

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(3), S/No 18, June, 2016:120-131

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i3.10>

An Attempt at a Logical Refutation of Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum*

Ebeh, John Igbogo

Department of Philosophy,
Kogi State University, Anyigba
Phone: +2348067092035
E-mail: Ebeh4u@gmail.com

Abstract

In the development of Greek philosophy, the focus of the ancient philosophers on realities, trying to determine the ultimate principle of all things, begs the question as to what part or extent of reality is assessable to man's knowledge. And a kind of skepticism was born, shifting the attention from the object [or the realities on which the ancient philosophers were focused on] to the observing or the knowing subject; man and the means through which he comes into contact with the known object. Thus, the possibility of attaining certain knowledge about realities was denied by the skeptics, giving the unreliable nature of the means by which such knowledge were acquired and the complexities of realities as powerful premises for their conclusion until the emergence of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, proving that there was something that could be known for certain using their [or the skeptic's] own method [doubting] to prove to them that in their own doubting, they confirm their own existence. This paper is concerned with whether or not the *cogito* is a suitable premise for the conclusion ["existence"] of his argument. However, my aim in this work is, not to refuse the truth of the existence of any reality, rather to show the inadequacies of Descartes' argument for them, with particular focus on the context within which his argument proceeds,

which might require a bit of logical analysis; perhaps to arrive at a better conclusion for his premises.

Introduction

Philosophy was kick-started by wonder, historians told us, wonder about the ultimate nature of realities. This is evident in the ancient period which came to its peak with Plato's duality of realities; that everything that exists in the material world is/was a copy of the original in the world of form. This, however, begs the question as to how the material or physical man, limited by the illusion of the copies which appears to him, could come in contact with its original and others in their original nature as forms. Consequently, shifting the attention from the objects or that which is seen of reality, to the man who is the observing subject and given the deceptive nature of the means by which the man acquires his knowledge, the skeptics declared that certain knowledge about realities was impossible.

It is imperative to note that to actually understand why Descartes inquiry was majorly dominated by the problem of certitude, it is important to understand the skeptics' argument. Hence, as a foundation to our discussion of Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, this work would begin by doing a little exposition of the skeptics' view of certitude which will lead us to discussing Descartes especially his argument for certitude [his *cogito ergo sum*] and the arguments that serves as support for his argument as well as pointing out those who had argued against him. Then, this paper will raise inferences for why it disagrees with his argument. In conclusion, this paper will propose what hopefully, should best be consistent with his premises for the argument.

Descartes [1516-1650]

Rene Descartes was born on March 31st 1516 in Touraine as the third child of a councillor of the parliament of Brittany. He went to the college of La Fleche, where he remained till 1612 studying logic, philosophy and mathematics. He resided in Paris until he retired to Holland. But in September 1649, Descartes left Holland for Sweden in response to the invitation of Queen Christina who wished to be instructed in his philosophy until his death in February 11TH 1650 as a result of the rigors of the Swedish Winter (Copleston 1958, p.63).

Descartes was a French philosopher who laid the foundation for the 17th Century continental rationalism which was later advocated by Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, and opposed by the empiricist school consisting of Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Hume. Thus, he was named the father of Modern Western philosophy since most of the writings that came that period were responses to his ideas.

Descartes was majorly burdened by the problem of certitude, trying to determine if there was anything that could be known for certain, upon which the foundation for philosophy could be laid, of which the skeptics had pronounced impossible and whatever man could know is nothing but opinion.

Note: The skeptics, within the context of this paper refer to the pre-Socratic sceptic called the sophists, not the skeptics, since this is usually used to refer to those who doubt in any form (skeptics, because of their refusal to admit to the possibility of certain truth and their Nihilist position that nothing exists). As Aja (2004) commented, the Greek principle called *dissoi logoi* as developed by Heraclitus (the idea that everything has two sides, thus, nothing is absolutely this or that) was taken up by the sophists and given practical application to everyday life. In this intellectual context, all absolutes were dissolved and it was increasingly difficult to maintain with confidence that anything was so (117).

Of this movement, two major positions stood out, viz;

1. Protagoras of Abdera in Thrace, the most prominent of them who proposed his *Homo Mensura* (man-measure) Doctrine (Aja 2004, p. 118), to which “man is the measure of all things of those that are; that they are, of those that are not that they are not” (Copleston 1946, p. 87).

2. From here, it was not too hard for Gorgias (who arrived in Athens in 427BC as the ambassador from his city, leontini in sicily) to say that nothing could be true and in fact, nothing existed. His arguments are laid down as follows.

- 1) Nothing exists,
- 2) If there were anything, then it could not be known (or understood), and
- 3) Even if there were knowledge of being, this knowledge could not be imparted (or communicated). Reasons being that every sign is different from the thing signified e.g. how could we impart (or communicate) the knowledge of colours by words since the ear hears tones and not colors? And how could the same representation of being be in the two persons at once, since they are different from one person to another (Copleston 1946, p. 93-94).

It is imperative to note that irrespective of the conflicting nature of both the views of these (two) sophists among others as themselves, in that one painted a picture where everything is true: that whatever is true to you is true (Protagoras), and the other painted a picture where nothing exists and knowledge of the truth was impossible (Gorgias). It is crucial to observe that both of them were advocating for the impossibility of objective knowledge or certainty/certitude.

Descartes' *Cogito Argument*

Descartes' *Cogito Ergo Sum* was a direct response to that view; having become a skeptic to prove the skeptics wrong that in fact, there was something that could be known for certain undoubtedly. As a foundation to his argument, Descartes observed that:

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously, undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences (Descartes1641, p. 66).

As a result, he set out to put everything to test using the instrument called the methodic doubt. To which, in his *discourse on method*, he summarized his argument thus:

I had long before remarked that, in relation to practices, it is sometimes necessary to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain, as has been already said; but as I then desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth, I thought that a procedure exactly the opposite was called for, and that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least ground for doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained ought in my belief that was wholly indubitable. Accordingly, seeing that our senses that there deceives us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, and fall into paralogisms, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I, convinced that I was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasonings I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts (presentations) which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects (presentations) that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth. I think, hence I am, was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might,

without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search. (Descartes 1637, p. 62-63).

In summary, he began with his methodic doubt; doubting every principle or opinion as well as everything upon which he had built his life on. But in his doubt, he discovered that he is “a thinking (conscious) thing, that is a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and ignorant of many” which in Latin goes as, *Ergo sum res cogitans, multa ignorans, volens, nolens, imaginans etiam et sentiens...* (Veitch 1880, 115). And because he is a *res cogitans*, he must certainly exist; a truth which could not be doubted without self-contradiction.

However, how original this concept was to Descartes, it is important to note that some philosophers before him had made this clear. Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethic*, pointed out that in human activities, there is a faculty that is conscious of their exercise; so that whenever we perceive, we are conscious that we perceive; and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think; and to be conscious that we perceive or think is to be conscious that we exist.

Augustine of Hippo in his book *De Civitate Dei* writes “Si...fallor, sum” (I am mistaken, I am”) (Book XI, 26). In the *Enchiridion*, Augustine attempt to refute skepticism by stating that “...one cannot err who is not alive. That we live is therefore, not only true, but it is altogether certain as well” (Chapter 7, section 20). This and many others could be seen as being consistent with Descartes argument, and thus, could be regarded as supports for him.

Reactions to Rene Descartes’ Thought

There had been much criticism to this argument: *Cogito Ergo Sum*. However, since this work is not seeking to do a metaphysical refutation of this argument, it will limit itself to a few that are best consistent with the purpose of this paper like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, among others.

Friedrich Nietzsche: He criticized the phrase in that it presupposes that there is an “I”, that does such activity as “thinking”, and that the “I” knows what “thinking” is. He suggested that a more appropriate phrase would be “it thinks.” In other words, the “I” in “I think” could be similar to the “It” in “It is raining”.

Soren Kierkegaard: He provided a more critical response to the *cogito* (argument) (1985, p. 38-42). Kierkegaard argued that the *cogito* already presupposes the existence of the “I” and therefore, concluding with existence is logically trivial. He illustrated his view in logical syllogism by adding a pre-premise or a major premise to his (Descartes’) argument, thus:

“X” thinks

I am that “X”

I think

Therefore, I am

Where, the “X” is used as a placeholder in order to disambiguate the “I” from the thinking thing. (Schonbaumsfeld 2007, p. 168-170). Here, the *cogito* has already assumed the “I” as existent and as that which thinks. For Kierkegaard, Descartes is merely “developing the content of a concept”, namely that the “I” which already exists, “thinks” (40).

Kierkegaard argued that the value of the *Cogito* is not its logical argument, but its psychological appeal: a thought must have something that exists to think the thought. It is psychologically difficult to think “I do not exist.” But as Kierkegaard argues, the proper logical flow of argument is that existence is already assumed or presupposed in order for thinking to occur, not that existence is concluded from thinking

Evaluation

In as much as Descartes was incredibly helpful or fruitful in putting the curiosity of the skeptics to rest, he erred in some ways in that arguing from reason, would mean that according to Descartes, whatever does not fit reason or cannot be accounted for through reason does not exist (given that certainty could only be derived from intuition- “The natural light of reason” and deduction-“all necessary inference from other facts known with certainty”) (Aja 2004, p. 137). This begs the question as to whether man can account for his existence or others’ existence apart from the fact of his thinking nature and what context to define existence. The conclusion drawn from premises as this is inconsistent at best, inconclusive and for this, I disagree.

However, so many critiques of this argument, in an attempt to refute it, had gone in too deep as to get themselves out, even to producing a counter (metaphysical) proposition which ended up becoming too ambiguous and improvable. In an attempt not to be too involved or doing what Wittgenstein observed when he said, “In order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have to think both sides of this limit” and to which Bradley observed rightly that in maintaining that “the man who is ready to prove that metaphysics is impossible is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of his own”. (Ayer 1952, p. 5) Thus, this paper will limit its criticism to the contradiction in Descartes’ argument or at most the context within which the argument is formed using some logical rule in the process.

The common version of this argument is that of the *cogito ergo sum*, to which according to Ayer, the *cogito* must not here be understood in its ordinary sense of ‘I think’; but rather as meaning ‘there is a thought now’ which even if it were logically certain, it still would not serve Descartes’ purpose; for if the *cogito* is taken in this

sense, his initial principle, *cogito ergo sum* is false since “I exist” does not follow from “there is a thought now.” Thus, the argument for Descartes this work will concern itself with is the *ergo cogito, ergo sum* [“I think, therefore I am” or “I think, therefore I exist”]

Ergo Cogito, Ergo Sum which first appears in French as *Je pense, donc je suis* in Descartes’ 1637 *Discourse de la methode*, which was written in French to reach a wider audience in his country than scholars (Burns 2001, p. 84). The analysis of this goes thus;

Firstly, he assumed in his second meditation, a position where he cannot admit to anything that is not necessarily true (121), yet Copleston (1958) observed how ‘Descartes was misled by grammatical forms into making the false assumption that thinking requires a thinker’ (96). The assumption is inconsistent with his conclusion, in that first for someone who emphasizes doubting everything including his own very existence and would not accept anything uncertain as existing, to assume is inconsistent with the exercise or his method, since even such an assumption should have been brought to the test of doubt. To prove this in syllogism form, it goes thus, using his very words;

Premise 1:

I am, I exist; this is certain but how often? As often as I think; for perhaps it would even happen, if I should wholly cease to think that I should at the same time altogether cease to be. I now admit nothing that is not necessarily true (1644; 121).

Premise 2: The “I” is assumed when he said *Ergo Cogito* (‘I’ think)

Conclusion: I exist

i.e.

I admit nothing unnecessarily true

‘I’ should exist to think (which is not necessarily true since it is assumed)

Therefore, I exist.

Here, you will see that the first premise contradicts the second premise which negates the principle of non-contraction; that a thing can ‘not be’ and ‘not not be’ at the same. This is so, in that it is either that one doesn’t admit to anything that is not necessarily true or one admits to a thing that is not necessarily true at a given time, you cannot do the two at the same time. As a result, it yielded an irrelevant conclusion in the end since the premise does not necessitate the conclusion.

Secondly, Descartes speaks of this proposition *I think; therefore, I am* as obviously expressing an inferential form. Thus, the question arises as to whether or not

the 'I' (or the *Cogito*) infer or intuit my existence. In other words, is the *cogito* an adequate or sufficient premise for the conclusion (*I exist*)? To understand this, let's add a major premise to the argument so that it makes sense and deduce our conclusion, thus:

Everything that thinks, exists (Major premise)

I think

Therefore, I exist

This is valid in the same sense as saying

Everything that does not think, does not exist

Stones don't think

Therefore, stones don't exist

The question will arise as to how sound the above argument is since they are both valid in the same sense. Thus, if one is unsound, it will amount to the unsound of the other. So let us analyze these arguments and see if they are conclusive

The first question is whether or not we could write off a thing as not existing because we don't know that it does? To this, even Descartes asserts that "it is true, perhaps that those very things which I suppose to be non-existent, because they are unknown to me are not in truth different from myself whom I know. This is a point I cannot determine and do not now enter into any dispute regarding it". My answer is NO, I simply don't know whether or not if they do exist.

Let us assumed the first or major premise to be true which is supported by his very argument, the second premise and the conclusion would be "undetermined". Thus, ascribing truth value to the argument in logical syllogism form; it goes as follows

Where

P stands for 'everything that thinks exist' and ~ signifies a situation of 'negation'

q stands for 'stones think'

s stands for 'stones exist'

Hence,

$(p \cdot q) \supset s$

And

$(\sim p \cdot \sim q) \supset \sim s$

Where, $\sim p$ stands for “everything that does not exist does not think”

$\sim q$ stands for “stones don’t think”

$\sim s$ stands for “stones don’t exist”

Of which both of them are valid in the same sense, but are they both sound in the same sense?

Note: an argument is said to be sound if it is not only valid, but its premises and conclusion are also true. Thus, if an argument is valid and its premises are also true, its conclusion must also be true for it to be sound. (Bello 2007, 30-31)

1. p or $\sim p$ will be undetermined (?) because it is not necessarily true that everything that does not think does not exist.
2. q or $\sim q$ will be true (T) because “I think” and stones don’t think” is necessitated by his arguments as well as is confirmed by reason of existence.
3. s or $\sim s$ is undetermined (?) because it is not necessarily true (T) that “stones do not exist” which is admitted in Descartes himself and since it was not clearly pointed out in what sense a thing is said to exist, it made the whole argument ambiguous and inconclusive at best.

Hence, ascribing truth value to them in logical syllogism form, they become, from the later,

$$(\sim p. \sim q) \supset \sim s$$

$$?? \text{ TF } ??$$

Since an implication is false only when the antecedent is true (T) and the conclusion is false (F); and a conjunction is true (T) only when both conjuncts are true (T); where the premises which formed a conjunction is undetermined since one of the conjuncts is undetermined and the other is true (T) and the conclusion is undetermined as well since according to the argument in the context of his work, it is undetermined whether or not “stones exist”, thereby making the whole argument undetermined (?)

Thirdly, as Copleston (1958) observes that “He who says, I think; hence, I am or I exist; does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but by a simple act of mental vision, he recognizes it as if it were a thing which is known through itself (*per se*). This is evident from the fact that if it were deduced syllogistically, the major premise, that everything which thinks is or exists, would have to be known previously; but it has been learned rather from the individual’s experience—that unless he exists, he

cannot think (91). This will be contradictory since he (Descartes) already assumes “existence” as a conclusion drawn from the inference of being a *res cogitan* (a thinking being). In a categorical syllogism, it becomes

1. Thought comes before existence
2. I think
3. Therefore, I am (or I exist),

You would see that the second premise is assumed (first) before existence, which rightly contradict the first premise implied in his arguments; in that the ‘I’ already preceded the activity of thinking in the premiss ‘I think’ saying that the ‘I’ which already exists, ‘thinks’. Yet to him it is the activity of thinking that makes him exist

Fourthly, to write the argument in symbolic syllogism form, *I think, therefore I am* becomes

$$T \supset A$$

Where; ‘T’ stands for *I think*, and
 ‘A’ stands for *I am*

Assuming that *I think, therefore I am* is conclusively true; what will become of the argument if we convert the truth value of the argument by changing the truth value of the premise *I think*

Applying Aristotle’s logical equivalent called “material implication” which says

$$(P \supset Q) \equiv (\sim P \vee Q)$$

(Bello 2007, p. 229; Efemini 2011, p. 178)

That is $(P \supset Q)$ is equivalent to $(\sim P \vee Q)$ i.e., to say that P implies Q

Hence, $(T \supset A) \equiv (\sim T \vee A)$ which will be inconclusive in this form because it means that *I think, therefore I am* is logically equivalent to *either that I don’t think or I exist* and to exist I must think. But, since it was determined and admitted by him (too) that things exist that does not think; that premise becomes inconclusive, making the argument inconclusive altogether.

Finally, since he ascribes to *I am, I exist* (as stated above) as necessarily true and also the activity of thinking as necessarily the inseparable quality of the soul since

he is necessarily a *cogito* (a thinking thing) in that if I exist, I must think. Thus, the argument becomes:

$$T \equiv A$$

i.e. that “I think” is logically equivalent to “I am or I exist”

Applying a rule called material equivalent which states that:

$$(P \equiv Q) = [(P \supset Q) \cdot (Q \supset P)]$$

$$(P \equiv Q) \cdot \equiv [(P \cdot Q) \vee (\sim P \cdot \sim Q)] \text{ (Bello 2007, 229; Efemini 2001, 178)}$$

The implication here is that, if we represent the original argument (T \supset A) with what Descartes implied when he ascribed necessity to both thinking and existence, it will amount to [(T \supset A) . (A \supset T)] That is [(*I think, therefore I am*) and (*I am therefore I think*)], will be logically equivalent and for this to be true, both must be true according to the rule of conjunction. Thus, given the meaning in context, the first (T \supset A) will be True and the second (A \supset T) or (*I am, therefore I think*) will be contradictory to the first since it is the thinking that necessitates existence and not the other way round.

Hence, (T \equiv A) \equiv (T \supset A) . (A \supset T)]

T T T F

Because the Antecedent will be true and conclusion false and in the end, the whole argument will be false, since for a conjunction to be true, both conjuncts must true.

Conclusion

Descartes’ argument, though on first glance, is appealing to reason, but on a closer scrutiny is inconclusive; with a purpose to create a new foundation for philosophy and himself inclusively, ‘a truth upon which other truths can be laid’, to which in my opinion, he failed and for this I disagree on relevance; in that his argument shifted from finding out “what is True” to “of what can I be certain?”

However, if I were to create an argument that could be best consistent with his premise *I think*, it will not be that *I exist* or *I Am*. Rather, for the premise, *I think*, the conclusion will be that *I know that I am* since my existence already preceded my thought; and my thoughts in the end, only confirm my existence and not make me exist. Illustrating the argument in categorical syllogism, it will become

I exist to think,

I think,

Therefore, I know that I am.

Since, the 'I' preceded the activity of thinking, making up our major premise and my conclusion because my thinking confirms my existence.

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