is a “simple intuition of the mind”, not a “deduction by means of syllogism.” I respond that Descartes is not denying that the cogito is an argument. He is specifying the type of reasoning process one must use to work through the argument from *cogito* to *sum*—*sum* is discovered by “intuition” rather than syllogistic reasoning.

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I also have friends. Thank you to my flatmates—Brayden, Jayde, Kyle, and Tod—for enduring my quiddities. Tod, I'm grateful for the rescue from Opoho and tussling on the bike polo court. To Olivia and Britta, just tone down the zeal. Olivia, you hike so fast that you're going to hurt yourself. Britta, put down the carrot.

Bye New Zealand. I'll see you soon.

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## A Note on Translation and Citation

In this thesis, all citations of Descartes will be doubly cited. The first citation is from *Collected Works*, a compendium of Descartes' oeuvre assembled by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery ("AT"). This is followed by a citation from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, an English translation by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny ("CSMK").

I will almost exclusively quote the CSMK translation of Descartes's writings. In several places in which the textual analysis is more exacting, I will quote the Latin from AT.

For brevity's sake, in-text references to secondary literature will be limited to a page number closed by parenthesis. If I cite multiple works by one commentator, the year of publication is included in the in-text citation. Full citations are found in the bibliography, formatted in MLA 7.

## Introduction

Famous quotes, as they become famous, sometimes get dislodged from where they were first said. This is true in the work of Descartes. “I think, therefore I am” is not stated in the *Meditations*, what is now Descartes’ most widely read work. It does show up, though, in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Principles of Philosophy*. So, many who read the *Meditations* for the first time, often familiar with Descartes’ most famous saying, are as surprised by its absence as scholars are eager to point out the aberration.

But what are we to make of the gap? At several junctures in the *Meditations*, the meditator makes claims about his thoughts, his existence, and their relations, most notably at the beginning of the second meditation (AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17). In the *Meditations*, did Descartes refine, or even omit entirely, the philosophical insight expressed by “I think, therefore I am”? The overarching claim of my thesis is “no.” Descartes neither omitted nor significantly refined the philosophical insight expressed by “I think, therefore I am” in the *Meditations*.

Shortly, I will state three central objections I will respond to in order to support my overarching claim that there is no “cogito gap” between the *Discourse* and the *Principles*, on the one hand, and the *Meditations*, on the other. However, first I must explain what philosophical insight Descartes is communicating with his famous saying.

To draw out the philosophical insight, I will follow Margaret Wilson, who offers a “naïve” interpretation of the famous saying (50-71). Although Wilson doesn’t mention it explicitly, the naïve interpretation, I take it, earns that innocent title because it’s suggested

merely by considering the saying “I think, therefore I am” in isolation of the contexts in the *Discourse* and the *Principles* where Descartes asserts it.

On the naïve reading, the meditator of the *Meditations* is presenting an argument. This is suggested by the phrase “therefore” (*ergo*). The argument establishes that the meditator is certain that he exists. The argument is this.

I think.  
Therefore, I am.

Suppose, for expository purposes, that I’m deploying this argument. The premise of the argument—I think—is something I’m certain of. I’m also certain that my existence follows from the fact that I think. From these two pieces, I infer the conclusion that I exist. And when I make this argument I become certain that I exist, since the conclusion is established by a certain premise and a certain logical entailment between the premise and the conclusion. Anyone else can make this argument, and so be certain that she too exists. A few clarifications should be made about the naïve argument to avoid confusion.

First, a note about the meaning of the premise “I think” (*cogito*). As I will use the term, when someone judges “I think”, or uses “I think” as a premise in an argument, she is saying that there is some thought currently going on in her mind or, as is now common parlance, she is in some mental state. So, when someone judges “I think” or uses “I think” as a premise, I will say that she is making a “second-order judgment.” A second-order judgment is a judgment about one’s own mental state rather than a “first-order judgment”, which is only about some worldly content. “It will rain” is a first-order judgment whereas “I believe that it will rain” is a second-order judgment. Crucially, on my usage, when someone judges “I think” they could be referring to any first-order mental state that they are in at the time of that judgment. For example, they could be referring to their (first-order)

belief that it's raining, their (first-order) state of imagining that it's raining, or that they are having a generic (first-order) thought. For someone to claim "I think"—*cogito*—is for that person to judge that they are in some first-order mental state, whatever it may be.

I believe this broad definition of *cogito* is how Descartes understood the term.

Descartes widely defines thought (*cogitatio*) as:

Everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it. Thus all operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses are thoughts. I say 'immediately' so as to include the consequences of thoughts; a voluntary movement, for example, originates in a thought but is not itself a thought. (AT VII 160; CSMK 2:113)

Descartes also identifies "operations of the will, the intellect, the imagination and the senses" with attitudes such as doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, unwilling, imagining, and having sensory perceptions (AT VII 28; CSMK 2:19). Given Descartes' broad definition of thought, when someone judges "I think", they are referring to any of their current first-order mental states of doubting that such and such, of understanding that such and such, of just thinking (in a generic, unspecified sense), and so on.<sup>1</sup>

The reason I have specified that, on my usage, the judgment "I think" may report some first-order mental state that is not stated by the proposition "I think" is that there are alternative interpretations of the *cogito*<sup>2</sup> that understand the proposition *cogito*—"I think"—

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes' letter from March 1638 (AT II 37) is additional evidence that he understands the judgment that "I think" to be a second-order judgment about one's first-order mental life. In the letter, Descartes says that to make the argument "I have the opinion that I am breathing, therefore I am" is "just the same as" arguing "I am thinking, therefore I am." He then goes on to say that "all the other propositions [e.g. "I have the opinion that I am breathing"] from which we can conclude our existence come back to this one [*cogito*]."

<sup>2</sup> Following standard convention in Descartes scholarship, when I write "the cogito" ("cogito" unitalicized and preceded by a definite article) I'm using this phrase as a



differently. On this other picture, “I think” is the sort of proposition that is made true just by my judging it. In this way, “I think” shares something special with other propositions such as: “This is a statement of my resignation” and “I judge that you are the winner.” Perhaps one way of expressing what these propositions have in common is that, in the contexts in which they are asserted, they are guaranteed to be true. If someone genuinely asserts one of these propositions and understands what she is asserting, then the proposition must be true. Burge (92) and Williams (59) call these propositions “self-verifying.” It might be thought that since the proposition “I think” is self-verifying in this sort of way, it follows that “I think” is also certain. Williams (59) considers an argument along these lines. I will not attempt to illuminate the nature of self-verifying propositions, how “I think” may be self-verifying, and how this connects to the certitude of “I think.” I only bring this up to clarify that on my use of “I think”, it doesn’t express a self-verifying proposition since when I judge “I think”, I may be referring to some first-order mental state, like my first-order desire for chocolate, which is not in the content of “I think.”<sup>3</sup> I have also presented some evidence on the previous page that Descartes understood the proposition “I think”—*cogito*—as I do.

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convenient way of referring to Descartes’ discussion of his first principle across his later writings.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the self-verifying reading of *cogito* is best brought out when *cogito* is translated as “I am thinking”, rather than “I think” (the former version is how the CSMK translation renders it in the *Discourse*. See CSMK 1:127). The proposition “I am thinking” may appear to have an active, self-referential quality that is central to the notion of self-verification. Perhaps the most famous discussion of self-verification and the *cogito* occurs in Hintikka (14-18), who was predominantly interested in the self-verifying properties of uttering “I exist” (rather than “I think”, which is my focus in this thesis). He also seems to have meant something different by “self-verifying” than Williams and Burge—Hintikka’s usage concerns, as I understand him, the pragmatic properties of asserting the proposition “I exist.” I will not go into this further.

A second clarification is that on the naïve interpretation, the meditator concludes that he exists by doing more than judging himself to be in some first-order mental state. The meditator is also judging that his existence is entailed by the fact that he is thinking. Many questions arise here. For example, in meditator's argument, is it necessary that he marks out the fact that he thinks entails that he exists as a separate premise from *cogito* in order to become certain that he exists? Or, is concluding *sum* on the basis of *cogito* enough? Does the meditator need to recognize that the fact that he thinks entails that he exists is an instance of a more general principle such as "Whatever thinks exists"? Why is it true that my thinking entails my existence? I will put off these questions until the third chapter of my thesis where I will examine how Descartes begins to answer these questions. The naïve interpretation is neutral about the answers to these questions.

Third, note that in the naïve argument, the meditator doesn't need to judge "I think *is certain*" to become certain of his existence. In other words, the premise doesn't need to be: "It is certain that I think." Relatedly, the conclusion doesn't have to include certainty. The reason why is that, as we will soon see, the meditator accepts, as a tenet of his method of doubt, that he should only make judgments that are certain. Thus, it's implied that the premise and conclusion are things of which the meditator believes to be certain, in addition to being true.<sup>4</sup>

Fourth, the naïve argument doesn't establish that the reasoner persists, or exists for any period except for the instant at which she is certain that she thinks. So, a completely accurate version of the naïve argument would have the premise and conclusion indexed to the exact same time.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of what Descartes means by "certainty", see chapter two, page 68-70.

My thesis argues for the naïve interpretation of the *Meditations* by responding to three central objections.

In the first chapter, I take up the objection that the naïve interpretation is incorrect since nowhere in the text of the *Meditations* does the meditator judge *cogito*. That is, nowhere does the meditator make a certain categorical second-order judgment. I argue that the meditator does make categorical second-order judgments that he regards as certain in the first meditation when he makes remarks such as “I have no answer to these arguments [the skeptical arguments]” and “my habitual opinions keep coming back, and despite my wishes, they capture my belief” (AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15). I go on to argue that in the first meditation, by engaging in the process of doubting his first-order beliefs, the meditator is committed to the Certainty of Mind Thesis (“CM”), the view that all his second-order judgments are certain. Surprisingly, then, the meditator has some certainty even in the first meditation. I close by arguing that when the meditator begins the second meditation, he uses these second-order judgments as a premise in his argument for *sum*.

In the second chapter, I respond to the objection that if the meditator were to derive *sum* from certain second-order judgments (which is what the naïve interpretation claims), then the mediator should provide an account of why his second-order judgments are certain, but he lacks such an account. I argue that an argument for the Certainty of Mind Thesis can be reconstructed in the first meditation that bears resemblance to an argument developed by Tyler Burge. The general idea behind the argument is that the meditator’s process of doubt requires certain second-order judgments. The meditator must be able to be certain about the structure and substance of his (first-order) belief system. He also must have certain second-order judgments to monitor whether his beliefs have changed in the face of the skeptical

arguments and determine when he has completed the project of doubting his beliefs. In short, certain higher-order judgments are built into the method of doubt.

The connecting theme of chapters one and two is that a close look at the first meditation, particularly the role of reflection in the method of doubt, provides novel responses to two central problems for the naïve interpretation. It turns out that *cogito*, the premise of the meditator's argument for his existence, is claimed in the first meditation. Also, we will see that in the first meditation the meditator has an argument available to him that establishes the certainty of *cogito* and more generally the certainty of the access he has over his own mind.

In the third chapter, I examine the objection that the *cogito* is not an argument at all. This objection emerges not from the text of the *Meditations* but from passages in the *Objections and Replies to the Meditations* as well as Descartes' *Conversation with Burman*. For example, in one of the passages Descartes says: "When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind" (AT VII 140-141; CSMK 2:100). I argue that Descartes here is not denying that the *cogito* is an argument. Rather, he is specifying the type of process by which someone must reason through the argument from *cogito* to *sum*—*sum* is discovered by what he calls "intuition" rather than syllogistic reasoning. To defuse the tension, I examine Descartes' account of various types of reasoning—intuition, deduction, and syllogism—present in one of his earliest written works, the *Regulae*.

## Chapter 1: *Cogito* is Claimed in the First Meditation

What is the earliest place in the *Meditations* where the meditator is certain of something? It's tempting to think that there is a clear answer to this question. The tempting answer is that the meditator waits until the third paragraph of the second meditation to consider what is beyond doubt.<sup>5</sup> There, he presents an argument for, or, more modestly, considers the certainty of his thoughts, existence, and/or their relations. Call this reading—that the meditator waits until the second meditation to begin his positive quest for certainty rather than what is uncertain—the “traditional” reading.

The traditional reading is plausible on a first read. Evidence for the traditional reading can be found by comparing the titles of the first and second meditations. The title of the first is “What can be called into doubt”, whereas the title of the second is “The nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body.”

In this section, I will argue that this traditional reading is false, though made very enticing by how the meditator appears to alert the reader to where his positive epistemology begins. A close reexamination of the end of the first meditation will reveal that the meditator, at this early stage, holds that more than several of his thoughts are certain, and relies on this claim to argue for the certitude of his existence. In light of this reexamination, we should adopt the revisionary reading that the first meditation is the starting point of the meditator's argument for the certainty of his existence. So, generalizing this point, it's also the starting point of his positive quest for certainty.

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<sup>5</sup> The third paragraph is at AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17.

My motivation for pitching this interpretive shift is to defend the naïve reading of the *Meditations*. The naïve interpretation says that the meditator advances an argument of the form:

I think  
Therefore, I am

The naïve interpretation faces a simple textual objection: nowhere in the text of the *Meditations* does the meditator categorically assert that “I think” is certain, or that any of his second-order thoughts are certain. So, it’s wrong to read the meditator as making the argument represented above. As I will soon explain, the force of this simple textual objection depends, falsely in my view, on considering the second meditation as the starting point for the meditator’s positive search for certainty.

Harry Frankfurt makes this objection in *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, his famous commentary on the *Meditations*. “If the peculiar value of deriving *sum* from *cogito* actually consisted in the certitude of *cogito*,” he writes, “Descartes ought to establish or at least to claim that *cogito* is in fact a statement of which he is certain. He does not do so” (111). In agreement with Frankfurt, Janet Broughton calls the fact that the meditator never asserts the certainty of his thoughts in the second meditation a “puzzle” that seriously undermines the naïve interpretation (2008, 182-183).

Before I explain why the traditional reading is mistaken, let us see why it’s so tantalizing. Consider the subheading of the first meditation: “What can be called into doubt” (AT VII 17; CSMK 2:12). That makes it sound as though the meditator is not setting out, just yet, to find what is certain and indubitable. Rather, the task of the first meditation is to discover what can be doubted. Indeed, the meditator’s sustained presentation of a series of skeptical arguments do just what the subheading says—expose

his beliefs to doubt. Furthermore, Descartes intends for the skeptical arguments, the levers of his project of doubt, to be the principal focus of the first meditation. Indeed, in the *Second Replies*, he says that he intends readers to “devote several months, or at least weeks” to the skeptical arguments before going on to the rest of the book (AT VII 130; CSMK 2:94).

The meditator also *seems* to be very explicit that the second meditation is where he will begin to uncover beliefs that are certain. Midway through the first paragraph of the second meditation he says:

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that this is no certainty. (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16)

An implication of this appears to be that he has not at this point in the text, or previously, found anything certain. Shortly, I will explain why such a conclusion would be a mistake—the meditator does find certain beliefs in the first meditation.

The traditional reading holds that it’s not until the third paragraph of the second meditation, that the meditator discovers a certain belief of some sort. Because of the way the meditator, in what was just quoted, appears to mark out the third paragraph as the place in which he will discover the first thing he is certain of, the “Archimedean point” (ibid), many think that the third paragraph is *the* authoritative passage on Descartes’ views about the relation of *cogito* and *sum*. This is the passage:

Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is nothing else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I myself may perhaps be the author of my thoughts. In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that

there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17. Italics are Descartes)

Of the passage, Frankfurt writes:

The statement, *I think, therefore I am*, simply does not occur in the passage at all; and neither does any exactly equivalent statement. In fact, the *cogito* as such does not appear anywhere in the Meditations. I propose to take Descartes's text on its own terms and to approach it without preconceptions based on the speculation that *cogito ergo sum* adequately formulates its meaning. (Frankfurt, 92, italics are Frankfurt's).

In the end, I think there is something correct in Frankfurt's remark. In the passage, there is no point at which Descartes asserts verbatim "I think, therefore I am."

However, at the least, the meditator is asserting that several of his thoughts entail that he exists. I will point out four of these entailments.

First, the line, "No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed."<sup>6</sup> seems equivalent to:

(1) If I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed.

The next two sentences are a little trickier to interpret, both because the first sentence starts with "but" (*sed*) and because the first half of the second sentence, the clause that ends with the semicolon, seems more germane to the first sentence—showing something that follows from what is being supposed in the first—rather than the second sentence, which expresses a slightly different claim.

But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me;

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<sup>6</sup> "*Imo certe ego eram, si quid mihi persuasi.*"



and let him deceive me as much as he case, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. (AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17)<sup>7</sup>

Note that the “but” that begins these sentences plays the role of introducing considerations—a supposed evil demon—that is claimed to bear on the truth of (1). Thus, the first sentence and the second sentence up until the semicolon don’t express a new entailment of the form: “If I am deceived by a powerful and cunning deceiver, then I undoubtedly exist.” What they express is a slightly modified version of (1):

(2) If I convince myself of something, then I certainly exist, even if I am being deceived.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the remainder of the second sentence can be rendered:

(3) If I think that I am something, then indubitably I exist.

And the final sentence, the “conclusion” Descartes reaches after “considering everything very thoroughly”<sup>9</sup> might be read as

(4) If I conceive of or put forward the proposition “I exist” in my mind, then I exist.

Before I move on, I wish to say why the traditional reading makes the naïve interpretation looks so unpromising. Recall that on the naïve interpretation the meditator establishes that he exists with certainty by inferring this from the premise “I think”, which he regards as certain, and, as I understand Descartes’ usage of “I think”, it’s equivalent to

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<sup>7</sup> “*Sed est deceptor nescio quis, summe potens, summe callidus, qui de industriâ me semper fallit. Haud dubie igitur ego etiam sum, si me fallit; & fallat quantum potest, nunquam tamen efficiet, ut nihil sim quamdiu me aliquid esse cogitabo.*”

<sup>8</sup>A subtlety about the past/present tense: if my reading of (2) as being a modification of (1) in the way described is correct, it seems plausible that Descartes would have allowed (1) to be rewritten in the present tense, since the two sentences that begin with “But” are themselves in the present tense. This point about tense is significant because “I think, therefore I am” is in the present tense.

<sup>9</sup> “*Adeo ut, omnibus satis superque pensitatis, denique statuendum sit hoc pronuntiatum, Ego sum, ego existo, quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur, necessario esse verum.*”

any second-order judgment such as “I’m thinking about my dog” or “I don’t believe in ghosts.” If this paragraph at AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17 is the focus point for deciphering Descartes’ views on the relation between “I think” and “I exist”, then he only asserts the four distilled entailments, each a species of the genus “If I think, I exist.” This creates a stumbling block—a “puzzle” as Broughton puts it (2008, 182-183)—for the naïve interpretation, since nowhere therein does the meditator assert the antecedents of any of the four entailments.

The common response by defenders of the naïve interpretation to this puzzle is to try to find some later point in the text of the *Meditations* or in *The Objections and Replies* where Descartes does assert that his thoughts are certain. In what follows, I review the passages that some adherents of the naïve interpretation cite as evidence of a statement by Descartes that his thoughts are certain. Then, I will say why this textual strategy to defend the naïve interpretation is inadequate. This will motivate my presentation of a new strategy that defends the naïve interpretation by looking to the first meditation.

The first source of evidence presented by adherents of the naïve interpretation to show that Descartes does assert “I think” with certainty comes from passages that come after the third paragraph of the second meditation. Perhaps the most favorable of these is a section emphasized by Bernard Williams (63-64) and Margaret Wilson (59) that occurs near the end of the second meditation. The section comes at the point where the meditator is concluding his investigation into the nature of the ‘I’ and is about to proceed to the wax. The most relevant sentences are italicized.

But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.

This is a considerable list, if everything on it belongs to me. But does it? Is it not one and the same 'I' who is now doubting almost everything, who nonetheless understands some things, who affirms that this one thing is true, denies everything else, desires to know more, is unwilling to be deceived, imagines many things even involuntarily, and is aware of many things which apparently come from the senses? Are not all these things just as true as the fact that I exist, even if I am asleep all the time, and even if he who created me is doing all he can to deceive me? Which of all these activities is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself? *The fact that it is I who am doubting and understanding and willing is so evident that I see no way of making it any clearer.* But it is also the case that the 'I' who imagines is the same 'I'. For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real, the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking. Lastly, it is also the same 'I' who has sensory perceptions, or is aware of bodily things as it were through the senses. For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. *But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false;* what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking. (AT VII 28-29; CSMK 2:19)

I will refrain from investigating whether either of these sentences are equivalent to, or imply, an assertion that the meditator's second-order thoughts are certain. Even if the meditator is asserting that his second-order thoughts are certain, the underlying strategy to defend the naïve interpretation by citing assertions that come *after* the beginning of the second meditation is inconsistent with the order of discovery in the *Meditations*. Descartes makes it clear in the *Second Objections and Replies* that there is a strict sequence of argumentation in the *Meditations*:

The order consists simply in this. The items which are put forward first must be known entirely without the aid of what comes later; and the remaining items must be arranged in such a way that their demonstration depends solely on what has gone before. I did try to follow this order very carefully in my *Meditations*, and my adherence to it was the reason for my dealing with the distinction between the mind and the body only at the end, in the Sixth Meditation, rather than in the Second. It also explains why I deliberately and knowingly omitted many matters which would have required an explanation of an even larger number of things. (AT VII 155; CSMK 2:110)

Since Descartes is explicit that he doesn't intend for things established at later stages to be parts of arguments for claims made earlier on, it would be illicit for the possible assertions within AT VII 28-29; CSMK 2:19 to be counted as components of an argument for the certainty of his existence. Notice: AT VII 28-29; CSMK 2:19 occurs after the meditator concludes his argument for the certainty of his existence. The change from arguing for his existence to examining the nature of his existence is implied by the transition sentence that comes directly after the third paragraph of the second meditation: "But I do not have a sufficient understanding of what this 'I' is that now necessarily exists" (AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17). That these two matters—establishing his existence and inquiring into the nature of his existence—are different issues and are taken up sequentially is further confirmed in Descartes' gloss of the second meditation in the *Synopsis* (AT VII 12-13; CSMK 2:9).

A somewhat more compelling defense of the naïve interpretation is to highlight passages from the *Objections and Replies* in which Descartes attempts to clarify the argument for *sum* made in the *Meditations*. The most promising of these passages is a response that Descartes makes to one of Gassendi's objections. There, I read Descartes as claiming that any second-order judgment about one's first-order thoughts is completely certain and so it can be used as a premise to infer the certainty of *sum*.

Gassendi's objection is that the meditator didn't need "all this apparatus" of putting forward, or conceiving of, the proposition "I exist" to "conclude" that he exists—the meditator "could have made the same inference from any one of [his] other actions, since it is known by the natural light that whatever acts exists" (AT VII 258-259; CSMK 2:180).

Below is Descartes' response. I draw the reader's attention to two points. (1) Descartes' response accepts the naïve interpretation. (2) Descartes' comments suggest that

any second-order order judgment will serve a premise in an argument for the certainty of *sum* since our second-order judgments are completely certain.

Again, what reason have you for saying that I 'did not need all this apparatus' to prove I existed? These very words of yours surely show that I have the best reason to think that I have not used enough apparatus, since I have not yet managed to make you understand the matter correctly. When you say that I 'could have made the same inference from any one of my other actions' you are far from the truth, since I am not wholly certain of any of my actions, with the sole exception of thought (in using the word 'certain' I am referring to metaphysical certainty, which is the sole issue at this point). I may not, for example, make the inference 'I am walking, therefore I exist', except in so far as the awareness of walking is a thought. The inference is certain only if applied to this awareness, and not to the movement of the body which sometimes - in the case of dreams - is not occurring at all, despite the fact that I seem to myself to be walking. Hence from the fact that I think I am walking I can very well infer the existence of a mind which has this thought, but not the existence of a body that walks. And the same applies in other cases. (AT VII 352; CSMK 2:243-244)

Here, Descartes does plainly assert that a second-order judgment such as “I think I am walking” is certain.<sup>10</sup> Still, one might find this way of defending the naïve interpretation objectionable. According to Frankfurt (10), to emphasize that Descartes accepts the naïve reading in his response to Gassendi is to admit that there is a “serious gap” in the meditator’s discussion of *sum* in the third paragraph of the second meditation, at AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17. There, the meditator doesn’t make certain second-order judgments; he doesn’t assert *cogito*.

Frankfurt’s objection seems to be this. Defenders of the naïve interpretation wish to read Descartes’ response to Gassendi, in which Descartes argues for the certainty of *sum* just as the naïve interpretation says, as Descartes’ real account of the *cogito*. But

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, “second-order judgment” is not Descartes’ terminology. In the introduction, I explained how and why this terminology is used. Descartes here is credibly read as implying that “I think I am walking” is a second-order judgment since he refers to “I think I am walking” as a “fact” and suggests it may serve as a premise in the argument for *sum* (which plausibly implies that the reasoner has judged the premise to be true).

this account of the cogito differs from the meditator's account in the second meditation, where an assertion of *cogito* is not to be found. Thus, defenders of the naïve interpretation who emphasize Descartes' response to Gassendi must portray the meditator as launching an invalid argument for the certainty of *sum* in the second meditation. Interpreting the meditator as making an invalid argument is unacceptable. If this counter objection to an emphasis on Descartes' response to Gassendi is merited, then the naïve interpretation still lacks a cogent response to Frankfurt's initial textual objection that the meditator doesn't assert *cogito* in the text of the *Meditations*.

Where are we? The traditional reading holds that the meditator commences his inquiry into what is certain in the third paragraph of the second meditation, at AT VII 25-25; CSMK 2:16-17. There, the meditator mounts some argument concerning the certainty of *sum* and its relation to *cogito*. The traditional reading is very hard to reconcile with the central conviction of the naïve interpretation that the meditator establishes the certainty of his existence by deriving that conclusion from a certain judgment he makes about his own mind. This is because, as we have seen, the evidence presented by adherents of the naïve interpretation that Descartes makes certain second-order judgments elsewhere—either at some later part of the *Meditations* or in the *Objections and Replies*—is unsatisfactory. What is left in the *Meditations* when read traditionally are scraps of the naïve argument: the if-then statements I extracted from AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17, which are in some sense more particular versions of the proposition “If I think, then I exist,” and the conclusion, as Descartes seems to put it, that “this ‘I’ now necessarily exists” (ibid). The missing piece is some assertion made by the meditator that he thinks, or at least of the thoughts that occur as the antecedents in the entailments at AT VII 24-25; CSMK 2:16-17.

The missing pieces, although elusive, can be found at the end of the first meditation (AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15). A quick roadmap of the end of the first meditation might proceed as follows. After presenting the dreamer argument, which calls into doubt beliefs about the external world, the meditator begins to present a skeptical argument based on the possibility of a deceptive God. This argument would call an even wider class of beliefs into doubt including, but not limited to, arithmetical and geometrical beliefs, “transparent truths,” and beliefs that appear to be “perfect knowledge” (ibid). Next, the meditator formulates an atheist-friendly version of this argument based not on the idea that God may be massively deceptive, but that our beliefs are arrived at by “fate or chance or a continuous chain of events,” processes liable to “deception and error.” At this point, the meditator realizes that his “former” beliefs have been cast into doubt. He resolves not to assent to any of them, as hard as that may be, but to “deceive” himself into “pretending” that all his former beliefs are “false and imaginary.” To make it easier to deceive himself into thinking that all his former beliefs are false and imaginary (rather than “reasonable to believe,” as he seems to think they really are), he tinkers with the skeptical argument based on the possibility of a deceptive God. A “malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning” replaces God as the master of deception. The force of this argument leaves the meditator suspended in doubt “like a prisoner enjoying imaginary freedom.”

The section critical for building my fresh defense of the naïve interpretation is after the skeptical argument intended for atheists but before the tinkered evil demon argument—from where the meditator appraises the force of the skeptical arguments continuing through his resolution to pretend that all his former beliefs are false and imaginary. This section might look unremarkable compared to the skeptical arguments that about it. It might be

thought that it contains little else save for some insight into the method of doubt of the *Meditations*: that doubts must be based on powerful and well-thought out reasons; that the main rule of his method of doubt is that assent should be withheld from any doubtable beliefs; that a successful undertaking of the method of doubt requires, because of weaknesses of the human mind, some self-deception.

There is more going on. While the meditator is articulating his method of doubt, he is also asserting, with certainty, that he is having a great number of his thoughts pertaining to his project of doubting his former beliefs. These second-order assertions should be understood as the premises that make up the meditator's arguments for the certainty of his existence. To illustrate this, take the first sentence of the section we are considering:

I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. (AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15).

The meditator is doing nothing less than making second-order judgements about his first-order former beliefs and first-order mental life more generally. The meditator makes the following second-order judgments about his first-order mental states and activities:

- (5) I have no answer to these arguments.
- (6) I have successfully doubted all my former beliefs.
- (7) I have doubted my former beliefs on the basis of powerful and well thought-out reasons.

That is not all. In the subsequent sentences, he makes more claims about his first-order mental activities. A few examples are:

- (8) I must withhold assent, in the next meditation, from my former beliefs.
- (9) I must remember to withhold assent, in the next meditation, from my former beliefs.
- (10) My habitual opinions are coming back even after I doubted them.



(11) It is a good plan to deceive myself into pretending my former opinions are false and imaginary.

And the assertions continue. At the very end of the first meditation, as he is reacting to the refined evil demon argument, the meditator also makes claims about other first-order mental states of his, such as being in a state of “dread” for subjecting old comfortable opinions to doubt and “fear” of having to laboriously use his reason to find indubitable beliefs, possibly without success.

The issue we have been concerned with over the last several pages is whether the meditator makes any second-order judgment about his first-order mental life. If the meditator makes a second-order judgment that he regards as certain, this would obviate Frankfurt’s objection that the meditator should not be read as concluding the certainty of *sum* from the certainty of *cogito* because the meditator never asserts *cogito* with certainty. That is, he never makes a certain second-order judgment. Now, we have seen that the meditator *does* make several second-order judgments during his procedure of doubting his first-order beliefs. Soon, I will explain why the meditator also regards these second-order judgments as certain. My response to Frankfurt’s objection will also show that the traditional reading is mistaken: the meditator’s argument for his existence begins in the first meditations, at AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15.

A virtue of my reading is that it bolsters the plausibility of the naïve interpretation while understanding the meditator as arguing for his existence in an orderly sequence. The sequence starts with various thoughts being asserted in the first meditation, then various thoughts are asserted to entail *sum* at the third paragraph of the second meditation, and finally *sum* is concluded at the very beginning of the fourth paragraph of the second meditation. As we have seen, those like Bernard Williams and Margaret Wilson, who agree

with me that the naïve interpretation is correct, rely on textual evidence that the meditator asserts *cogito* after he concludes *sum*. This is weak evidence because it portrays the meditator as arguing in a disorderly, disorganized fashion, drawing conclusions from premises that are only stated *ex post facto*. Such an interpretation would have left Descartes himself quite unsatisfied, given his remarks about the order of discovery we have seen from the *Second Objections and Replies*.

I turn now to three objections to reading the meditator as commencing his argument for the certainty of his existence in the first meditation.

The first objection is that for the meditator to draw his conclusion that he is certain of his existence, he must assert that his thoughts are *certain*. However, goes the objection, in the passages I have cited the meditator makes assertions about several of his thoughts, but doesn't regard these assertions as certain. He merely states, "my habitual opinions are coming back" (AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15) not "Certainly, my habitual opinions are coming back." Perhaps the meditator is making these higher-order assertions as uncertain, reasonable conjectures about what is going on in his mind.

There are two pieces of evidence that show that the meditator regards his second-order judgments about his thoughts as certain. The first can be gleaned from a line that reveals the central tenet of the method of doubt in the *Meditations*. At the very beginning of the first meditation, the meditator says, "Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false" (AT VII 18; CSMK 2:12). What this comes down to is a norm or constraint regarding what should be asserted (and by that token believed, on the assumption that asserting that p entails believing that p) by any rational

individual who wishes to engage in the method of doubt. The constraint is a negative one: do not assert to what can be doubted, even ever so slightly. Yet, since the meditator also champions a constructive side of his project, one of establishing in the sciences what is “stable” and “likely to last” (ibid) and what is certain, it’s plausible that the meditator accepts the positive version of the rule of doubt: assert what is certain, that which cannot be doubted at all. Thus, we should expect that whenever the meditator, always didactically obedient to the method of doubt, makes an assertion, he regards that assertion as certain.

While it’s true that the meditator doesn’t always explicitly attach the word “certain” to every assertion he makes, the deviation is a matter of style, not substance. This can be seen at AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:15-16, where the meditator sometimes expresses the entailments so that their consequents sometimes contain the word “certain” and sometimes don’t. His intermittent sprinkling of “certain” is immaterial, and included most likely to remind the reader that the meditator is obeying the rule of doubt, unlike in ordinary life, in which we sometimes assert things that we take to be true but uncertain.

The second piece of text that shows the certainty in the meditator’s judgments during the first meditation is a passage we have already seen, Descartes’ response to Gassendi in the *Fifth Set of Replies*. There, Descartes says that “I am not certain of any of my actions, with the sole exception of thought” (AT VII 352; CSMK 2:244). He goes on to suggest that he can be certain of any of his thoughts, such as the thought or awareness that he is walking (ibid). Here, Descartes appears to commit himself to the thesis that all one’s second-order judgments are certain. Since Descartes is committed to this thesis about the certainty of mind, it would be inconsistent for him to hold that the meditator’s assertions about his mind are uncertain.

The second objection concedes that the meditator does regard the assertions he made about his mind in the first meditation as certain. The objection, however, is that the meditator doesn't intend these certain assertions to be part of an argument to establish the certainty of *sum*. Since the meditator doesn't characterize his assertions about his mind as premises in an argument for *sum*, it's unlikely that the meditator, or Descartes, regarded them as serving as part of an argument for *sum*.

A reply to this objection can be given by pointing out the remarkable similarities that exist between content of the meditator's second-order judgments in the first meditation and the entailments the meditator states between thought and existence in the second meditation. The similarities suggest that the meditator did, at some level, intend the assertions made in the first meditation to a premise of the cogito argument. The most salient similarity is between the initial second-order judgement the meditator has in the first meditation:

(5) I have no answer to these arguments (AT VII 21; CSMK 2:14)

and the very first entailment claimed in the second meditation, at AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17, namely:

(1) If I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.

In (5), when the meditator says that he has "no answer" to the skeptical arguments, he is saying that he can think of no objections to the skeptical arguments—they have *convinced* him that his beliefs are doubtable.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The following is the full sentence from which (5) is translated; (5) is from the italicized first clause. *Quibus sane argumentis non habeo quod respondeam, sed tandem cogor fateri nihil esse ex iis quae olim vera putabam, de quo non liceat dubitare.*

The parallelism of the proposition in (5) and the antecedent of (1) gives us good reason to believe that the meditator intends them to make up an argument of the form:

- (1) I am convinced by the skeptical arguments. (5, rewritten from AT VII 21; CSMK 2:14)
- (2) If I am convinced by something, then I exist. (1, rewritten from AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17)
- (3) Therefore, I exist. (rewritten from AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17)

That the meditator intends this pairing is also corroborated by scrupulously attending to his use of the past tense. The line from the second meditation that states the logical connection reads “No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed” (AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17). It was in the first meditation that the meditator felt the force of the skeptical arguments and had no answer to them (i.e. was convinced), so the past tense phrasing should be taken as referring to the course of the first meditation, specifically to when the meditator reported being convinced by the skeptical arguments, as rendered in (5).

While other argumentative pairings are less obvious than (1) and (5), I think this single striking similarity is enough to defuse the objection. If the meditator made a pairing with one of his second-order judgments<sup>12</sup> and an if-then conditional, it’s plausible that the meditator regarded any of his second-order judgments as a potential premise in the naïve argument for *sum*. For example, it’s plausible that the meditator regarded the following as a sound argument using the meditator’s second-order judgment that his habitual opinions keep coming back even after he has doubted them, which I represented earlier as proposition (10).

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<sup>12</sup> “I am convinced by the skeptical arguments” is a second-order judgment because it’s a judgment about the first-order mental state of being convinced. Being convinced implies forming or changing one’s belief on some matter.

- (1) My habitual opinions are coming back even after I doubted them.
- (2) If my habitual opinions keep coming back, then I exist.
- (3) Therefore, I exist.

What might be true is that the meditator didn't *recognize* or *discover* that claims like "I have no answer to these argument" are things he asserted with certainty in the first meditation—or could assert with certainty—*until* the second meditation, which begins with a summary of what skeptical intellectual activities previously have occurred. This point is bolstered by how the objective of the second meditation is described: "Anything which admits the slightest doubt I will set aside...I will proceed until I *recognize* something certain" (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16, my italics). "Recognize" leaves open the possibility that the meditator makes certain second-order judgments in the first meditation, but didn't recognize this and consider its philosophical import at that earlier time. Still, even if the meditator didn't recognize until the second meditation that he made several certain second-order judgments in the first meditation, this is not a compelling reason to hold that the meditator didn't intend any of the judgments to be a premise in the argument for *sum*. He still intends any of them to serve as a premise, he just doesn't form this intention until the second meditation.

The third objection concedes that the meditator makes certain second-order assertions concerning several of his thoughts in the first meditation and that these assertions may be paired together with an if-then statement made in the second meditation to make up an argument for the certainty of *sum*. The objection maintains that if the meditator argued in this way, he wouldn't establish the certainty of *sum* because he must rely on memory, which is open to doubt. The meditator must rely on memory because my reading suggests

that at the time the meditator concludes *sum* in the second meditation, he must recall an assertion he made back in the first meditation, which took place at an earlier time.

This objection is correct in saying that if the naïve interpretation reads the meditator as using his memory to argue for the certainty of *sum*, then he would be unable to show the certainty of *sum*. Indeed, the meditator acknowledges that memory is open to doubt in the second paragraph of the second meditation. The meditator says that he will suppose that his memory tells him lies (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16), presumably because his memorial beliefs are open to doubt. The objection is also correct that the first meditation occurs at an earlier time than the second meditation. In the first line of the second meditation, the meditator refers to the first meditation as “yesterday’s meditation” (ibid).

In response to the objection, a further look at the beginning of the second meditation shows that the meditator doesn’t rely on memory because he continues to engage in the method of doubt through the first two paragraphs of the second meditation. The meditator likens his persisting state of doubt to a swimmer caught in a whirlpool and vows to “once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday” (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16). Since the meditator continues with his enterprise of doubt at the opening of the second meditation, he continues to be in a reflective state of mind. He keeps on thinking about what is happening to his mind as he engages in doubt. At the beginning of the second meditation, the meditator has many of the same thoughts that he did at the end of the first meditation. For example, in the first paragraph of the second meditation, the meditator is found again asserting that he should only assent to what cannot be doubted (ibid). He also reasserts that

he is convinced by the skeptical arguments in the third paragraph.<sup>13</sup> In addition, in the third paragraph the meditator makes new judgments about his first-order mental life: he wonders whether God could have authored his first-order thoughts.

Thus, while the meditator begins to make judgments about what is going on in his mind at the end of the first meditation, he continues to do so through the beginning of the second meditation. Strictly speaking, it's the meditator's second-order judgments from the very beginning of the second meditation that my reading holds are used in an argument for *sum*, since they occur at the same time as the meditator's judgments about how various of these thoughts entail the certainty of *sum*. By noting that the meditator's process of doubt and concomitant reflections on his belief system endures into the second meditation, we can see that the meditator continues to make second-order judgments about some of the same first-order thoughts as he did back in the first meditation. For this reason, the meditator doesn't rely on memory when he concludes *sum* in the first sentence of the fourth paragraph. The naïve interpretation has it that the premise and conclusion of the argument for *sum* are indexed to the same time.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, there are some thoughts that the meditator has in the first meditation, at AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15, like “my habitual opinions keep coming back”, that he no longer has when he begins the second meditation at AT VII 23-24; CSMK 2:16. The reason he doesn't continue to think that his former beliefs keep coming back by the start of the second meditation is that the final formulation of the demon argument presented in the last paragraph of the first meditation presumably was successful, and he completely stopped assenting to his former beliefs.

<sup>14</sup> One might further object that on my reading the two premises, “*cogito*” and “if *cogito*, then *sum*”, and the conclusion “*sum*” still cannot occur at the same time because the meditator asserts each premise and the conclusion in different sentences within the beginning of the second meditation. So, the different sentences suggest the inference is diachronic. As we will see in chapter three, Descartes understands the cogito to be inferred using a psychological process called “intuition” where the premises and conclusion of an argument can all be asserted and inferred in one mental grasp or a single “movement of thought” as Descartes says (AT X 368-370; CSMK 1:14-15). Thus, it's beside the point



In this chapter, my aim has been to defend the naïve interpretation of the cogito against the objection that the meditator doesn't make categorical, certain assertions about his mental life. We have discovered that these certain assertions occur primarily at the end of the first meditation and continue into the second meditation. They arise as the meditator, a rational agent, takes on the intellectual project of subjecting his former beliefs to doubt. The intensity and rigor of the meditator's enterprise of doubt leads him to reflect on his belief system, the extent to which he has thrown it into doubt, and what further steps he must take to complete his enterprise of doubt. My interpretive observation that the meditator does make certain categorical assertions about his mental life during his doubt and intends any of them to be a premise in an argument for the certainty of *sum* bolsters the plausibility that the meditator deploys the following argument:

I think.  
—————  
Therefore, I am.

I will end by suggesting that the interpretive observation I have been stressing in this section—that as the meditator doubts his beliefs, he is simultaneously examining and judging his belief system with certainty—sheds light not only on how the meditator establishes *sum* but also on the general structure of the *Meditations*.

First, it's an overgeneralization to think that the meditator's positive quest for certainty begins in the second meditation and the meditator doesn't form any certain beliefs in the first meditation. As the meditator quite clearly tells us on the first page, he intends the skeptical arguments to target a foundational belief (that is false, in his view) in a "basic

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that the elements of the argument for *sum* occur in different sentences. For Descartes, if the conclusion can be intuited from the premises, as is the case in the cogito, then the premises and conclusion are indexed to the same time. A more in-depth discussion of intuition is in chapter three, pages 84-86.

principle” that his sensory beliefs are “most true” (ibid). I bring this up to emphasize that at no point in the first meditation does the meditator say that he intends to target his judgments about his mental life. Neither does he consider a skeptical scenario in which his second-order judgments are false in the first meditation.<sup>15</sup> It’s just the opposite. He forms new beliefs, second-order ones, such as the belief that he is convinced by the skeptical arguments and that he has successfully doubted all his former beliefs.<sup>16</sup> The second-order beliefs fall outside the specter of doubt because they are an essential part of the enterprise of doubting. For the meditator to doubt all his former opinions, he must form reflective judgments to track the destruction of his former belief system. Indeed, he regards these reflective judgments as certain, as I have argued. So, the meditator discovers certainty in the first meditation, contrary to how it might be traditionally read.

Second, the certainty in the meditator’s method of doubt shows that the meditator, as early as the first meditation, is committed to the view that we can be certain of our own mental life, or at least parts of it, whereas our beliefs about the external world are less certain. Gilbert Ryle, in his provocative book *The Concept of Mind*, says that Descartes, like many other philosophers, relies on this sort of view, the thesis that we have “Privileged Access” to our own minds:

A mind has a twofold Privileged Access to its own doings, which makes its self-knowledge superior in quality, as well as prior in genesis, to its grasp of other things. I may doubt the evidence of my senses but not the deliverances of consciousness or introspection. (137)

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson makes this point (59-60).

<sup>16</sup> It is helpful for my argument that the meditator often speaks of his “former” beliefs being cast into doubt. He specifies that it is his “former” beliefs that are doubted at four places in the first meditation (once at AT VII 18; CSMK 2:12 and three times at AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15). The designation of “former” suggests that the new second-order beliefs, which he is forming as he is doubting, are not what he intends to doubt and fall outside the scope of doubt.

While the view that we have “privileged access” to our minds was probably thought to be a Cartesian view before Ryle, it was Ryle who coined the now popularly used term in Descartes scholarship as well as within contemporary philosophy of mind and epistemology. Ryle also distilled the Privileged Access Thesis into two further theses, what many have called the “Infallibility Thesis” and “Omniscience Thesis” represented below.<sup>17</sup> Following Ryle, there has been significant debate among scholars whether Descartes really commits himself to these claims.

Infallibility: If S makes the second-order judgment that she is in mental state M, S is in M.

Omniscience: If S is in M, S believes that she is in M.

According to the Infallibility Thesis, if you judge that you are in some mental state, that judgment is “exempt from error” as Ryle says (137). That is, it will always turn out to be true; you will always in fact be in the mental state that you self-ascribe. Since Ryle, many have attributed the Infallibility Thesis to Descartes, but some do not.<sup>18</sup>

According to the Omniscience Thesis, if you are in some occurrent mental state, then you will believe that you are in it. As Ryle colorfully puts it, “a mind cannot help

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<sup>17</sup> Ryle doesn’t name them as such. See 136-138.

<sup>18</sup> Sometimes the Infallibility Thesis is called the Incorrigeability Thesis. For those who attribute infallibility to Descartes, see Ryle (140) Audi (91), Kenny (70-72), Vinci (10), McRae (57), Williams (70). Broughton (2008, 179) and Wilson (150-165) partly attribute the thesis to Descartes. Curley (170-193) and Newman (2) do not attribute the view to Descartes. I’m disregarding slight differences in formulations of the view between authors. Also, it’s usually specified in a more exact formulation of the infallibility claim that one’s self-attributions are infallible only if they are arrived at through an introspective process. This specification is made to preclude cases of false self-attributions of mental states arrived at via sense perception (i.e. forming a false belief about yourself by listening to a false conjecture from your therapist) from being counterexamples to the infallibility thesis.

being constantly aware of all the supposed occupants of its private stage” (136). Again, there are a range of views on whether Descartes held the Omniscience Thesis.<sup>19</sup>

Now that we have seen how the meditator makes certain second-order judgments about his mind and belief system as he engages in the method of doubt, we are in a better position to consider Descartes’ commitments to the Privileged Access Thesis in the *Meditations*. The meditator commits himself to the strong claim that he can make certain judgments about his first-order mental states, or at least those first-order mental states that are part of his enterprise of doubt. To be certain about X implies, among other things, that X is true.<sup>20</sup> So, the Certainty of Mind Thesis implies the Infallibility Thesis. Thus, there is good evidence that the meditator relies on the Infallibility Thesis in the first meditation.

Scholars who believe that Descartes commits himself to some Privileged Access Thesis in the *Meditations* frequently cite passages in the second or third meditations. For example, some scholars think that the meditator implicitly draws on infallibility, omniscience, or both in the second meditation, in his reasoning surrounding the cogito,<sup>21</sup> for *sum res cogitans*,<sup>22</sup> and even in his discussion of the wax.<sup>23</sup> Other commentators think that the meditator relies on Privileged Access in the third meditation when claims to know

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<sup>19</sup> Sometimes the Omniscience Thesis is called the Self-Intimation or Self-Presentation Thesis. Ryle (140) Audi (91), Vinci (10), McRae (57), Kenny (70-72), and Williams (70) attribute the view to Descartes. Broughton (2008, 179) and Wilson (150-165) partly attribute the view. Curley (170-193), Newman (2), and Rozemond (57-66) do not. The Omniscience Thesis is limited to occurrent states rather than latent or standing mental states. Descartes likely thought that there are latent mental states—in particular, innate ideas—that we are not always aware of, or at the least not clearly and distinctly aware of. See Nelson (163-178) for a discussion of innate ideas in Descartes’ philosophy.

<sup>20</sup> See my discussion of certainty in chapter two, page 68-70.

<sup>21</sup> Kenny (47-48), McRae (57), Williams (71), and Wilson (59-60).

<sup>22</sup> Kenny (70-72), McRae (57), Williams (71), and Wilson (150-165).

<sup>23</sup> Broughton (2008, 193).

that he has clear and distinct perceptions,<sup>24</sup> or in his taxonomy of ideas and thoughts.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter, I have argued that from the very beginning of the *Meditations*, the meditator relies on his privileged access to his own mind while he engages in the enterprise of doubting his beliefs. In the next chapter, I will consider how the meditator might defend the certainty present in his first meditation doubts.

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<sup>24</sup> Broughton (2008, 193).

<sup>25</sup> Wilson (150-165).

## Chapter 2: Reconstructing an Argument for the Certainty of Cogito in the First Meditation

The purpose of the last chapter was to defend an interpretation of the *Meditations* according to which the meditator secures certainty of his existence by way of the naïve argument against an objection made by Harry Frankfurt. “If the peculiar value of deriving *sum* from *cogito* actually consisted in the certitude of *cogito*,” Frankfurt objects, “Descartes ought to establish or at least to claim that *cogito* is in fact a statement of which he is certain. He does not do so” (111).

In response, I argued that the meditator holds that the second-order judgments that occurred to him during his reaction to the skeptical arguments in the first meditation are certain. These second-order judgments are equivalent to asserting *cogito*. An example of one of these second-order judgments is: “I have no answer to these arguments”, which I rewrote as “I am convinced by these skeptical arguments.” We can see that the meditator regards this second-order judgment as certain for at least two reasons. First, he asserts it in the first meditation after saying that he should not assert anything which is not certain. Second, Descartes responds to Gassendi by saying that (perhaps all) his second-order judgments are certain.

Moreover, the meditator doesn't single out his belief that he convinced himself of something as the only second-order judgment from which it follows that he exists. He thinks many second-order judgments, perhaps *any* of his second-order judgments, will suffice. The French translation underscores this point. There, Descartes modifies the if-then claim I just mentioned to say: “If I convinced myself of something *or thought anything at*

*all*, then I certainly existed” (AT VII 25; CSMK 2:17. My italics).<sup>26</sup> Thus, the meditator takes all his second-order judgments to be completely certain. This applies to second-order judgments with the most attenuated content (a generic “I think”) to those that provide rich reports of one’s own mental life (“I am convinced by the argument” and “My former opinions keep coming back.”).

It seems, then, that Descartes holds a strong thesis about the certainty we enjoy about our minds.

The Certainty of Mind: For all of S’s mental states (M’s), if S forms the second-order judgment or belief that she is in M, then this second-order judgment/belief is certain.

Thus, against Frankfurt’s objection, the meditator does regard *cogito*, which is a second-order judgment, as certain. It’s in part due to the meditator’s adherence to this thesis that he can mount a cogent argument for his existence.

Still, I have not yet offered a full response to Frankfurt’s objection. Frankfurt objects that the naïve interpretation requires (1) that Descartes offers an account of why *cogito* is certain, or (2) that Descartes at the least claim *cogito* to be certain, and Descartes does neither. In the last chapter, I have shown that Frankfurt’s second demand is satisfied by examining the first meditation. Now, I will show that Frankfurt’s second demand can also be met.

This chapter will proceed under the assumption, suggested by Frankfurt, that if the naïve interpretation is true, then Descartes should have some argument in support of the Certainty of Mind Thesis. I concede that Descartes doesn’t explicitly indicate why CM is

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<sup>26</sup> “*On certes, j’étais sans doute, si je me suis persuadé, ou seulement si j’ai pensé quelque chose*” (Duc de Luynes French Translation of 1647).

true in the *Meditations*. I will argue that, whether he knew it or not, in the first meditation Descartes makes *available* to the meditator a compelling argument for CM, or rather a slightly more restricted version the thesis. This argument begins with the assumption that the meditator can doubt his first-order beliefs. The argument then shows that the certainty of the meditator's second-order judgments that are integral to his enterprise of doubt follow from the assumption that he can doubt his beliefs. Tyler Burge makes a similarly structured argument for a somewhat weaker privileged access thesis than CM. So, midway through this chapter we will consider Burge's argument to assist us in our reconstruction of Descartes.

### **I. Does Descartes Already Have an Argument for CM?**

Reconstructing an argument for CM would be ill-advised if Descartes makes a strong case for it elsewhere. Let us consider whether Descartes already has a satisfactory argument. To look for an argument, we might return to Descartes' response to Gassendi's objection, perhaps the most explicit endorsement of CM across Descartes' works.

Gassendi's objection is that the cogito argument is too restrictive; he contends that the meditator could have inferred *sum* from a premise about any of his actions, such as "I walk" rather than only "I think." Descartes responds by saying, "the inference is certain only if applied to this awareness [of walking], and not to the movement of the body which sometimes—in the case of dreams—is not occurring at all" (AT VII 352; CSMK 2:244).

One might read a trace of an argument for CM in Descartes' response: if one is aware of a mental state M, then one is certain that she is in M. However, I don't think that Descartes means for this to be an argument for CM. Descartes is only articulating what is



certain. We can be certain that we are aware that our body is in some state, but we cannot be certain that our body is in some state. That is, Descartes is only specifying what we can be certain about. If this passage is to offer an argument for CM, Descartes must tell us why awareness or consciousness provides certainty. Here, he does not do this.<sup>27</sup>

Some commentators have interpreted Descartes as defending CM and other theses concerning privileged access such as infallibility and omniscience by an appeal to his stipulated definitions of “thought” and “idea” from the *Second Replies* (AT VII 160-161; CSMK 2:113).<sup>28</sup> I think this reading is undesirable. If Descartes did in fact rely purely on stipulated definitions in support of CM, a substantial thesis about privileged access, we should seek an alternative reconstruction if possible. Arguments that resort only to stipulated definitions are unsuccessful. Now, if Descartes didn’t rely purely on stipulated definitions to establish CM (in my view, McRae and Kenny don’t adduce forceful evidence that Descartes means for CM to follow from his definitions of “thought” and “idea”), then the defense-by-definition reading is plainly uncharitable. We ought to keep looking for an argument for CM.

Another area to examine for a defense of CM may be Descartes’ doctrine of clear and distinct perception. At the beginning of the third meditation, the meditator seems to suggest that a perception being completely clear and distinct is a mark of what is known and certain (AT VII 34-35; CSMK 2:24-25). Perhaps Descartes thought that we can have clear and distinct perceptions of our current first-order mental states, and, in this way, be certain of *cogito*.

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<sup>27</sup> Broughton also makes this point (2008, 188-189).

<sup>28</sup> For this position, see Kenny (48-50) and McRae (57).

While it would take me too far afield to examine Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perceptions, and whether Descartes might have relied on it in support of CM, I wish only to say that there are interpretations of the doctrine on which it doesn't support CM. For example, Alan Nelson argues for an interpretation of the doctrine on which only innate ideas can be clearly and distinctly perceived (163-167). Further, on Nelson's view, we only have innate ideas of God, ourselves, corporeal bodies, eternal truths, and possibly also pains and colors. I understand Nelson's reading as implying that we cannot have clear and distinct perceptions of our current first-order mental states, such as my belief that there is a computer screen in front of me, because these mental states are not inborn in us and latent, as are innate ideas. Rather, my current first-order mental states come and go. CM, on the other hand, does assert the certainty of judgments about our current first-order mental states. So, if Nelson's interpretation is correct, then the certainty of our judgments about our current first-order mental states must come from another source. And even if the doctrine of clear and distinct perception can successfully be extended to CM, I think it would be insightful to find that the *Meditations* contains an alternative argument for CM unsupported by the doctrine of clear and distinct perception. That is what I will turn to next.

## **II. Clues for Reconstructing Descartes' Argument for the Certainty of Mind**

### **Thesis**

Our attempt to locate Descartes' own defense of the Certainty of Mind Thesis has proved unsuccessful. In the places in which Descartes appeals to CM in his response to Gassendi, he does so without an account of why, when we judge ourselves to be in a particular mental state, those self-ascriptions carry certainty. Other potential lines of defense for CM that

depend on Descartes' definition of "thought" or his doctrine of clear and distinct perception look problematic.

These two points—that Descartes neither gave an outright account of why CM is true nor has an in-house epistemological doctrine that can be extended to second-order judgments—should motivate us to dig deeper for an argument somewhere in the *Meditations* for the thesis. If we wish to find Descartes' account of the truth of CM, the best we might be able to do is to find several commitments the meditator makes on Descartes' behalf that can be linked into a plausible argument for CM, even if we are unable to uncover evidence that Descartes himself intended to make such an argument.

Where in the *Meditations* should we look for materials to reconstruct? One of the points I argued for in the first chapter was that the meditator relies on CM in the first meditation. After meditating on several skeptical arguments, he reflects on how his skeptical meditations have affected his belief system. He considers to what extent he has successfully doubted his former beliefs and whether more skeptical meditation is required to rid himself of beliefs that admit of the slightest doubt. It is in these reflective moments in which the meditator examines his current doxastic attitudes towards propositions he once firmly believed that he appeals implicitly to CM. And this appears to be the earliest point where the meditator relies on CM. The thesis becomes somewhat more explicit in the third paragraph of the second meditation, when, in the French translation, the meditator suggests that the certainty of the second-order judgments that occurred during his enterprise of doubt can be used to infer, and transfer certainty to, the fact that he exists.

The first meditation then—specifically where meditator reflects on the effect of the skeptical arguments on his belief system at AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15—will serve as

an appropriate starting point for the reconstruction. Already, I think the seeds of an argument for CM having to do with the *function* of second-order judgments in undertaking rational and intellectual mental activities are evident from this passage.

The argument in a compressed form might look like this. I can doubt my beliefs. I cannot doubt my beliefs unless I have second-order judgments that are certain about my belief system and how it's responding to doubt. So, my second-order judgments, particularly those about my belief system and how it's responding to doubt, are certain, at least while I'm actively doubting my beliefs.

Descartes has available to him, given his commitments regarding the method of doubt, a detailed version of this argument. This argument trades on the idea that having certain second-order judgments is *constitutive* of the method of doubt. To consider how this argument might proceed, we should more closely investigate the meditator's second-order judgments during the first meditation. Below I articulate four observations concerning the role of the meditator's second-order judgments in his project of doubting his beliefs.

First, the meditator's second-order judgments are *essential* to the enterprise of doubt. Consider once more some of the meditator's second-order judgments.

- "I have no answer to these arguments" (AT VII 21; CSMK 2:14)
- "[I] am compelled to admit there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not be properly raised" (AT VII 21; CSMK 2:14-15)
- "I must make an effort to remember [not to assent to my former beliefs]" (AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15)
- "My habitual opinions keep coming back" (ibid)

These thoughts are not randomly or contingently connected to the meditator's first-order mental activities. For an example of a contingent connection, suppose my (first-order) belief that I get to see my dog today popped into my head. Furthermore, then I reflectively made a (second-order) judgment that I am currently believing that I get to see my dog

today. In that case, my second-order judgment is contingently connected to my current first-order belief. I could have thought “I get to see my dog today” without reflectively judging “I’m currently believing that I get to see my dog today.”

Unlike the dog case, as the meditator engages in the method of doubt, the changes in his first-order beliefs *require* him to make second-order judgments about his first-order beliefs. It’s inconceivable that the meditator (or anyone else) could doubt all his first-order perceptual beliefs, and withhold belief from them, all without having any second-order judgments about how his outlook on the world has changed. Of course, we frequently cast doubt on our beliefs without having second-order judgments. For example, as I raise what looks like veggie pizza to my mouth, my friend Jim interposes: “I think that has some meat on it.” After that, I doubt that it’s veggie. Doubting it’s veggie pizza doesn’t require having second-order judgments. But some doubts do require having second-order judgments. The more pervasive one’s doubts, and the deeper the beliefs that are made suspect in the structure of one’s belief system, the more common it is to reflect on and review one’s doubts. Furthermore, the meditator’s doubts, which are extensive (the doubt strikes many beliefs in the system) and extreme (the doubt strikes beliefs that confer justification to many other beliefs) require second-order judgments. They are an essential part of meditator’s process of doubt.

My second point is an extension of the point just made, that the meditator’s second-order judgments are essential to doubting his first-order beliefs. For Descartes, to doubt a belief is to use one’s faculty of *reason*, among other things. Furthermore, to successfully doubt *an entire system* of beliefs is to exercise one’s reason to its *fullest*. Thus, having

second-order judgments, which we observed is essential to doubting an entire belief system, is also essential to using reason to its fullest.

I will say a little more about how Descartes understands doubt to be an activity performed by reason. Descartes believes that as we grow up, by habit we come to rely mostly on our senses for knowledge. This reliance conceals us from the perfect knowledge (*scientia*) in metaphysics and the sciences, causing us to have many false beliefs in these areas. Massive doubt is a process in which reason frees itself from the senses, allowing reason to discover true and certain metaphysical and scientific conclusions. This view of doubt as a process whereby reason frees itself can be found in more than several places in Descartes' corpus, but it's presented quite clearly in the introductory materials to the *Meditations*. In the *Synopsis to the Meditations*, Descartes explains that the "usefulness of such extensive doubt" in the first meditation "lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be lead away from the senses" (AT VII 12; CSMK 2:9). In the *Preface to the Reader*, we are told that once the mind is freed (which is later identified with reason: "I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason" (AT VII 27; CSMK 2:18)), it can "arrive at certain and evident knowledge of the truth." (AT VII 10; CSMK 2:8).

Previously we saw that the meditator's second-order judgments are essential to his enterprise of doubt. Now, considering how Descartes holds the view that reason entails the power to doubt, it follows that having second-order judgments is essential to reason exercising its full authority.

The final two points regard the way in which second-order judgments enter and assist in the meditator's procedure of doubt.

The third point is that the meditator's second-order judgments are about first-order mental states that are relevant to the process of extensive doubt. Of course, some of the meditator's second-order judgments, like "My habitual opinions keep coming back", are just about his first-order beliefs. These second-order states allow him to assess and monitor whether he still holds various beliefs after meditating on the skeptical arguments. Other second-order judgments concern the connection between his former beliefs and his reasons for holding them. For example, the meditator states how he is "compelled to admit" that all his former beliefs can be properly doubted "based on powerful and well-thought out reasons" (AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15). Here, the meditator is acknowledging that the skeptical arguments *are reasons* his former beliefs could be false. The meditator also has second-order judgments about attitudes other than beliefs, like his intention to follow through with the enterprise of doubt—"I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation...I shall...resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods" (ibid). So, the meditator has second-order judgments about his first-order beliefs, their reasons, and even non-belief states, such as his intentions to follow through with his enterprise of doubt.

The fourth and final point I wish to make is that the meditator has another kind of second-order judgment about what he *should* believe. After the meditator thinks about how the skeptical arguments are reasons to think his former beliefs are false, he has the following thought: "I *must* withhold my assent from former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods" (AT VII 21-22; CSMK 2:14-15, my emphasis).<sup>29</sup> It's appropriate to read "must" as expressing an intellectual standard that the meditator is

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<sup>29</sup> "*ideoque etiam ab iisdem, non minùs quàm ab aperte falsis, accurate deinceps assensionem esse cohibendam, si quid certi velim invenire.*"

obligated to meet. The standard might be put as: *no belief should be admitted into my belief system if it can be doubted at all*. This reading, that the meditator is *obligated* to meet the standard, is underscored by the fact that the meditator makes a near-identical point in the second paragraph of the first meditation, where the meditator states that this is a standard that he *should* obey. “Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable” (AT VII 18; CSMK 2:12).<sup>30</sup> Janet Broughton acknowledges that the meditator takes the standard to be something he should to satisfy when she calls the standard a “maxim of assent” (2003, 43-45).

It’s apt to call this standard a maxim because thinking about the standard *guides* the meditator in restructuring his system of beliefs, just as a moral or practical maxim may guide an individual in determining how to conduct herself. Sometimes the maxim features in the meditator’s thoughts as a self-proclaimed intention or commitment to carry on with his quest for certainty. This is similar to how a runner, fatigued and far into her route, might say to herself: “I will run for another hour.”<sup>31</sup> This formulation of the maxim of doubt as a self-proclaimed intention arises in the first paragraph of the second meditation, when the meditator states that he will continue to follow the maxim, his “path” to finding something that cannot be doubted.

I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something

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<sup>30</sup> “*sed quia jam ratio persuadet, non minus accurate ab iis quae non plane certa sunt atque indubitata, quàm ab aperte falsis assensionem esse cohibendam*”

<sup>31</sup> This is consistent with Broughton’s reading of the standard as a maxim since many maxims become intentions when we think and talk about them (“I will be a good neighbor more often.” “I intend to donate this year.”).



certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty. (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16)<sup>32</sup>

It's also apt to call any judgment that the meditator has about the maxim a second-order judgment because, when one thinks about this maxim, one is thinking about one's mind and what states it should have.

To recap, I have unearthed four claims about the meditator's second-order judgments:

1. They are essential to his enterprise of doubt.
2. They are essential to using the full power of his reason to search for *scientia*.
3. They concern his first-order beliefs and reasons.
4. They concern the doubt-guiding maxim that he should not believe what can be doubted.

These four points should be viewed as interpretive boundaries for any reconstruction of the *Meditations*. If an argument for CM can be reconstructed in the *Meditations*, and this argument incompatible with several of these points, then it probably would not attract Descartes.

### III. A Contemporary Rationalist Account of Self-knowledge

Tyler Burge, in his article *Our Entitlement to Self-Knowledge*, argues that our second-order judgments are rational—epistemically supported—because of our capacity to think through our reasons and beliefs as we actively try to figure out what to believe. In this section, I lay out Burge's account of self-knowledge and his arguments for it. My purpose in exploring

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<sup>32</sup> Note that the meditator seems to understand the maxim of doubt as instructing him not only to stop assenting to uncertain beliefs, but, moreover, to consider them false. To consider a belief as false differs from merely suspending judgment or bracketing a belief off from one's belief system. I bring this up only to note that there is subtlety in what exactly Descartes' maxim of doubt directs an agent to do with his former beliefs. I will not consider this issue any further, since it doesn't bear directly on my line of argument.

Burge's arguments is to return to the *Meditations* in the section to follow, where I will show how similar arguments to Burge's can be reconstructed in support of the Certainty of Mind thesis.

According to Burge, we are rational beings. Rational beings are unique in that they have attitudes. Examples of attitudes include the belief that there will be a snowy Christmas, the desire to travel, or the intention to return a borrowed backpack. Now, rational beings do not just have attitudes on a whim. Their attitudes are based on reasons. I believe that there will be a snowy Christmas because the weatherman said so. I desire to travel because I value seeing new places. I intend to return a borrowed backpack because I agreed to return it.

All these reasons can be said to support my attitudes. The reasons make my attitudes *rational*. But this is not always the case. Consider a little boy who believes there will be a snowy Christmas only because it snowed the Christmas before. He believes that it will snow this Christmas for a bad reason. The fact that it snowed last year on one particular day does not justify someone in thinking that it will snow again this year on the same date.

All rational beings are open to evaluation, unlike non-rational individuals such as rocks and thermometers. For example, the belief of the little boy who believes there will be a snowy Christmas this year is incorrect, even if there really will be a white Christmas. That is, even if his belief is true, he still does not believe as he should. The rock, or even the thermometer, which represents the weather, are closed to this type of evaluation since they do not have attitudes. Burge believes that mature humans, young children, and some non-human animals are rational in the sense that (1) they have attitudes (2) their attitudes are

usually based on reasons and (3) their attitudes might be rational or irrational depending on their reasons for their attitudes.

Burge does not think that just being rational—having attitudes that are based on reasons—entails having second-order judgments that are epistemically supported. For Burge, this requires a heightened rational capacity, which mature humans, but not children and animals, sometimes enjoy. Burge calls this “critical rationality.” His thesis is that “our epistemic warrant for our judgments about our thoughts...derives from the nature of the thinker as a critical reasoner” (91).

Before explaining Burge’s arguments for his thesis, it will be helpful to understand what Burge means by “critical rationality.” He defines the term of art as follows.

As a critical reasoner, one not only reasons. One recognizes reasons as reasons. One evaluates, checks, weighs, criticizes, supplements one’s reasons and reasoning. Clearly, this requires a second-order ability to think about thought contents or propositions, and rational relations among them. (98)

While Burge thinks that only mature adults are capable of critical reasoning, and that they sometimes merely reason non-critically (that is, “blindly” without “appreciating reasons as reasons”) he thinks critical reasoning is common practice among adults (99). He does not strictly mark out where blind reasoning turns into critical reasoning. He does say that any individual who uses the term “therefore” is critically reasoning since such use requires “some conception of validity”, which in turn “requires an ability to think of the propositions in a proof as constituting reasons for what follows from them” (ibid).

To illustrate the contrast, an example of blind reasoning might be when you get up from the couch after watching a weather report that calls for snow and begin to salt the driveway. Your behavior shows that you formed a belief that it will snow from watching the weather report—you *reasoned* to your belief. And your snow belief is rational. The

weather report gives you good reason to believe it. But, in a way, you are blind to your reasoning. You do not, at the moment that you rise from the couch, appreciate that the testimony of the weather report serves as your reason for the snow belief. You are thinking about other things, perhaps about where the salt is in the garage and whether you need to put on an extra coat. So, you don't appreciate the testimony as your reason; you do not appreciate your reason as a reason.

Your blind reasoning might escalate into critical reasoning without you having an explicit second-order judgment like "the weather reports testimony gives me reason to think it will snow." Suppose you have a toddler who is at the charming stage of development where she endlessly asks "why" questions. She waddles out to you as you salt the driveway. In responding to her questioning, you begin to critically reason. "Why are you salting?" she asks. "It's going to snow tomorrow." "Why?" "That's what weather report said, *so I think* it will. They usually get it right." When you respond to the second question, you are critically reasoning. You are thinking about—and evaluating—whether your snow belief is justified.

Burge explains how critical reasoning need not always involve an explicit focus on attitudes:

[Critical reasoning] also involves an ability to assess the truth and reasonability of reasoning-hence attitudes. This is not to say that critical reasoning must focus on attitudes, as opposed to their subject matter. Normally we reason not about ourselves but about the world or about practical goods. But to be fully a critical reasoner, one must be able to—and sometimes actually—identify, distinguish, evaluate propositions as asserted, denied, hypothesized or merely considered. (99-100)

I read Burge as thinking that critical reasoning is incremental. Once a reasoner appreciates her reasons as reasons, she might appreciate her reasons as reasons in varying degrees in the way that I might appreciate a friend's generosity more or less.

When a critical reasoner maximally appreciates her reasons as reasons, she explicitly identifies and distinguishes the attitude she takes towards the proposition that serves as her reason.

Neither does being a critical reasoner require that one's first-order attitudes are true, let alone always rational. Someone's attitudes may turn out to be considerably irrational. Their attitudes might be based on misleading evidence. Sometimes people engage in wishful thinking and their beliefs are motivated by non-evidential matters. Others are quite lazy and careless in forming their attitudes. This is all consistent with having the capacity to reason critically. Adults of varying degrees of intellectual ability are capable of critical reasoning and can conceive of themselves as having the capacity. Even Donald Trump:

I call my own shots, largely based on an accumulation of data, and everyone knows it. Some FAKE NEWS media, in order to marginalize, lies!<sup>33</sup>

Central to critical reasoning is that "certain rational norms are necessarily associated with such reasoning" (98). It is essential that in recognizing reasons as reasons one also holds their reasons and attitudes to be subject to norms of reasoning. Burge does not identify specific norms. At one point, he says norms of reasoning exist that "are basic to all critical inquiry, including empirical, mathematical, philosophical, and practical inquiry" (108). He might well have in mind norms such as:

- If you believe that p and you also believe that if p then q, you should believe that q.
- Your beliefs should be based on good reasons.
- Your beliefs should fit your evidence.

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<sup>33</sup> Trump, Donald J. *Twitter*. 06 Feb. 2017. Web. <[https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/828575949268606977?lang](https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/828575949268606977?lang=)>.

We rarely speak of these sorts of standards in everyday conversation, although they do come up periodically, especially when we argue with each other. Consider the protester who yells at a climate change denier, “you have no respect for scientific evidence!” It is plausible that one thing the protester means when she says this is: “You—climate denier—should have beliefs that fit your evidence. You fail to satisfy this norm of reasoning.”

Burge’s idea is that when we critically review our beliefs and reasons, we are subjecting our beliefs and reasons to these sorts of norms. Admittedly, as critical reasoners, we may rarely have an explicit representation of the relevant norm of reasoning while we review and evaluate our beliefs. But an agent who critically reasons does more than just *satisfy* a norm of reasoning. Back in the case of blind reasoning where you form the snow belief while watching the weather report, you successfully satisfy the rational standard that your beliefs should be based on good reasons. But when critically reasoning, the relation of the reasoner to the norms is more intimate. As Burge articulates the more intimate relation, “genuinely critically reasoning requires an application of rational standards to [one’s] commitments” (100). So, a critical reasoner must not only operate in ways where her beliefs and reasons satisfy the norms of rationality. She must review her beliefs and reasons via second-order thinking and make this review a *critical review* by applying norms of reasoning to her beliefs and reasons. Furthermore, the purpose of this application of norms of reasoning is to *control* one’s belief system. As Burge puts it, the point of the application is to “confirm and correct attitudes and reasons (not merely to assess logical and evidential relations between the propositions themselves), by reference to rational standards.”

For Burge, critical reasoners, who can control their attitudes by critically reviewing whether they meet certain rational standards, are *epistemically responsible* for their attitudes in a way that merely rational creatures are not.

We are epistemically responsible only because we are capable of reviewing our reasons and reasoning. And we are paradigmatically responsible for our reasons when we check and review them in the course of critical reasoning. (111)

We usually imply that various people are responsible for the rationality of their attitudes around the same time that someone refers in conversation to a standard of rationality.

Recall the protester who yells at a climate change denier, “you have no respect for scientific evidence!” Besides evaluating the rationality of the climate denier’s attitudes, the protester is *blaming the climate denier* for not doing so herself. And it is not just moral blame. The denier is in part being blamed epistemically for failing to control and critically review her climate beliefs. On the other hand, merely rational individuals cannot be blamed for their attitudes. It would be a *category error* to fault the little boy for believing in a white Christmas because there was one last year. He is too young to appreciate his belief about Christmas last year as his reason. He is not psychologically developed enough to be able to critically review whether his reason is good evidence.

To take stock, we just seen what, on Burge’s view, critical reasoning is, which he thinks is a fairly common practice among adults. The meditator is a prime example of a critical reasoner. He reviews his beliefs and the reasons on which he holds them. He controls his beliefs through the application of the maxim of doubt, and this leads him to consider skeptical reasons for thinking his beliefs may be false. This procedure of doubt requires the meditator to make second-order judgments to survey his belief system and fully apply the maxim of doubt.

There is more in Burge, however, that will be useful to us. The aim of this chapter is to reconstruct an argument in the *Meditations* for CM. In articulating the concept of critical reasoning, which requires second-order judgments, Burge has not yet provided any argument that the second-order judgments of critical reasoners are themselves rational or certain. I now turn to Burge's arguments. In the next section, I will show how the meditator can be reconstructed as making similar arguments.

First, a word about the type of argument Burge employs. Although Burge does not characterize his arguments as transcendental arguments, several philosophers have interpreted them as such.<sup>34</sup> They might be thought to be transcendental in the following sense. First, Burge makes the assumption that we are capable of critical reasoning, and no argument is given for this assumption: "All of us, even sceptics among us, recognize a practice of critical reasoning" (98). Then, without relying on the assumption that we are capable of critical reasoning, Burge reasons to the intermediate conclusion that a necessary condition for being a critical reasoner is that our second-order judgments are rational. Finally, with the transcendental assumption that we are capable of critical reasoning in place, he concludes that we do have rational second-order judgments.

Second, a word on the scope of Burge's arguments. Burge limits the scope of his arguments only to establishing that we have epistemically supported second-order judgments about our *propositional attitudes*. He does not apply his transcendental arguments to our second-order judgments about mental states such as "imaging, remembering, or reasoning about *sensed* inner-goings on" (104, Burge's emphasis). He thinks our second-order judgments about our daydreams, memory states, pain states, or

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<sup>34</sup> Gertler (5) and Smithies (81) categorize Burge's arguments as transcendental.



sensations such as the redness of my visual experience when I look at an apple, and the like, are rational. However, the reason for the epistemic support of these kinds of second-order judgments is not our status as critical reasoners. Burge's arguments apply to second-order judgments about the mental states that we critically review while critical reasoning about what to believe or do. These are judgments about our attitudes—beliefs, desires, intentions, and whatever other stances we might take to propositions. Burge usually speaks of beliefs, and this attitude is most pertinent to my discussion of Descartes, so I will confine my discussion of Burge's argument to second-order judgments about one's beliefs.

The first thing Burge intends to show is that we are *epistemically entitled* to our second-order judgments. Burge contrasts epistemic entitlement, a term he introduces, with justification. For Burge, justification and entitlement are distinct species of "epistemic warrant" (the property of a true belief that makes it count as knowledge)—what I have been calling "rational" or "epistemically supported" (versus irrational/unsupported) belief.<sup>35</sup> When someone's belief is justified, if pressed they are usually able to access and articulate the reason on which they hold their belief. On the other hand, the kinds of beliefs we are entitled to are those that we cannot access or articulate reasons for without "extreme philosophical difficulty" (93). Moreover, "this articulation need not be part of the repertoire of the individual that has the entitlement" (ibid). So, the contrast concerns whether a believer can access and articulate the reason she holds her belief.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Justification and entitlement are also non-overlapping properties. None of the sorts of beliefs that are entitled (most second-order beliefs, e.g. "My reason is that I saw the weather report" and non-inferred perceptual beliefs, e.g. "I'm looking at the weather report on TV") can be justified. And conversely, none of the sorts of beliefs that are justified (e.g. "It will snow tomorrow") can be entitled.

<sup>36</sup> Assuming the believer can reason critically. Some individuals, like young children, will have justified beliefs whose reasons they cannot access.

While Burge uses “entitlement” in a rather technical fashion, he intends it to bear some connection to how rights are discussed in moral and political discourse. At times, he even shifts from speaking of epistemic entitlements to “epistemic rights.”<sup>37</sup>

Below is what I take to be the key passage where Burge argues that the capacity for critical reasoning implies entitlement to one’s second-order judgments.

If one's judgments about one's attitudes or inferences were not reasonable—if one had no epistemic entitlement to them—one’s reflection on one's attitudes and their interrelations could add no rational element to the reasonability of the whole process. But reflection does add a rational element to the reasonability of reasoning. It gives one some rational control over one's reasoning. (101)

Here, Burge is claiming that entitlement to one’s second-order judgments is a consequence of being a critical reasoner, someone epistemically responsible for controlling her attitudes through critical review. While Burge will introduce the idea that critical reasoners are epistemically responsible for their attitudes several pages later in his paper, it is this fact he is alluding to when he speaks of the “rational element” of the “whole process” of critical reasoning and the fact that critical reasoners have “rational control over [their reasoning].”

What Burge is claiming is that since we are obliged and responsible for making our belief system meet rational standards, it follows that we also have an epistemic right/entitlement to make second-order judgments. If the second-order judgments I have in while I critically review my belief are not something I am entitled to, then I would not be responsible for making my beliefs accord with rational norms through critical reasoning.

As I read Burge, his argument relies on some principle linking responsibility and entitlement such as the following:

Responsibility Implies Entitlement: If S has a responsibility (/obligation/ought) to X and S is required to Y to X, then S is entitled to (/has the right to/is permitted to) Y.

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<sup>37</sup> See pages 91, 101, and 104.

To illustrate the Responsibility Implies Entitlement Principle, consider growing up in a household where you are responsible for taking out the trash. Being responsible for taking out the trash entitles you to things. For example, it affords you the right to access the garage and to walk the garbage bin down the driveway on trash day since you must do those things to carry out your responsibility.

The same principle is at work in Burge's argument. As critical reasoners, at times we are responsible for undertaking a critical review to make our attitudes accord with standards of reasoning. A critical review requires second-order thinking about one's attitudes. Therefore, critical reasoners have the right to their second-order judgments while engaging in a critical review.

Burge's argument can be represented as follows.

- (1) We are critical reasoners. (Assumption for Trans. Argument)
- (2) Thus, we are responsible for critically reviewing our attitudes. (1, by def.)
- (3) If we are responsible for critically reviewing our attitudes, we are required to form second-order judgments about our attitudes. (Premise)
- (4) If S has a responsibility to X and S is required to Y to X, then S is entitled to Y. (Res. Implies Entl. Principle)
- (5) Therefore, we are entitled to our second-order judgments. (2,3,4 by instantiation)

So, Burge has purportedly shown that the second-order judgments that critically rational individuals have in a critical review are epistemically entitled—so, the second-order judgments are rational; epistemically supported. However, some rational beliefs and judgments can turn out false. It could be that your belief that it will snow tomorrow, while rational since the weatherman said so, is false. We will see that the meditator has a modified version of this transcendental argument for CM—his second-order judgments are so epistemically supported that they can never be false.

Burge also wishes to demonstrate that the rationality and truth of second-order judgments in a critical review are inseparable. To establish that these second-order judgments are always true—that is, they cannot be in error (false)—Burge uses a thought experiment to reduce to absurdity a contrary view that says a critically rational agent could during a critical review have a false second-order judgment about her first-order beliefs. He asks us to consider what he calls a “simple observational view of self-knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> On this view, we know about our first-order mental states by way of a contingent causal mechanism, like a mental scanner. The scanner produces second-order judgments that give us access to our mental life. But, being a contingent process, malfunction is possible. And in the event that the scanner malfunctions, we would have false second-order judgments about our lower-level mental life. Burge says:

Not all one's knowledge of one's propositional attitudes can fit the simple observational model. For general application of the model is incompatible with the function of knowledge of one's own attitudes in critical reasoning. The main idea is that such application would entail a dissociation between cognitive review and the thoughts reviewed that is incompatible with norms of epistemic reasonability that are basic to all critical inquiry, including empirical, mathematical, philosophical, and practical inquiry. (108)

Burge says this incompatibility makes the simple observational model “nonsense” and concludes that the second-order judgments of a critically rational agent are always true.

Here is my best description of Burge’s thought experiment designed to bring out the absurdity of the simple observational model.<sup>39</sup> The thought experiment will involve

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<sup>38</sup> By “simple observational view of self-knowledge”, Burge is referring to the inner sense theory of self-knowledge, according to which, we know our mind by way of a quasi-perceptual mechanism, like a mental scanner, which is liable to malfunction. The inner sense theory/simple observational view was defended by David Armstrong (323-338) and William Lycan (ch 4).

<sup>39</sup> This is a simplified version of Burge’s example of the guilty suspect. See 110.

the case described on page 46, where you blindly reason to the snow belief and then are moved to critically reflect on the snow belief by the toddler. So, in the thought experiment it is assumed for sake of argument that you do have the first-order belief that it will snow tomorrow and your reason is that the weatherman said it would snow tomorrow.

Suppose the simple observational model is true. Also suppose that you are a perfectly rational critical and blind reasoner.<sup>40</sup>

Part 1. Consider when you reason *blindly* to the conclusion that it will snow tomorrow on the basis that the weather report said it would snow. Everyone should agree that you are justified in holding the snow belief, for it satisfies the relevant norm of rationality: one's beliefs should fit one's evidence. Thus, you should hold the snow belief (as you do in the case, by hypothesis).

Part 2. Consider when the toddler moves you to critically reflect on your snow belief. However, in this case your mental scanner is broken. So, while you form the true second-order belief "I believe it will snow", you also form the *false* second-order belief "My reason for my snow belief is that I wish it will snow." Based strictly on the information you have in this critical review, everyone should agree that you are *irrational* in holding the snow belief. Thus, you have *not* satisfied the relevant norm of rationality—you should dump the snow belief from your belief system.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> I.e. in blind reasoning, you always satisfy the norms of reason. In critical reasoning, you always apply the norms of reason with perfect accuracy to what you (second-order) believe are your first-order attitudes.

<sup>41</sup> We are supposing that you have no other relevant evidence regarding tomorrow's forecast besides the weather report.

But it would be absurd to say that it is true of you both that you should and should not hold the snow belief. So, the simple observational model is false. Thus, the second-order judgments of a critically rational agent can never be in error.

So, Burge has given a transcendental argument that critically rational agents are epistemically entitled to the second-order judgments that function in a critical review of their beliefs and reasons. Burge has also purportedly shown through a thought experiment that a critically rational agent's second-order judgments must be true.

#### **IV. The Meditator as a Critical Reasoner**

Having introduced Burge's concept of critical rationality, we can view the meditator as a critically rational agent. His second-order judgments make up a critical review in which he articulates his beliefs and reasons as his beliefs and reasons. He evaluates them against a norm of reasoning: believe nothing that can be doubted. All this second-order mental activity is done with the aim of controlling and massively overhauling his belief system. In this section, I will show that we can reconstruct the meditator as making an argument for CM much like Burge's transcendental argument for the claim that we are entitled to our second-order judgments. The argument can be gleaned primarily from the two opening paragraphs of the first meditation.

As a first step towards this reconstruction, the meditator assumes without argument that he is critically rational. Take the first two paragraphs of the *Meditations*. I quote the passage at length here because I refer to it at various points in this section.

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the

foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions.

But to accomplish this, it will not be necessary for me to show that all my opinions are false, which is something I could perhaps never manage. Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to run through them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord; so I will go straight for the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested. (AT VII 17-18; CSMK 2:12)

From the very first line, the meditator is writing from more than his own first-person perspective. He is writing from the perspective of a critical reasoner. The first meditation reads as an opening diary entry of someone embarking on a week or month long retreat to reflect on and evaluate her beliefs.

I would like to press that we should read the meditator's critically rational perspective as a substantive philosophical assumption rather than a choice of style on Descartes' part. The meditator seems to suppose that regardless of whether he can find beliefs that are certain, he at least has the capacity to check his beliefs and consider whether they are certain or dubitable. In the first meditation, he never openly doubts whether he can know what his beliefs and reasons are, or whether he can accurately apprehend the norms of reason. Moreover, at the opening of the second meditation, the meditator holds that even if he finds no certain beliefs, he can be *certain* that he has found no certain beliefs:

Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just

as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty. (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16)

As I read this, the meditator claims that even if his scheme to find certain first-order beliefs turns out fruitless, he can still be certain that he has found no certain first-order beliefs. This claim seems to rely on the meditator's certainty that he can undertake and complete a critical review of his first-order beliefs.

If we look across Descartes' philosophical writings, it turns out that many of his works assume that humans are capable of critically reasoning about their attitudes and subjecting them to rational standards. Often the assumption is made in the opening lines, or even the title of each work. Take the full title of one of Descartes' earliest works: *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. There, Descartes sets down a series of rules that will help us become better thinkers in general and find truth across many academic disciplines.

Descartes plainly assumes that we are critical reasoners in the *Principles* and the *Discourse*. Consider the beginning of the *Discourse*:

Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world: for everyone thinks himself so well endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in everything else do not usually desire more of it than they possess. In this it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken. It indicates rather that the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false—which is what we properly call 'good sense' or 'reason'—is naturally equal in all men, and consequently that the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things. For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well. The greatest souls are capable of the greatest vices as well as the greatest virtues; and those who proceed but very slowly can make much greater progress, if they always follow the right path, than those who hurry and stray from it. (AT VI 1-2; CSMK 1:111)

As this passage reads, Descartes might only be making the more modest assumption that we have beliefs based on reasons. But as Descartes continues, it emerges that being



endowed with reason comes with a capacity to reflectively criticize one's opinions. After Descartes discusses the opinions he acquired in early life, he writes:

But after I had spent some years pursuing these studies in the book of the world and trying to gain some experience, I resolved one day to undertake studies within myself too and to use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I should follow. (AT VI 10; CSMK 1:116)

On the next page, Descartes illustrates what it means to "use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I should follow":

regarding the opinions to which I had hitherto given credence, I thought that I could not do better than undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same ones once I had squared them with the standards of reason. (AT VI 13-14; CSMK 1:117)

Descartes seems to think that possessing "reason" comes with the capacity to critically reason. As I read him, Descartes equates the "right path" a mind can take with a norm of reasoning. In the last quoted passage, he suggests that someone with reason can apprehend the norms of reason and apply them to their opinions during a critical review. In this way, the paths offer the critical reviewer guidance about what to think. As is clear in the first *Discourse* passage, Descartes also thinks that these paths or norms determine whether an opinion is reasonable or not.

The assumption also comes through in the *Principles*. There, Descartes says the first principle of human knowledge is that "the seeker after truth must, once in the course of his life, doubt everything, as far as is possible":

Since we began life as infants, and made various judgements concerning the things that can be perceived by the senses before we had the full use of our reason, there are many preconceived opinions that keep us from knowledge of the truth. It seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these opinions is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty. (AT VIII 5; CSMK 1:193)

Here, Descartes once again is in agreement with Burge that adults are capable of critically reasoning. Adults can recognize their beliefs as their own and judge their epistemic credentials. These skills are used to their full extent during the enterprise of doubt.

Further evidence that Descartes shares Burge's assumption that adults are critical reasoners is revealed by similarities in their views about the reasoning capacities of children. For, Descartes states that babies make judgments and thus come to have "preconceived opinions." He also thinks that infants have reasons for their beliefs, though very dubitable ones that they cannot reflect on. At the end of book one of the *Principles*, Descartes provides an elaborate theory of the developmental changes in the mind-body interactions of very young children and infants. Descartes hypothesizes that since the minds of very young children are "so closely tied to the body", they are disposed to falsely judge that sensations are properties of external world objects on the basis of dubious metaphysical reasons (AT VIII 35-36; CSMK 1:218-219).<sup>42</sup> Like Burge, Descartes holds that children are rational—but not critically rational—agents since they hold beliefs for reasons but cannot critically reflect on those reasons.

We have seen that that the meditator assumes that he is critically rational. This is the first premise in Burge's transcendental argument for the claim that the second-order

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<sup>42</sup> Descartes provides an earlier version of this view that infancy is the origin of false beliefs in a letter responding to an interlocutor under the alias "Hyperaspistes" (see *Letter to Hyperaspistes*, August 1641. AT III 3:424). Descartes says that "the human soul, wherever it be, even in the mother's womb is always thinking." He goes on to say that every baby has the innate ideas of God, himself, and self-evident truths in his mind although a baby either perceives them in a "confused" way or attends primarily to things "presented by the senses" rather than the innate ideas. Yet, if a baby were "released from the prison of the body, it would find [the innate ideas] within itself."

judgments that feature in critical reasoning are epistemically supported and entitled. Recall

Burge's argument:

- (1) We are critical reasoners. (Assumption for Trans. Argument)
- (2) Thus, we are responsible for critically reviewing our attitudes. (1, by def.)
- (3) If someone is responsible for critically reviewing their attitudes, they are required to form second-order judgments about their attitudes. (Premise)
- (4) If S has a responsibility to X and S is required to Y to X, then S is entitled to Y. (Res. Implies Entl. Principle)
- (5) Therefore, we are entitled to our second-order judgments. (2,3,4)

Having presented evidence that the meditator accepts premise (1), I wish to examine more closely the opening paragraphs of the first meditation, which are quoted on pages 57-58. I think a close reading of the second paragraph of the first meditation shows that meditator accepts the second and third premises of Burge's argument.

Earlier, we saw that Burge understands critical reasoners not only to have the real psychological capacity to critically review their beliefs against norms of reason but also to be epistemically responsible for their beliefs. In other words, critical reasoners are worthy of praise or blame depending on how they use their critical reasoning abilities to control their belief system. Burge builds this responsibility into the definition of a critical reasoner. Now, one possible position is to acknowledge that we are critical reasoners, those capable of subjecting our beliefs to critical review, but to reject that we are responsible for our beliefs in the way that Burge suggests.

Like Burge, the meditator—and Descartes—works epistemic responsibility into the definition of a critical reasoner. However, the meditator goes further, holding that we have an epistemic responsibility and obligation to apply the stringent norm of doubt to our belief system at some time during our life. The meditator says that is “*necessary*” for him to doubt

his belief system and that he “would now be to *blame* if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out” (AT VII 17; CSMK 2:12. My emphasis)

One might object that there are other plausible readings of these lines. When the meditator says that it’s necessary for him to doubt his beliefs and he would be to blame if he procrastinated further, he is not really saying that he has a rational obligation or epistemic responsibility to doubt his beliefs. Maybe the meditator, who thinks he has a talent for finding certainty, feels compelled to realize his talent by extensively doubting his beliefs in the way that an artist might feel like she has to paint in her studio on Sunday mornings. Or perhaps Descartes, speaking through the meditator, is voicing the pull of his professional duty as a philosopher to make philosophical progress, and he views doubting his beliefs as the first step.

There is considerable evidence that Descartes really does think that we are responsible, as critically rational agents, to doubt our entire belief system. He thinks this mandate stems from our situation as reason-endowed beings. The responsibility doesn’t come from considerations that vary from person to person, such as ambitions, desires, or careers.

A quick detour to the fourth meditation shows that Descartes thinks that all humans, because we are minded beings, are epistemically responsible for doubting our belief system. In the fourth meditation, the meditator, who has purportedly proven the existence of God in the third meditation, attempts to dispel the suspicion that a deceptive God is the best explanation of the source of human cognitive error (making false judgments). Once the meditator explains how our error arises from our own imperfection, he can rest confident

that God is entirely praiseworthy and wouldn't allow us to form false judgments from clear and distinct perceptions. We have only ourselves to blame for errors in our belief system.

The meditator argues that we are only to blame by presenting a subtle psychological account of how we make judgments:

I perceive that the power of willing which I received from God is not, when considered in itself, the cause of my mistakes; for it is both extremely ample and also perfect of its kind. Nor is my power of understanding to blame; for since my understanding comes from God, everything that I understand I undoubtedly understand correctly, and any error here is impossible. So what then is the source of my mistakes? It must be simply this: the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand. Since the will is indifferent in such cases, it easily turns aside from what is true and good, and this is the source of my error and sin. (AT VII 58; CSMK 2:40-41)

On Descartes' view, God has outfitted us with two perfect faculties, the understanding and the will, that work together to produce judgments. When we make false judgments, the source of error is in our own operation of these perfect faculties, not the God-given faculties themselves. The reason Descartes goes into all this is to shift responsibility for human error from God to humanity.

The overall strategy of argument in the fourth meditation—demonstrating that humans are responsible for the truth and falsity of their judgments—confirms Descartes' commitment to the view that humans are epistemically responsible for doubting their beliefs. Indeed, in the fourth meditation, Descartes doesn't frame this as a responsibility to doubt one's beliefs, but merely to make true judgments rather than false ones. However, as we have previously seen, on Descartes' view it is an unfortunate reality of early childhood development that we come to have false beliefs. For Descartes, doubting one's beliefs is a necessary first step to eliminating all false beliefs and beginning to form new true beliefs. While the meditator's discussion in the fourth meditation centers error rather than doubt,

his claim that we are responsible for avoiding error implies a responsibility to doubt our beliefs given his view that doubt rids ourselves from holding erroneously formed beliefs.

Outside of the *Meditations*, Descartes repeatedly suggests that we have an obligation to seek the truth and that this is accomplished through extensive critical doubt. To Gassendi, who in the *Fifth Set of Objections* says he approves of Descartes' project of freeing the mind from all preconceived opinions, Descartes responds: "Indeed, no one can pretend that such a project should not be approved of" (AT VII 348; CSMK 2:241-242). A few lines later, Descartes writes that the enterprise of doubt is a project that "everyone agrees should be performed."

Later, in the preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, Descartes bids newcomers to philosophy, which in his view starts with doubt, a necessary first step in seeking wisdom. He motivates critical reason-based philosophy by arguing that our status as minded beings carries an obligation to philosophize:

The brute beasts, who have only their bodies to preserve, are continually occupied in looking for food to nourish them; but human beings, whose most important part is the mind, should devote their main efforts to the search for wisdom, which is the true food of the mind. (AT IX 4; CSMK 1:180)

And a few lines later:

Now this supreme good, considered by natural reason without the light of faith, is nothing other than the knowledge of the truth through its first causes, that is to say wisdom, of which philosophy is the study. (AT IX 4; CSMK 1:180-181)

For Descartes, the best thing that we can do is discover philosophical knowledge, *scientia*, the true principles that serve as the structure of other non-basic knowledge. Since this wisdom is the supreme good, we have an obligation and responsibility to search for it. It's plausible that Descartes thinks our responsibilities to avoid error and doubt our beliefs are

derived from our responsibility to search for wisdom, our ultimate responsibility. Perhaps, Descartes might argue for our responsibility to critically review our attitudes as follows:<sup>43</sup>

- (1) It is our responsibility to search for wisdom. (AT IX 4; CSMK 1:180-181)
- (2) Thus, it is our responsibility to avoid all error and seek the truth. (from 1; AT VII 58; CSMK 2:40-41)
- (3) Our belief system is founded on false beliefs from childhood. (AT VIII 35-36; CSMK 1:218-219)
- (4) Thus, it is our responsibility to critically doubt our beliefs (from 2,3; AT VII 17-18; CSMK 2:12)

Having seen that Descartes thinks that we are responsible for critically reviewing our belief system, let us consider whether he accepts the third premise in Burge's argument, that forming second-order judgments about one's belief system is required to carry out one's obligation to critically doubt one's belief system.

In the second paragraph of the first meditation, the meditator suggests that doubt requires inspection of one's opinions.

For the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough if I *find* in each of them at least some reason for doubt. And to do this I will not need to *run through* them all individually, which would be an endless task. Once the foundations of a building are undermined, anything built on them collapses of its own accord (AT VII 18; CSMK 2:12. My italics)

While the explicit mention of second-order thinking is absent here, the meditator regards reflecting on his beliefs—his basic, foundational beliefs—as a key part of tracking down the beliefs that are to be subjected to doubt.

In the *Seventh Objections and Replies*, Descartes again appears to acknowledge the role of second-order judgments in the method of doubt. To elucidate the position of the

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<sup>43</sup> I cite the passages to show where Descartes makes each responsibility claim. Of course, the citations in conclusions (2) and (4) are in no way meant to show that Descartes intended the reader to see that a responsibility claim he made in one work followed from a responsibility claim one of his other works.

meditator at the opening of the *Meditations*, Descartes draws an analogy to a person who has a basket of apples and, having learned that some of his apples are rotten, is afraid that the rot may spread to the remaining good juicy apples. Descartes says that it would be prudent for him to tip over the basket, and then “*cast his eye over each apple in turn, and pick up and put back in the basket only those he saw to be sound, leaving the others*” (AT VII 481; CSMK 2:324. My emphasis). Of course, Descartes means for the apples to represent the meditator’s beliefs.<sup>44</sup> Crucially, the language Descartes uses to convey how the man must sort out the apples—by “casting his eye over them” and putting back only “those he saw to be sound” suggests that the method of doubt requires second-order judgments at various stages in the process. Second-order judgments are necessary to first identify one’s foundational beliefs and then make determinations about their epistemic credentials.

Thus, from the very beginning of the *Meditations*, the meditator accepts the premises of an argument that establishes that he is epistemically entitled to second-order judgments. While he neither explicitly links these premises into an argument for that conclusion or comments on the Responsibility-Implies-Rights Principle, we should reconstruct the meditator as making such an argument to defend the reasonableness of his reflective judgments that are part of his process of doubt.

Now, it would be highly anachronistic to reconstruct the meditator as concluding, on the basis of this argument, that his second-order judgments are epistemically *entitled*,

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<sup>44</sup> One relevant difference between Descartes’ apple sorting example and the process of doubt is that, with the apples, all the apples are inspected. By contrast, in the process of doubt, only basic beliefs, the ones on which the rest of one’s belief system is derived, are reflectively inspected and doubted.



since epistemic entitlement is a term of art from a contemporary philosophy. However, Burge is happy to state his conclusion in terms of reasonable belief, or “epistemic warrant” as he calls it—he says that our second-order judgments are *reasonable* to believe (99). While the meditator uses many different epistemic concepts throughout the *Meditations*—certainty, knowledge, the firmness and shakeability of belief, indubitability, *scientia*, and understanding—the meditator also has a notion of reasonable belief. This comes up at the end of the first meditation, where the meditator says that his former opinions, although doubtful, are still “highly probable” (*valde probabiles*) and “are much more reasonable to believe than to deny” (*quas multo magis rationi confentaneum fit credere quàm negare*) (AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15). So, it’s preferable to reconstruct the meditator as arguing for the reasonableness of his second-order judgments.<sup>45</sup>

Of course, this reconstruction is not enough for the meditator. The meditator is committed to CM, the view that his second-order judgments are certain, which is a stronger claim than if one were to claim that they are reasonable. In the remainder of this section, I will consider how the special rigor of the meditator’s critical reasoning makes available a stronger version of the transcendental argument with a conclusion stated in terms of certainty rather than reasonable belief.

What does certainty require, for Descartes? It’s beyond the scope of this thesis to delve fully into Descartes’ account of certainty, but the question deserves at least a

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<sup>45</sup> It should be said that the meditator doesn’t say here that his second-order judgments are reasonable—he doesn’t directly comment on the epistemic status of his second-order judgments in the quoted passage. I’m making the point that the meditator employs the concept of reasonable judgments/beliefs, and, so, if we are to reconstruct an argument on his behalf for why his second-order judgments carry positive epistemic status, he would accept an argument framed in terms of reasonable second-order judgment/belief.

provisional answer so that we may consider how the transcendental argument might show the certainty of the meditator's second-order judgments. Sometimes "certain" is used to describe the state of an individual who believes to the fullest—is maximally persuaded, convinced, or confident about some issue. We might call this "psychological certainty." Psychological certainty is only a matter of believing something as much as possible, given the limits of our psychology. In the following passage, commentator Peter Markie (55) reads Descartes as speaking of psychological certainty:

And even if I had not demonstrated this [a mathematical truth like "The angles of a triangle equal two right angles"], the nature of my mind is such that *I cannot but assent to these things*, at least so long as I clearly perceive them. I also remember that even before, when I was completely preoccupied with the objects of the senses, I always held that *the most certain truths* of all were the kind which I recognized clearly in connection with shapes, or numbers or other items relating to arithmetic or geometry, or in general to pure and abstract mathematics. (AT VII 65; CSMK 2:45. My emphasis.)

Yet, Descartes sometimes appears to use "certainty" to denote maximally *reasonable* belief. We have already seen this kind of certainty in the first meditation. It comes up when Descartes contrasts his old opinions, which are "much more reasonable to believe than to deny" to beliefs that are certain (AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15). This notion of certainty sometimes is called "epistemic certainty" since a belief being *reasonable* is understood to be closely related to a belief being *justified*, based on *evidence*, or based on a *good reason*. When someone's belief is epistemically certain, her belief is as reasonable as a belief can possibly be, and, by definition, its maximal reasonability entails that the belief is true.<sup>46</sup> It's controversial whether Descartes really separates epistemic certainty from

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<sup>46</sup> Similar distinctions between psychological certainty and epistemic certainty are accepted by Markie (33-72), Frankfurt (102-105), and Vinci (12-13). Frankfurt articulates the distinction between psychological and epistemic certainty in terms of "descriptive" and "normative" certainty. See Markie for a detailed interpretive argument for the distinction

psychological certainty. Perhaps one passage in which Descartes speaks more univocally in terms of epistemic certainty arises in the *Second Set of Replies*:

if this conviction is so firm that it is *impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting* what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could *reasonably* want... such a conviction is clearly the same as *the most perfect certainty*. (AT VII 144-145; CSMK 2:103. My emphasis.)

It what follows, epistemic certainty will be our focus. I will make the case that the meditator has available to him a modified version of Burge's transcendental argument with conclusion that his second-order judgments are as reasonable as any belief or judgment can be. They are so reasonable that they are true. This modified argument trades on the unusual *rigor* of the meditator's critical reasoning required for the method of doubt compared to that discussed by Burge. I will now explain how the meditator's critical reasoning is especially rigorous.

Compare the responsibilities of a mature adult to those of the meditator. Burge tells us that the mature adult, as someone capable of critically reasoning, is epistemically responsible for making his first-order beliefs respect "norms of epistemic reasonability basic to all critical inquiry, including empirical, mathematical, philosophical, and practical inquiry" (108). These norms of reasonability are norms such as "your beliefs should fit your evidence." That is, on Burge's view, we are responsible for making our attitudes only *reasonable*. To fulfill our epistemic responsibility, we must critically review and control our first-order attitudes by inspecting the reasons they are based on.

By contrast, the meditator is called on to do so much more. On Descartes' view, he is responsible for making his first-order beliefs respect the norm of doubt—"believe only

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between psychological and epistemic certainty in Descartes' corpus, and how Descartes may even conflate the two notions at times.

what is epistemically certain.” In other words, the meditator must make his first-order beliefs *maximally* reasonable. This requires using the robust norm of doubt rather than a norm such as evidential fit. We can see that the evidential fit norm is too weak for the meditator’s purposes since many of his former opinions—for example, believing that there is a fire before him and believing that the fire is warm—satisfy the norm of evidential fit, but, as the skeptical arguments purportedly show, are still uncertain.

Descartes seems to register the stringency of the meditator’s epistemic obligation at least twice in the *Meditations*. First, in the preface to the *Meditations* he says that “the route which I follow” in acquiring certainty “is so untrodden and so remote from the normal way” (AT VII 7; CSMK 2:6). The stringency is again acknowledged at AT VII 22; CSMK 2:15, a passage that has come up twice already, where the meditator says that his former, doubtable beliefs are still reasonable. So, the meditator concedes that his former first-order beliefs are epistemically supported since they stand up to the norms of reason used in ordinary critical review. The meditator, however, has ratcheted up the bar of acceptability.

We saw earlier that the transcendental argument hinges on a link between one’s responsibility to critically reason and the reasonability of the second-order beliefs that are essential to the review. The idea was that someone couldn’t be responsible for making their first-order beliefs reasonable unless their second-order beliefs about the reasonableness of their first-order beliefs are also reasonable. This inference relies on a principle, the Responsibility Implies Entitlement Principle as I have called it, that links responsibility to reasonability (or entitlement, on Burge’s view). The principle (as applied to specifically to epistemic responsibility rather than moral or political responsibility, and also framed in terms of reasonableness of belief rather than entitlement to belief) is that if someone is

epistemically responsible for having one's belief system satisfy some norm X and satisfying X requires believing Y, then believing Y is reasonable.

The same train of thought can be used to argue for the certainty of the meditator's second-order judgments, given the rigor of his epistemic responsibility. In a compressed form, the idea is that the meditator cannot be epistemically responsible for ensuring that his belief system has only certain first-order beliefs unless his second-order judgments about the lower beliefs are certain. Here is the same point drawn out slightly more. The meditator is responsible for making his belief system adhere to the norm of doubt, the norm that one should believe only what is maximally reasonable. Now, for the meditator to satisfy the norm of doubt, he must have certain second-order judgments as part of a critical review of the epistemic credentials of his first-order beliefs, particularly whether those first-order beliefs are maximally reasonable. So, the meditator's second-order beliefs that are part of the critical review are also maximally reasonable—certain.

So, assuming that the meditator would accept some principle linking epistemic responsibility with reasonability, the meditator has available to him the following transcendental argument in defense of the Certainty of Mind Thesis.

- (1) We are critical reasoners. (Assumption for Transcendental Argument)
- (2) Thus, we are responsible for critically reviewing our belief system so that it satisfies the norm of doubt. (From 1, by def.)
- (3) If someone is responsible for critically reviewing their belief system so that it satisfies the norm of doubt, then they are required to form certain second-order judgments about their attitudes. (Premise)
- (4) If S has a responsibility to X and fulfilling X requires S to have a certain belief that Y, then S's belief in Y is certain.<sup>47</sup> (Particular version of Res. Implies Ent.)

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<sup>47</sup> This is a specific version of the Responsibility Implies Entitlement Principle formulated in terms of maximal reasonable belief instead of entitlement. On pages 53-54 I discussed the principle and on pages 67-70 I explained how Descartes makes use of the epistemic concept of reasonable belief (and maximally reasonable, i.e. epistemically certain belief).

Principle framed in terms of epistemic responsibility and maximally reasonable/certain belief)

(5) Therefore, our second-order judgments are certain. (2,3,4)

Having reconstructed the meditator as making the above argument, I wish to close by examining two objections.

First, someone might question the inference to (5). The objection concedes that (2), (3), and (4) entail that the meditator's second-order beliefs are reasonable, even *almost* maximally reasonable. However, the objection maintains that the meditator would be able to complete the method of doubt with second-order judgments that are merely highly reasonable, but still uncertain, second-order judgments.

One response to this objection is that the epistemic reasonability of the meditator's second-order beliefs must be at least as reasonable as the level of reasonability that he is responsible for ensuring at the first-order level. Since the meditator is required to make his first-order beliefs satisfy the norm of doubt, when he makes second-order judgments about whether his first-order beliefs satisfy the norm of doubt, those second-order judgments must themselves satisfy the norm of doubt, that is, be epistemically certain.

A second response is that the meditator's second-order judgments being only *almost* maximally reasonable is incompatible with the meditator's claim that he can be certain that he has completed the method of doubt. Recall that in the second meditation, the meditator assumes that he can be certain that he can complete the method of doubt. For, he says that even if his inquiry turns up no certain beliefs, he can "at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty" (AT VII 24; CSMK 2:16). Now, if the meditator's second-order judgments are anything less than certain, there would be some reason, however small, for him to think that his critical review is flawed and thus he didn't successfully finish the

enterprise of doubt. So, the possibility that the meditator's second-order judgments are less than maximally rational is incompatible with his claim that he can recognize with certainty that his enterprise of doubt has come to an end, regardless of whether it turns up certain first-order beliefs or not.

The other objection I will consider is that the transcendental argument that I claim is available to the meditator makes it too easy to have epistemically certain second-order judgments about one's belief system. This objection points out that Descartes wrote the *Meditations* for the readers to follow and imitate the meditator's thought process in order to discover metaphysical truth and eventually something firm and lasting in the sciences. However, the readers of the *Meditations*, though they are critical reasoners, aren't perfect critical reasoners. It's conceivable that while they are critically doubting their first-order beliefs, they might become mentally fatigued from the rigor of the inquiry, distracted, or thoroughly confused. If this were to happen, they could end up making a false second-order judgment about their belief system. They might mistake a first-order belief in a conditional claim for a belief in a categorical claim. Or perhaps while thinking about an argument during their critical review, they could mistake an assumption they grant for sake of argument as a premise that they believe. These second-order errors seem possible. But the transcendental argument has it that those who take up the critical enterprise of doubt don't err at the second-order level. Their second-order judgments are so reasonable that they always accurately report on their first-order mental life. Thus, the transcendental argument oversteps: it attributes certainty to the second-order judgments of those who haven't earned it.

In response to this objection, we will see that Descartes understands the meditator as someone who is more proficient at critical reasoning than most mature adults. In fact, the meditator is so proficient at critical reasoning that he cannot become distracted or mentally fatigued; he lacks the cognitive weaknesses that open him up to second-order error. Now, the transcendental argument only attributes second-order certainty to those who have reached the meditator's ability to hyper-critically reason. So, the objection is misguided when it claims that the transcendental argument attributes second-order certainty to any critical reasoner who attempts to doubt their beliefs.

Let us see where Descartes describes the meditator as an elite critical reasoner. One begins to see Descartes making this point in the *Preface to the French Edition*. There, Descartes is very clear that the *Meditations* is for a highly select audience:

I am also going to deal with the foundations of First Philosophy in its entirety. But I do not expect any popular approval, or indeed any wide audience. On the contrary I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between. (AT VII 9; CSMK 2:8)

Descartes even begins the *Preface* by telling the reader of the *Meditations* that he chose not to publish the first edition in French because he didn't want masses of weak minded people to get ahold of it, only hardened academics conversant in Latin.

The issues seemed to me of such great importance that I considered they ought to be dealt with more than once; and the route which I follow in explaining them is so untrodden and so remote from the normal way, that I thought it would not be helpful to give a full account of it in a book written in French and designed to be read by all and sundry, in case weaker intellects might believe that they ought to set out on the same path. (AT VII 7; CSMK 2:6-7)

Previously I argued that Descartes thinks that the masses are in fact critical reasoners, but who usually apply (merely) norms of reasonable belief such as the norm of evidential fit, but not the norm of doubt (see page 59-61). If that argument is correct, then Descartes isn't



here saying that many humans are incapable of critically reflecting on their first-order beliefs. So, Descartes means something else when he calls many intellects “weak.”

For Descartes, the mind can gain certain knowledge not by improving its capacity to reason or critically reason, which are already divinely constructed perfect capacities. Rather, the human mind acquires certain knowledge by carefully attending to itself and focusing solely on using its rational powers to the fullest. Descartes articulates this point in the *Second Set of Replies*, where he says that the *Meditations* are written in what he calls the “analytic” style of exposition:

Analysis shows the true way by means of which the thing in question was discovered methodically and as it were a priori, so that if the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself. But this method contains nothing to compel belief in an argumentative or inattentive reader; for if he fails to attend even to the smallest point, he will not see the necessity of the conclusion. (AT VII 155-156; CSMK 2:110)

In his view, this is the style of thinking used by ancient mathematicians when they made great discoveries in geometry (AT VII 156; CSMK 2:111). As a practitioner of the analytic method, the meditator enters the project of doubt by giving his first-order beliefs his undivided attention and critically reviewing them as meticulously as is humanly possible. Descartes even says that anyone engaging in the method of doubt should “devote several months, or at least weeks” to the skeptical arguments before going on to seek positive knowledge (AT VII 130; CSMK 2:94).

So, a true imitation of the meditator’s method of doubt requires more than being a critical reasoner or even critically reasoning with the rigorous norm of doubt. One must also think about one’s mental life with complete attention and uninterrupted thought. While Descartes thinks that everyone can do this with enough practice and time, and everyone is

even obligated to since we are all responsible for attaining certainty and wisdom, only those few who really do follow the method make certain second-order judgements about their mind.

### Chapter Three: The Cogito is an Argument

In the last two chapters, I presented evidence that, in the *Meditations*, the meditator does in fact draw the kind of argument that is suggested by the line “I think, therefore I am.”

Surprisingly, as early as the first meditation, the meditator judges that he thinks—he makes second-order judgments pertaining to the method of doubt. These second-order judgments about his first-order thoughts are essential to the method of doubt, and the meditator regards each second-order judgment as a premise he can use in his argument for *sum*.

Moreover, the meditator has available a transcendental argument to vindicate the certainty of these second-order judgments. Their certainty follows from his capacity and responsibility to engage in the method of doubt.

However, in the *Objections and Replies* and in his recorded *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes makes a series of detailed and complex remarks that are *prima facie* in tension with an understanding of the cogito as an *argument*. If Descartes regarded the meditator as not arguing for *sum*, but establishing *sum* some other way, then my naïve interpretation, which reads the meditator as arguing from *cogito* to *sum*, is false.

In this chapter, I will begin to introduce these three remarks by exploring two ways that commentators have taken a sentence of the first remark to be in tension with an understanding of the meditator as arguing from *cogito* to *sum*. Appreciating the potential tensions will motivate a comprehensive scrutiny of the three remarks.

Common to the remarks is a discussion of whether Descartes uses “syllogistic” reasoning to establish *sum* in the *Meditations*. The first remark appears in the *Replies to the Second Objections*. Of the numerous features of Descartes’ first remark, including apparent hostility to syllogistic reasoning, he issues the follow denial.

When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. (AT VII 140; CSMK 2:100)

The second and third remarks, if read quickly, may be thought to contain similar denials to the first remark (I will soon argue, among other things, that this is a misreading). Now, if by “syllogism”, Descartes means argument, then the above passage contradicts my naïve interpretation of the *Meditations*. Hintikka reads the denial in this way: “...Since [*cogito*] is not just a premise from which the conclusion *sum* is *deduced*, the relation of the two becomes a problem.” (5, my emphasis).

There is a second, more specific, way that the denial in the *Second Replies* might be read as creating a tension in Descartes’ writings. It might be read as accepting that “I think, therefore I am” expresses an argument, while denying that the argument relies on a general premise such as “Whatever thinks exists.” In this way, the denial seems to contradict Descartes’ other remarks where he appears to say that the argument expressed by the famous line *does* rely on a general premise in addition to *cogito*.

The young theologian Frans Burman is plausibly read as articulating this tension in his documented conversation with Descartes.<sup>48</sup> Burman (AT V 147; CSMK 3:333) quotes the denial from the *Second Replies* and claims that Descartes “asserts the opposite” of the denial in the Principles, Part I, Article 10. Burman doesn’t say where in Article 10 Descartes asserts the opposite of the denial from the *Second Replies*, or explain the conflict

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<sup>48</sup> Following scholars such as Bernard Williams and Harry Frankfurt, I will bracket questions regarding the textual accuracy of the record we have with Descartes’ *Conversation with Burman*. I assume the text as Descartes’ word. I refer a reader concerned with questions about the legitimacy of the text to Cottingham’s 1976 translation and commentary, the first English translation of the conversation. Cottingham examines the accuracy of the record we have of the *Conversation with Burman*.

in any way. Let us see how these passages might contradict one another. Below is Article 10. I have italicized the line Burman is most plausibly referring to. For some context, in the *Principles* Descartes first asserts “I think, therefore I am” in Article 7 of Part I; Article 10 might be read as clarifying Article 7.

10. Matters which are very simple and self-evident are only rendered more obscure by logical definitions, and should not be counted as items of knowledge which it takes effort to acquire.

I shall not here explain many of the other terms which I have already used or will use in what follows, because they seem to me to be sufficiently self-evident. I have often noticed that philosophers make the mistake of employing logical definitions in an attempt to explain what was already very simple and self-evident; the result is that they only make matters more obscure. And when I said that the proposition I am thinking, therefore I exist is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, *I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist*, and so forth. But because these are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think they needed to be listed. (AT VIII 7; CSMK 1:194-195)

This seems to suggest that, to establish *sum*, one *must* know that “it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist.” Assuming that the italicized claim “it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist” is semantically equivalent to “whatever thinks exists,” it’s straightforward how Burman took Article 10 to be in tension with the denial Descartes makes in the *Second Replies*. Namely, Article 10 asserts that the cogito argument requires the premise “Whatever thinks exists”, while the denial from the *Second Replies* denies that the cogito argument requires that premise. In his response to Burman, Descartes seems to regard Burman as articulating the tension between the *Second Replies* and the *Principles* in this way (which is entirely resolvable, in Descartes’ view).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See Cottingham (xx-xxii) for a longer argument in support of this way of framing the tension that Burman poses to Descartes.

We have seen two ways in which Descartes' denial that *sum* is established by means of syllogism is in tension with an understanding of Descartes as establishing his existence by making an argument. One way is that the denial rejects an understanding of the cogito, like that suggested by the naïve interpretation, where it is an argument. The denial should be taken this way if Descartes uses the term "syllogism" to mean an argument. A subtler conflict is that the denial is in tension with an understanding of the way in which Descartes elsewhere seems to suggest that "I think" must be combined with the supporting premise "Whatever thinks exists" to successfully establish "I exist." In the remainder of this section, I will argue that these two tensions dissolve on a close analysis of Descartes' remarks, the first from the *Second Replies*, the second from the *Appendix to the Fifth Replies*, and the third from his *Conversation with Burman*. More specifically, my analysis will argue for the following three theses.

First, against the first tension, Descartes doesn't deny that one can deploy an argument for *sum* anywhere in the remarks. Rather, the denial in the *Second Replies* specifies the type of psychological procedure—the kind of reasoning—one must use to successfully argue from *cogito* to *sum*. Namely, to discover *sum* by arguing from *cogito*, one must reason from *cogito* to *sum* by "intuition" rather than by "deduction" or "syllogism." Descartes distinguishes these three modes of reasoning in the *Regulae*, one of his earliest works. He is channeling the three-part distinction in the three remarks.

Second, the chronological order of the remarks represents a shift in Descartes' thinking about whether *sum* can be discovered through syllogistic reasoning. By the time of his *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes becomes neutral about whether it is *possible* to discover *sum* syllogistically. So, Descartes recants the denial he made in the *Second*

*Replies*. While, Descartes becomes neutral regarding whether *sum* can be discovered by syllogism, he still holds, first, that discovering *sum* through syllogistic reasoning is liable to reasoning errors of which a discovery by intuition is immune, and, second, if *sum* could be discovered via syllogism, this would only occur in exceptional cases involving a reasoner who is highly attentive and undistracted.

Third, against the second tension, Descartes' response to Burman clarifies that the passage from the *Second Replies* doesn't deny that the cogito argument relies on the general premise "Whatever thinks exists" and so is not in conflict with Article 10 of the first section of the *Principles*. In fact, the Descartes' *Conversation with Burman* shows that the most accurate representation of the cogito is an argument of the form:

Whatever thinks exists.  
I think.  
Therefore, I exist.

Furthermore, that the cogito argument is best represented as this argument, which exemplifies the Barbara form, one of the four forms documented in Aristotle's theory of syllogism, doesn't imply, for Descartes, that *sum* must be *reasoned to* syllogistically.

Let us now examine in full the three remarks in which Descartes discusses his views about syllogistic reasoning and their connection to the cogito. The three remarks can be chronologically ordered with the remark beginning with the *Second Replies*, followed by the remark from the *Appendix to the Fifth Objections*, and finishing with the *Conversation with Burman*.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The *Second Objection and Replies* was published along with the first Latin edition of the *Meditations* in 1641. The *Appendix to the Fifth Set of Objections* came into circulation when it was affixed to the *Objections and Replies* for the publication of the first French edition in 1647, but could have been written as early as 1644 (see the first footnote on AT VII 198; CSMK 2:268). *Descartes' Conversation with Burman* is dated 1648.

The first remark is from the *Second Replies*.

Thirdly, when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. Now awareness of first principles is not normally called 'knowledge' by dialecticians. And when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premiss 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones. (AT VII 140-141; CSMK 100-101)

The second remark appears in the *Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies*.

Your friends note six objections against the Second Meditations. The first is this. The author of the *Counter-Objections* claims that when I say 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' I presuppose the major premiss 'Whatever thinks exist', and hence I have already adopted a preconceived opinion. Here he once more misuses the term 'preconceived opinion'. For although we can apply the term to the proposition in question when it is put forward without attention and believed to be true previously, we cannot say that it is always a preconceived opinion. For when we examine it, it appears so evident to the understanding that we cannot but believe it, even though this may be the first time in our life that we have thought of it—in which case we would have no preconceived opinion. But the most important mistake our critic makes here is the supposition that knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones, following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic (footnote: by 'Dialectic' Descartes means scholastic logic.) Here he shows how little he knows in the way in which we should search for the truth. It is certain that if we are to discover the truth we must always begin with particular notions in order to arrive at the general ones later on (though we may also reverse the order and deduce other particular truths once we have discovered general ones). Thus when we teach a child the elements of geometry we will not be able to get him to understand the general proposition 'When equal quantities are taken from equal amounts the remaining amounts will be equal' or 'The whole is greater than its parts', (footnote: These are two of the 'Axioms' which appear at the start of Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*) unless we show him examples in particular cases. It is by failing to take heed of this that our author has gone astray and produced all the invalid arguments with which he has stuffed his book. He has simply made up false major premisses whenever the mood takes him, as though I had used them to deduce the truths which I expounded. (AT VII 205-206; CSMK 2:271)



The third remark is Descartes' response to Burman, who complains that Article 10 of Part 1 of the *Principles* asserts the opposite of the denial in the first remark. Descartes replies:

Before this inference, 'I am thinking, therefore I exist', the major 'whatever thinks exists' can be known; for it is in reality prior to my inference, and my inference depends on it. That is why the author says in the *Principles* that the major premiss comes first, namely because implicitly it is always presupposed and prior. But it does not follow that I am always expressly and explicitly aware of its priority, or that I know it before my inference. This is because I am attending only to what I experience within myself—for example 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'. I do not pay attention in the same way to the general notion 'whatever thinks exists'. As I have explained before, we do not separate out these general propositions from particular instances; rather, it is in the particular instances that we think of them. This, then, is the sense in which the words cited here should be taken. (AT V 147; CSMK 3:333)

Let us cover some basic interpretive points that arise in the first remark. Then we will work up to the second two remarks, considering how they expand on and depart from the first remark. The central point Descartes makes in the first remark is the denial already introduced; that when someone says, "I think, therefore I am," she recognizes her existence through intuition and doesn't deduce it by means of a syllogism.

The only work in which Descartes distinguishes these kinds of reasoning—intuition, deduction, and syllogistic reasoning—is the *Regulae*. Thus, any interpretation of the just-quoted remarks must begin with the *Regulae*. The full title of the *Regulae* is translated as "Rules for the Direction of the Mind." Fittingly, the work is a series of rules for reasoning that, if followed with scrupulous care, will supposedly lead a rational person to discover true and certain conclusions across a breadth of domains: philosophy, arithmetic, geometry, and possibly more.

In distinguishing intuition, deduction, and syllogistic reasoning, Descartes' intention is not to develop three separate logical systems but to build an account of human reasoning

that will serve as the basis for a method to make us better thinkers. What he is not doing is creating three different logical vocabularies in which certain chains of vocabulary make up valid arguments and others do not, in the way that modal logic features different logical vocabulary and valid arguments than propositional logic. Rather, Descartes is interested in what the human mind does when it reasons. More specifically, first, he is interested in the *psychological methods* that a thinker can use to move from the premise(s) to the conclusion of an argument. Second, he is interested particularly in different ways to reason to conclusions where we discover something new. That is, reasoning where we draw a conclusion about some matter we haven't decided on before. Third, he is interested in what is psychologically responsible for reasoning that leads to very good outcomes: new conclusions that are true and certain (AT X 366-370; CSMK 1:13-15).

Descartes introduces intuition and deduction as two reasoning processes that “arrive at a knowledge of things with no fear of being mistaken” (AT X 368; CSMK 1:14). Reasoning by intuition leaves “no room for doubt about what we are understanding” (ibid). Reasoning by intuition involves having a clear and distinct perception that “the original proposition follows necessarily from the [premises].” In addition, whatever we intuit is certain (if something is uncertain, it either has not or cannot be intuited). One example Descartes gives of a conclusion we can discover via intuitive reasoning is “ $3+1=2+2$ .” By considering the two propositions “ $3+1=4$ ” and “ $2+2=4$ ”, one can intuit the proposition “ $3+1=2+2$ .”

While Descartes uses his concept of intuition to explain what happens in the mind when we draw logical consequences, this is an explanation of logical consequences we draw in one mental grasp or a single “movement of thought” as Descartes says (AT X 368-

370; CSMK 1:14-15). So, intuition is a way of reasoning through arguments that don't have many premises (whether an argument can be intuited that has many premises—say more than two or three—might vary from one person to the next: compare the child learning arithmetic to the professional mathematician). For arguments that have more premises—arguments with “remote” conclusions, as Descartes calls them—we use deduction.

Deduction is a psychological process that is defined partly in terms of intuition. When we deduce a conclusion from premises, we make a series of intuitions between premises to intermediary conclusions, and so on, in “a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought” until we draw the main conclusion (ibid). As with intuition, in deduction we form certain beliefs in the conclusion of our reasoning. Yet, the certainty we attain through deduction requires remembering the sequence of intuitions that you have completed.

To illustrate how it takes more for the deduced conclusions to be certain than for the intuited ones to be certain, consider two chain link fences: one ten feet long and a second fence stretching out of sight. It's reasonable to be very confident that all the links in the ten-foot fence are connected because you can see all its links in one glance. But to reasonably be very confident that the extended fence is linked up, more is required. You must walk its length, stop at multiple places to make note of the links, and make a point to remember each stop. So, while intuition and deduction both lead to certainty and cannot be mistaken, intuition is instantaneous and requires nothing more than the clear and distinct perception of very few premises and the conclusion. In deduction, which involves many premises, more is required for certainty. An argument must be reasoned through over time in a continuous series of intuitions, and each step of the argument must be preserved in memory.

To best appreciate the significance of Descartes' denial that the cogito is a syllogism, it will be helpful to further explore Descartes' contrast between syllogistic reasoning with intuition (and deduction, since deduction, on Descartes' theory of reasoning, requires a series of intuitions). In the *Regulae*, Descartes appears to contrast syllogistic reasoning and intuition as two styles of reasoning associated with different accounts of logical consequence. He says that the dialecticians, who teach Aristotle's theory of syllogism to their students:

prescribe certain forms of reasoning in which the conclusions follow with such irresistible necessity that if our reason relies on them, even though it takes, as it were, a rest from considering a particular inference clearly and attentively, it can nevertheless draw a conclusion which is certain simply in virtue of the form. (AT X 405-406; CSMK 1:36)

Descartes goes on to critique the dialecticians.<sup>51</sup> But, before doing so, in this passage he is plausibly read as attributing to the theory of syllogistic reasoning an *account of logical consequence*. Perhaps Descartes thought along the following lines. According to the dialecticians, an argument or inference is valid (or, less technically, "good") when reason identifies it as having one of the twenty-four accepted forms of argument set down in the

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<sup>51</sup> When Descartes uses the term "syllogism" or "syllogism in Dialectic", he is referring to the study of logic that was prominent in medieval scholastic schools (the "logic of the Schools" as he calls it in the preface of the *Principles*). This late medieval logic largely accepted Aristotle's theory of syllogism as detailed in the *Prior Analytics*. While medieval logicians expanded on some of Aristotle's syllogisms for modal sentences, those having to do with possibility, Aristotle's syllogisms for non-modal sentences were with little exception treated as a definitive science of valid reasoning. Aristotle's theory of syllogism developed a system to identify twenty-four valid forms of three-line arguments or "syllogisms" out of two-hundred fifty-six possible arguments forms. The theory of syllogism was not just seen as a scientific accomplishment, but as something that could be taught to make people think better. Like the critical thinking courses that are taught to undergraduates today, in the late middle ages there was a pedagogy called "dialectic" which centered on the idea that students could ameliorate their reasoning skills by learning to use the theory of syllogism.

theory of syllogism. By contrast, when we use intuition, a good argument is understood using Descartes' in-house notion of clarity and distinctness. An argument is valid when reason clearly and attentively (or "distinctly", as Descartes might have later said) perceives that the conclusion follows from the premises in this particular argument (rather than in some larger class of arguments to which the argument under consideration is a member).

It should be clear at this point that Descartes' denial from the *Second Replies* doesn't imply that he thought he could establish his existence using some non-argumentative, non-inferential strategy—that the relation of *cogito* to *sum* is not one of premise to conclusion. The denial sheds light on the method of reasoning the meditator uses to infer *sum*: he did so *intuitively*. Based on Descartes' account of intuitive reasoning, this means that the meditator used his reason to look at the argument as he formulated it in his own case (rather than being a member of some larger class of arguments defined by their formal properties). When his reason checked out the argument, he clearly and distinctly perceived that *cogito* entails *sum* (again, instead of perhaps clearly and distinctly seeing the argument in his own case as being a member of a larger class of valid arguments in virtue of shared formal properties).<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Why does Descartes think that *cogito* entails *sum*—why is it true that if I think, then I exist? Descartes may be read as appealing to clarity and distinctness for the answer. Since I can clearly and distinctly perceive that my existence is a necessary condition for my thinking, I have the strongest possible reason to believe that the entailment holds. ("Perception" here is not sensory but some sort of rational or purely intellectual perception, however obscure that may be). In the *Principles*, Descartes explains that *cogito* entails *sum* because "it is a contradiction to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist" (AT VIII 7; CSMK 1:194). Here, Descartes is suggesting that the entailment can be shown by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument. When it's assumed that *cogito* doesn't entail *sum*, it follows that it's possible for someone to think who doesn't exist. That is a contradiction. So, the initial assumption—that *cogito* doesn't entail *sum*—is false. Therefore, *cogito* does entail *sum*. I leave it an open question whether these two answers to the question of why *cogito* entails *sum*—that we can clearly and distinctly

Having clarified the meaning of Descartes' denial that *sum* was arrived at syllogistically, our next task is to examine Descartes' rationale behind the denial. The first point to consider is that, compared to the first remark from the *Second Replies* containing the denial, in the latter two remarks Descartes progressively softens the denial. In the second, he only goes so far to say that Gassendi was mistaken to think that *sum* "must always" be arrived at through syllogism. He also concedes that *sum* can be derived through syllogism after *sum* has been discovered by intuition. In the third remark, Descartes never overtly mentions syllogistic reasoning, even though he is responding to the apparent tension, framed by Burman, between the *Principles* and the denial in the *Second Replies*, and in the latter Descartes explicitly refers to syllogistic reasoning.

In the next several pages, I will argue that in the third remark Descartes retracts his denial that *sum* is inferred syllogistically. In the end, he becomes neutral about whether we can discover *sum* through syllogistic reasoning. However, he continues to maintain that establishing *sum* via syllogistic reasoning would not be easy, psychologically speaking, to do—it's much easier for us to discover *sum*, and be certain of our discovery, by intuition. To advance this claim, I will argue that Descartes' retraction of the denial in the *Second Replies* stems from a shift in his objections against the view that syllogistic reasoning can be used to discover new truths.

I will start by discussing a strong objection Descartes issues in the first remark that it's impossible to discover *sum* by reasoning syllogistically. There, Descartes says that the

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perceive the entailment, and that it's contradictory to deny the entailment—are really separate answers. It could be that Descartes' view is that to clearly and distinctly perceive X is just to understand that a statement that negates X is a contradiction.

reason why *sum* is not inferred by syllogism is that, to have done so, he would have to previously know the major premise “Everything that thinks exists.” But to have previously known that and not yet have known *sum* is incompatible: it would be impossible for there to be a time that Descartes, on the one hand, knew that everything that thinks exists, but, on the other hand, didn’t know that he exists. Descartes thinks that the dialecticians who think that *sum* can be discovered syllogistically fall into the error of endorsing something that is impossible—that an individual can know the general premise and at the same time not know “I exist.”

Descartes, here, is recasting a more general objection leveled towards syllogistic reasoning that he states in the *Regulae*. The objection is that it’s *impossible* to use syllogistic reasoning of the form “All X are A. S is an X. Therefore, S is A” to *discover new knowledge*:

Dialecticians are unable to formulate a syllogism with a true conclusion unless they are already in possession of the substance of the conclusion, i.e. unless they have previous knowledge of the very truth deduced in the syllogism. It is obvious therefore that they themselves can learn nothing new from such forms of reasoning, and hence that ordinary dialectic is of no use whatever to those who wish to investigate the truth of things. Its sole advantage is that it sometimes enables us to explain to others arguments which are already known. It should therefore be transferred from philosophy to rhetoric. (AT X 406; CSMK 1:36-37).

The objection applies only to certain arguments whose form exemplifies the Barbara form of syllogism, like the classic:

All men are mortal.  
Socrates is a man.  
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

The apparent problem is that, if, say, I’m not sure whether Socrates is mortal, it would be impossible for me to discover this fact about Socrates by reasoning via syllogism from two other things I know—that all men are mortal, and that Socrates is a man. In arguing so, I

wouldn't have discovered anything new. Since I already knew that all men are mortal, I also knew, at that same time—by that “All men are mortal” premise alone!—that Socrates is mortal. Socrates, after all, is a member of the class of all men. The same objection applies to a formulation of the cogito as:

Whatever thinks exists.  
I think.  
Therefore, I exist.

The objection is not that the argument is invalid. It's that someone who issues such an argument and knows that the general premise is true could never genuinely discover the conclusion as a fact not previously known.

The cogency of Descartes' objection depends on the view that to know general claims like the major premises “Whatever thinks exists” or “All men are mortal”, one must have extensive knowledge of particulars. Consider some potential requirements for knowing general claims. First, to know a general claim, one must know of (or be acquainted with) *all the particulars* that are members of the class described by the subject of the general claim (for example, thinkers and men, respectively). Second, of each of these particulars that one knows of, or is acquainted with, one must know that the particular has the thing which the general claim attributes (existence and mortality, respectively). With these two requirements on knowledge of general claims in place, Descartes' objection appears to carry weight. For, from these requirements, when I know “whatever thinks exists,” I'm acquainted with myself, since I'm one of the thinkers, and, moreover, I know that I'm one of the thinkers that exists since existence is what is being attributed in the general claim. In other words, with these requirements, I already know that I exist. The Cartesian objector then says that *sum* can never be genuinely discovered via syllogistic



reasoning since such reasoning requires one to know “Whatever thinks exists,” and whenever this is known by the individual doing the syllogistic reasoning, that individual already knows that she exists.

In fact, in the first and second remarks Descartes looks like he is making a requirement on knowledge of general claims similar to those mentioned in the above paragraph. In the first he says, “It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones.” He comes close to restating the point in the second remark with the example of the boy learning geometry. The boy cannot “learn” the general claims that make up the axioms of Euclid’s geometry “unless we show him examples in particular cases.” Given Descartes’ views that we “learn” and “construct” general claims only by first examining particulars, it’s plausible that Descartes, at the time he made the first and second remarks, accepted the requirement that, to know a general claim, one must have substantial knowledge of all the particulars that are in the class discussed in the subject of the general claim. The presence of such a requirement in the first two remarks, which justifies the strong objection against syllogistic reasoning we have been discussing from the *Regulae*, lends further coherence to the view that Descartes, at the time of writing the first and second remarks, did endorse the strong objection.

In the second remark, Descartes qualifies his strong objection against syllogistic reasoning. His parenthetical comment that “we may also reverse the order and deduce other particular truths once we have discovered general ones” allows that *sum* can be soundly derived from “Whatever thinks exists” and “I think”, just not *discovered*. So, Descartes’ remark clarifies that he is only rejecting the idea that syllogistic reasoning can lead to discoveries—he does sanction syllogistic reasoning for purposes other than discovering

new truths. This position echoes his comment in the passage from the *Regulae*, already cited, that the syllogism does have the advantage of, in some sense, helping to “explain” what is already known (AT X 406; CSMK 1:36-37).

By the time of Descartes’ conversation with Burman, he no longer thought it was impossible to discover truths through syllogistic reasoning. I suggest that we should read Descartes by this time as neither accepting nor rejecting that *sum* might be discovered by syllogistic reasoning. The three pieces of evidence from Descartes’ *Conversation with Burman* that are jointly sufficient to attribute this neutral position are:

- (1) That he omits to state the strong objection that syllogistic discovery is impossible.
- (2) That he modifies his previous view that we learn general claims by first knowing particulars in a way that fails to adequately support the strong objection.
- (3) That he explicitly endorses another objection that syllogistic reasoning makes discovery psychologically challenging (but not impossible), which is compatible with the view that syllogistic reasoning can lead to the discovery of certain truths.

Let us take up each piece of evidence one at a time.

First, nowhere in Descartes’ response to Burman does he deny that *sum* can be discovered syllogistically. In fact, he doesn’t even use the words “syllogism” or advert to the dialecticians in his response. Nor does Descartes say that it’s impossible to know “Whatever thinks exists” without also knowing “I exist.” Thus, Descartes makes no reference to the strong objection.

Second, more than just omitting to mention the strong objection that he endorses in the first and second remarks, Descartes, in his response to Burman, makes several claims that are in tension with the strong objection. He says that the general claim can in fact be known before one infers *sum*, although one need not know it to discover *sum*. Also, he no longer states a view about how we learn general claims that implies that we must have considerable knowledge of particulars to know a general claim, a requirement on

knowledge of general claims that makes the strong objection tenable. His revised view is that “we do not separate out these general propositions from particular instances; rather, it is in the particular instances that we think of them.” It’s hard to make out exactly what this amounts to. The claim is too weak to entail the requirement that to know a general claim, one must know of all the particulars that are members of the subject of the general claim. Thus, Descartes lacks the justification he needs to mount the strong objection that discovery cannot be made via syllogism.

Third, in the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes only explicitly endorses an objection that reasoning via syllogism is *less likely* to lead to discovery. This position, when coupled with the above evidence that he no longer avowed the strong objection that syllogistic discovery is impossible, is evidence that Descartes at this point doesn’t disavow the view that in rare cases one *could* discover *sum* via syllogism.

Elsewhere in Descartes’ conversation with Burman, Descartes commits to an objection against syllogistic discovery other than the one we have been discussing. At one juncture, Burman quotes (without any documented context) a passage from the *Discourse on Method* where Descartes says, “I observed with regard to logic that syllogisms and most of its other techniques are of less use for learning things than for explaining to others the things that one already knows” (AT VI 17; CSMK 1:119). Descartes, presumably offering clarification about what he meant in the passage, says to Burman:

This really applies not so much to logic, which provides demonstrative proofs on all subjects, but to dialectic, which teaches us how to hold forth on all subjects. In this way it undermines good sense, rather than building on it. For in diverting attention and making us digress into the stock arguments and headings, which are irrelevant to the thing under discussion, it diverts us from the actual nature of the thing itself... (AT V 175; CSMK 3:350)

On this objection, syllogistic reasoning is less likely to lead to discovery. The objection is that since syllogistic reasoning emphasizes attending to the form of an argument rather than the “actual nature” of what we are trying to discover, the prospects for discovery via syllogistic reasoning are poor.

This objection that syllogistic reasoning encourages reason to attend to properties of arguments that are less conducive to discovering truth also traces its development in Descartes’ works back to the *Regulae*. There, Descartes warns that when we follow the dialectician’s advice of reasoning using syllogisms, we risk “reason’s taking a holiday” when we concentrate on the form of the argument before us and whether its form corresponds to one of the twenty-four valid forms of argument, instead of considering “the *particular* inference clearly and attentively” (AT X 406; CSMK 1:36, my emphasis). In another place in the *Regulae*, Descartes says that the formal properties of an argument which we attend to in syllogistic reasoning make the procedure a “positive hindrance” on the finding new truths (AT X 373; CSMK 1:16) in which “truth slips through these fetters” (AT X 406; CSMK 1:36).

Once this objection that reasoning by syllogism can distract us is prized apart from what I have called the “strong objection”, we will see that the objection from distraction is by itself compatible with the possibility of rare discovery through syllogism. The strong objection is that syllogistic discovery using the Barbara form is impossible since knowledge of the general claim (All X’s are F) requires knowledge of the conclusion that one is trying to reach (S is an F). By contrast, the objection we are now considering applies to all forms of argument in the theory of syllogism.

Yet, the objection doesn't offer a reason why, in principle, syllogistic reasoning cannot lead to discovery. The issue that the objection from distraction brings out is that when we engage in syllogistic reasoning, we must assiduously analyze the form of the argument whose validity is in question and compare its form to a very complicated system of argument forms. When we do this, we might make mistakes in all sorts of ways—for example, by misanalysing the form of the argument we are considering, or, while analyzing it correctly, failing to correctly match our argument to the general argument form it exemplifies (of the 256 total forms). These procedures, essential to syllogistic reasoning, open us up to error, and so can be thought of as distracting us from making accurate judgments about whether an argument is valid, which in turn hampers us from discovering true conclusions through reasoning. However, thus described, the objection from distraction doesn't maintain that it's impossible (even psychologically speaking) for someone—a really careful person who keeps all her marbles straight—to genuinely discover *sum*. Discovering *sum* would require, first, being certain of the premises “Whatever thinks exists” and “I think”, and, second, correctly identifying that these premises, along with the conclusion “I exist”, compose an argument that exemplifies one of the valid forms of argument in the theory of syllogism. Doing that is hard, and Descartes thinks it's much easier to intuit *sum* from attending only to *cogito* and what it entails. But by his talk with Burman he doesn't seem to think that it's impossible to discover *sum* by syllogistic reasoning.

What I have argued over the last several pages is that Descartes' view about whether it's possible to discover one's existence using a syllogistic inference changed considerably. At the publication of the *Meditations*, Descartes continued to espouse the

view that it's impossible to discover that he exists via syllogistic reasoning. However, by the time he wrote what we know as his final written word on the subject, his *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes' view had changed. At the end, he is neutral about discovering *sum* by syllogistic reasoning. How Descartes' comes down on the issue of whether *sum* can be discovered via syllogism doesn't affect the tenability of the naïve interpretation of the cogito. Still, if syllogistic discovery could occur, Descartes would hold that it would only occur in exceptional circumstances in which a reasoner is especially skilled at deploying the theory of syllogism. Descartes' change in view resulted from his dropping the stronger of two separate objections against the possibility of syllogistic discovery, both of which he avowed in his earliest writings.

I have not identified textual evidence that sufficiently explains why Descartes no longer avowed the strong objection that syllogistic discovery is impossible. I have argued that there is textual evidence that Descartes jettisoned the strong objection because he revised his views about what is required to know a general claim like "Whatever thinks exists" or "All men are mortal." At the publication of the *Meditations*, Descartes thought we "learn" general propositions "on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones" (AT VII 140-141; CSMK 100-101), which entails that one must know of particular thinkers or men to know the mentioned general claims. Furthermore, for Descartes to adequately justify the objection that syllogistic discovery is impossible, the requirement on knowing general claims must be even stronger. It must be that to know the general claim "All men are mortal", one is required to know of *all* the particular men and whether each man is mortal or not. However, by the time of Descartes' *Conversation with Burman*, he only thought that when we think of general claims "we do not separate out these general propositions from

particular instances.” This claim does not seem to entail the requirements for knowing general claims necessary to support the strong objection against syllogistic discovery.

But why did Descartes no longer think that we learn general claims on the basis of our knowledge of particular claims? I have not found textual evidence to explain *this* change in Descartes’ position, a change that in turn explains why Descartes no longer accepted the strong objection against syllogistic discovery. The view that we learn general claims on the basis of our knowledge of particulars seems to have problems. Surely, in some cases, knowledge of particulars is required for knowledge of the general claim. I ask my little cousin Simon if all the flowers in the garden are peonies. He must examine each flower in the garden to know the answer.

However, when it comes to general claims like “All men are mortal,” some might find it plausible that all I need to do is analyze what “man” means to know that all men are mortal. And analyzing the concept “man” doesn’t involve thinking about, or knowing, a particular man. Indeed, it might be a fact about the human mind that we usually *imagine* a particular man—perhaps Socrates, your brother, or Al Capone—when we consider the concept “man.” And this fact may be what Descartes is getting at when he says to Burman “we do not separate out these general propositions from particular instances; rather, it is in the particular instances that we think of them.” Still, to imagine a man is not to know him. It may be plausible that to know a general claim like “all men are mortal”, all that is required is analyzing the concept (which might involve imagining, but not knowing, a particular instance of the concept). Perhaps by his *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes even held this view.

Another problem with the requirement that one must know particulars to know a general claim is that such a requirement may lead to skepticism about many general claims we purport to know. On a view according to which no particular numbers exist, the requirement entails that we cannot know general claims in mathematics such as “the sum of two prime numbers is an even number.” To the extent that we should reject views that imply skepticism about mathematical knowledge (and maintain the view that no particular numbers exist), we should reject the view that knowledge of particulars is required for general knowledge.

Still, I leave it an open question why Descartes softened his requirements on having knowledge of general claims, though I have just presented two reasons why one might do so.

The way I read the three remarks as a progression of Descartes’ thoughts on whether *sum* can be discovered syllogistically runs counter to the interpretations of several commentators. For example, Margaret Wilson (56), Harry Frankfurt (98), and Bernard Williams (73-76) each note some differences between Descartes’ *Conversation with Burman* and the two remarks from the *Objections and Replies*, although they don’t consider the possibility that Descartes’ *Conversation with Burman* represents a change in his views about the possibility of syllogistic discovery. Neither do these three commentators explore Descartes’ three remarks in connection to Descartes’ account of syllogistic reasoning in the *Regulae* and the objections found within that text against the possibility of syllogistic discovery.

Without digressing much further into the secondary literature, I wish to draw one last point of difference between my interpretation of Descartes’ views on syllogistic



reasoning and the cogito and those interpretations of other commentators. I don't think that Descartes thought that if someone were to rely on the general claim "whatever thinks exists" in reasoning to *sum* for the first time, doing so would entail that they discovered *sum* via syllogistic reasoning.<sup>53</sup> In Bernard Williams's discussion of the cogito, he refers to the general claim "whatever thinks exists" as "the syllogistic premiss" (75). Referring to the general premise this way might give one the impression that Descartes believed that relying on the general premise in one's argument for *sum* is tantamount to syllogistic reasoning. This is not so, as I have explained. By "syllogism" Descartes was referring to a theory of proper argument forms. Descartes also used the term to refer to a psychological process of reasoning connected to this theory of valid argument forms. This process involves identifying the form of the particular argument whose validity is in question and checking that form against the proper forms licensed by the theory of syllogism.

Moreover, calling the general claim a syllogistic premise doesn't sit well with Descartes' comments in his *Conversation with Burman*. There, Descartes says that the general claim "Whatever thinks exists" is "*always...prior*" to *sum* and the argument for *sum* "*always presupposes*" the general claim (AT V 147; CSMK 3:333, my italics). Now, as I have argued, while Descartes might have in the end become neutral regarding whether *sum* can be discovered syllogistically, he always held that *sum* can be discovered by intuition. So, the general claim is presupposed and "depended on" as a "major premiss" even when *sum* is discovered by intuition (ibid). For this reason, it's misleading on Descartes' use of the term "syllogism" to call the general claim a syllogistic premise. So, Descartes held that

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<sup>53</sup> My point applies whether "relied on" means either explicitly representing the general claim as a premise when formulating the argument in one's mind, or just presupposing the general claim as a premise in the argument for *sum*.

Whatever thinks exists.  
I think.  
Therefore, I exist.

is a valid argument with true premises, but not a “syllogistic” argument as such (in his view, that depends on whether someone who reasons through this argument compared its formal properties to those accepted by Aristotle’s theory of syllogism).

Lastly, the conclusion of this argument can be discovered by intuition, even if the individual making the argument doesn’t consciously represent the general claim as a premise. As Descartes says, the general premise is relied on in the cogito argument even if one isn’t “expressly and explicitly aware of [the general claim’s] priority” (ibid). This appears to be the way the meditator reaches *sum* in the second meditation. While Descartes’ remark to Burman suggests that the meditator relies on the *suppressed* general premise “Whatever thinks exists” for the success of his argument for *sum*, the meditator proceeds in the second meditation as though he isn’t aware of a general premise in his argument. He concludes *sum* only by considering the certitude of his second-order judgment that he is thinking and his clear and distinct perception that *his* existence is a logical consequence from the fact that *he* has been thinking. The meditator doesn’t recognize that this logical consequence holds for *all* thinkers. For Descartes, this is entirely sufficient for the meditator to be certain of his existence.

## Final Remarks

This thesis has sought to defend a reading of the *Meditations* on which the meditator establishes with certainty that he exists by deriving this conclusion from the premise that he thinks. If this naïve interpretation of the *Meditations* is correct, Descartes has a uniform account of the cogito across his three most comprehensive philosophical works, the *Meditations*, the *Discourse*, and the *Principles*.

Although the naïve argument is simple and elegant, I hope to have shown that its presentation in the *Meditations* is quite complex. Compared to the *Discourse* and the *Principles*, where the naïve argument is deployed in one sentence, in the *Meditations* the argument transpires over the course of two meditations. *Cogito*, the premise, is asserted in the first meditation in the form of the meditator's second-order judgments that are integral to his doubt. Then, in the second meditation, the meditator discovers that his existence follows from the fact that he thinks and subsequently concludes that he exists.

In contrast to the crisp presentations of the naïve argument in Descartes' other works, its exposition in the *Meditations* may seem tedious. But I have striven to show that this presentation rewards the close reader with added philosophical detail. The assertion of *cogito* in the first meditation showcases the significance and necessity of second-order reflection in the meditator's method of doubt. The assertion of certain second-order judgments also dispels the caricature that the first meditation is purely destructive and contains no certainty. In fact, the meditator must be certain of his own mental states to call his beliefs into question.

We have also seen that the meditator can defend the certitude of *cogito* by using assumptions he makes in the first meditation and Descartes' corpus more generally. He can

make an argument that appeals to his epistemic responsibility to doubt his beliefs and how this requires that he has certain self-knowledge about his own thoughts.

Moreover, we saw that Descartes' discussion within the *Objections and Replies* and his *Conversation with Burman* clarify that the cogito is in fact an argument whose conclusion is inferred using a reasoning process Descartes calls "intuition." The meditator himself intuits that his own existence is implied by the fact that he thinks. It's plausible from Descartes' discussion in the *Regulae* that to intuit something is equivalent to having a clear and distinct perception of that thing. As he puts it, to intuit an inferential connection between some premise and conclusion is to "clearly and attentively" consider that inference (AT X 405-406; CSMK 1:36). So, Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct perception also enters into the cogito. Once *cogito* is claimed as a premise, then, by clearly and distinctly perceiving that *sum* follows from *cogito*, one becomes certain that she exists. But *cogito*, the premise, is itself not clearly and distinctly perceived—only the entailment between the premise and conclusion.

It's also superfluous for the person reasoning through the naïve argument to recognize that the entailment from *cogito* to *sum* is an instance of a principle generalized to all thinkers such as "Whatever thinks exists." This principle need not be represented as a premise by someone reasoning to *sum*. However, there is some possibility that Descartes became open to the view that a second alternative way of maneuvering through the inferential step of the cogito is to use syllogistic reasoning. In this case, the syllogistic reasoning would require that the reasoner recognizes the general principle "Whatever thinks exists" as an additional premise in the naïve argument. Recognition of this premise would be required so that the argument can be fully evaluated for its formal properties.

My approach to this thesis has been to consider three basic challenges to reading the meditator as arguing from *cogito* to *sum* in the *Meditations*—that he never asserts *cogito*, lacks a defense of *cogito*, and denies ever making an argument from *cogito* to *sum*. If my project has succeeded, it has shown that, when one hews closely to the text of the *Meditations*, these challenges are more than surmountable: they are doorways, beyond which lie nuanced and possibly novel insights into one of the pithiest arguments in Western philosophy.

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