The Cogito: Indubitability without Knowledge?

Stephen Hetherington

University of New South Wales

Abstract. How should we understand both the nature, and the epistemic potential, of Descartes's *Cogito*? Peter Slezak's interpretation of the *Cogito*'s nature sees it strictly as a self-referential kind of denial: Descartes cannot doubt that he is doubting. And what epistemic implications flow from this interpretation of the *Cogito*? We find that there is a consequent lack of knowledge being described by Descartes: on Cartesian grounds, indubitability is incompatible with knowing. Even as the *Cogito* halts doubt, therefore, it fails to be knowledge.

Keywords: Descartes, *Cogito*, indubitability, knowledge, Slezak.

1.   I wish to encourage further reflection upon an interpretation of the *Cogito* which has received less attention than, on textual grounds, I believe it deserves. The interpretation in question is Peter Slezak's, and I will examine a few of its philosophical implications.[1] Descartes is perhaps epistemology's paradigm infallibilist about what knowledge is, certainly about the nature of knowledge's putative foundations. (This is because, famously, he requires knowledge — perhaps all knowledge, but at least all foundational knowledge — to include a kind of rational certainty or conclusiveness.) Yet we will uncover, nestled surprisingly within his approach, a possible *fallibilist* moral, even about putatively foundational knowledge. We will find reason to conclude that Cartesian indubitability is never part of knowing, not even of foundational knowledge.

2.   At the heart of Slezak's interpretation is the *Cogito*'s combination of self-reference and denial. Indeed, most notably, Slezak likens the *Cogito* to a Liar statement ('This sentence is false'). How so?

What is happening in the *Cogito*, according to Slezak, is that Descartes is focusing at the crucial moment upon his actively doubting. This doubting is not random or incidental. It is essential to all that the *Meditations* have contained until that vital moment early in 'Meditation II'. The doubting defines the moment itself. Descartes is marshalling his doubts. He is inquiring, by contemplating various possibilities of dramatically wide-ranging falsity or mistake. In fact, he is doing more than contemplating these *as* possibilities; he is supposing them to be actualities. His sceptical challenge to himself is to know, even so — even as he imagines these possibilities to be actualities. And the *Cogito* claims to meet that challenge. It is Descartes's telling

himself that he knows he is thinking — not at just any moment, but precisely at that moment of sceptical challenge, when the only thinking he is doing is sceptical. He is doubting. Correlatively, on Slezak's interpretation, Descartes can know that he is doubting.[2]

3. Descartes's doubting involves various cognitive terms. He describes himself (in 'Meditation I' and 'Meditation II') as *pretending*, as *supposing*, as *thinking*, and as *considering*. He says that he *sets aside* whatever admits of some doubt. He thereby regards himself as being *persuaded*, at any rate momentarily, of the actual falsity of the dubitable. In more modern parlance, Descartes is accepting that to doubt is at least to represent-as-false.[3]

4. Slezak presents his interpretation in a couple of guises. Here is an adaptation of both of them at once.

Place yourself in Descartes's position of inquiry. Then imagine thinking this thought: 'I suppose that there is nothing.'[4] Or, equally, 'I suppose that all is false.' This supposition includes a representation of all being false. But if all is false, then so is any representation of oneself *as* representing all as being false. So, to represent all as false is in part to represent, as false, any representation of oneself as representing all as being false. Hence, to represent all as false is, in part, to represent, as *true*, any representation of oneself as *not* representing all as being false. Thus, in part, one does not represent all as being false — even when trying to do so. That is, one does not doubt everything, after all. The attempt to do so consumes itself.

With which observation, we have the *Cogito*. There is an attempt to doubt all. But this attempt collapses, because if it doubts all then it includes a failure to doubt that one is doubting all. Thus, one cannot doubt that one is doubting everything. And so (it is standardly parsed) one thereby knows that one is thinking, at least in this way at that time.

5. Section 4's way of deriving the *Cogito* enables the latter to evade one traditional concern about Descartes's version; which is that he has begged the question at issue by presuming the doubting to be *his*. We need only reword section 4's argument slightly. Instead of beginning it with the thought, 'I suppose that there is nothing,' imagine its initial claim to be this: 'Suppose that there is nothing.' Then the rest of the argument proceeds as before, *mutatis mutandis*. The result is that *any* attempt to doubt everything becomes a failure to be doubting that there is a doubting of everything. This is so, regardless of whose attempted doubting in particular, if indeed anyone's, is being examined.[5]

6. Nevertheless, if Slezak's interpretation is correct, then Descartes is not entitled to claim all that he does claim on the *Cogito*'s behalf.

Descartes reassures himself that the *Cogito* constitutes his knowing of himself as a thinker; and by this, he means to describe himself as a thinker of *much*, with a richly varied range of thoughts.[6] Strictly, however, Slezak's interpretation gives Descartes only this:

$\sim$D   One cannot doubt that one is doubting everything.

And although it is epistemologically tempting to infer from $\sim$D that

K_d One knows that one is doubting everything,

or even, more generally, that

K_t One knows that one is thinking (be this one's doubting, one's willing, one's affirming, etc.),

it is not clear that K_d and K_t *are* entailed by $\sim$D. Given Descartes's constraints, at any rate, it is not clear.

Here are two grounds for that worry (the second being less standard than the first).

First, Slezak's form of interpretation reflects only the inquirer's doubting — not, more generally, his thinking in various ways. This is apt as an interpretation of Descartes at that specific moment of sceptical circumscription. But if his *Cogito* had been centred upon something other than doubting, the form of reasoning displayed in section 4 would not be maintained, even *mutatis mutandis*. (The analogy with the Liar sentence would be absent.) Accordingly, the generalization mentioned above — from K_d's '. . . that one is doubting everything', to K_t's '. . . that one is thinking (. . .)' — is not entailed. A *new* line of supporting reasoning would be needed for that. In other words, something more than the *Cogito* is required.

Second (even if that first concern can be defused), a substantial epistemological issue remains, regarding the conceptual links between *indubitability* and *knowing*. We might assume that whatever is indubitable for an inquirer at a time is thereby known by her at that time. Certainly such an assumption could be pivotal for an *infallibilist* conception of knowledge.[7] Yet the assumption is questionable, perhaps surprisingly so. It is questionable for Descartes, in particular — no matter that he *was* an infallibilist.

Clearly, the fact that an inquirer has not found a counterexample to a thesis does not entail that the thesis is true, let alone known: 'not yet doubted' does not entail 'true', let alone 'knowledge'. However, presumably Descartes would reply that his reasoning reveals something far stronger than merely his doubting's not having *yet* been doubted. Rather (he would claim), there is an *indubitability* about the fact

of his doubting. He is *not able* to doubt that he is doubting. (And this inability's presence is demonstrated deductively.)

Nevertheless, here is a reply to that hypothesized Cartesian reply:

~[BD]   Believing something and trying to doubt everything cannot be present (actively and consciously) at the same time.[8] Nor, therefore, can believing something and being-unable-to-doubt-everything-(*because* one is trying to doubt everything but one is in principle failing).[9]

And (on standard conceptions of knowing) belief is a necessary component of any instance of knowing. Accordingly, ~[BD] entails this:

~[KD]   Knowing something and trying to doubt everything cannot be present (actively and consciously) at the same time. Nor, therefore, can knowing something and being-unable-to-doubt-everything-(*because* one is trying to doubt everything but one is in principle failing).

Moreover, because (on Slezak's interpretation) the *Cogito* is an instance *of* being-unable-to-doubt-everything-(because one is trying to doubt everything but one is in principle failing), ~[KD] in turn implies this:

~[KC]   Knowing something and the *Cogito* cannot be present (actively and consciously) at the same time.

So, the *Cogito* is not knowledge on Descartes's part — because it is not even a belief. It is not his *knowing* that he is doubting, insofar as it is his *being unable to doubt* that he is doubting. Even if one *cannot doubt* everything (because one cannot doubt that one is doubting everything), this does not entail that at the same time one thereby *knows* something.[10]

7. Section 6 supplements a traditional epistemological objection to Cartesian reconstructive foundationalism.

Epistemologists have long noted that Descartes, in reaching for his supposed epistemic foundation of introspective knowledge of immediately present mental occurrences, grasps too slim a basis upon which to build much further knowledge: knowledge of one's immediate thoughts could well be insufficient to justify unequivocally our true beliefs about the physical world, say. But if this paper is right (in building as it does upon Slezak's interpretation), Descartes's epistemic situation is even more dire than that.[11] He lacks knowledge *even* of his immediately present mental occurrences — even of the doubting, not to mention any further mental activities. Indeed, he lacks even indubitable *beliefs* as to the presence of such mental occurrences. The only indubitability he enjoys, courtesy of the *Cogito*, is a feature of his trying to doubt everything. And, as we found, this still falls short of constituting

knowledge of his doubting — let alone of any other introspective beliefs at that time, let alone at any other times.[12]

8. I began the paper by acknowledging that I would not be arguing for the textual accuracy of Slezak's interpretation of the *Cogito*. Still, it is not a manifestly implausible interpretation; and we have seen that *if* it is correct, Descartes might have inadvertently revealed a way for indubitability to fall short of knowledge. I will close by mentioning a more general reason — independent of section 6's reliance upon the Cartesian presumption of belief's being active — for not being so surprised by that potential disconnection between indubitability and knowledge. The reason in question reflects a fundamental epistemological tension — between the putative need to avoid falsity and the presumed search for truth, all of this being balanced within any would-be knower on any given occasion.

To focus upon indubitability is to focus upon the danger of *falsity* (as one aims to avoid even the possibility of falsity). Yet knowing, whatever else it involves, is first and foremost an apprehension of *truth* (being correct in one's belief, one's cognitive commitment). And, as epistemologists are well aware, it is quite possible that no mode of inquiry could combine these perfectly. Even as mere attitudes, these might not combine aptly. Each of these could be served best by *competing* modes of inquiry. It is often observed that sceptical reasoning is driven by a desire, above all else, not to be mistaken — but that this attitude is not epistemically obligatory. Caution need not be more effective than boldness, for example, even as a means of gaining all and only true beliefs. Caution will miss out on some knowledge. An inquirer *could* more effectively choose boldness over such caution, insofar as her goal is to form all and only true beliefs.[13]

In a small way, this paper supports that thought. We have noticed a reason why the *Cogito*, providing as it does *only* an inability to doubt that one is doubting, need not be constituting knowledge at all. The *Cogito* is an outcome of a way of thinking not inherently and immediately suited for producing belief at all, let alone true belief. Although Descartes wanted to derive grounded and true belief from the *Cogito*, it is *itself* not an instance of belief, let alone true belief. As a momentary cognition, the *Cogito* reflects caution, not boldness. Perhaps, correlatively, it is not a kind of epistemic foundation that would-be knowers should be seeking, at least not first and foremost. This is not a new idea among epistemologists, of course. But Slezak's potential textual insights provide further support for the idea.[14]

References

Descartes, R. 1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Ed. and trans. John Cottingham. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Slezak, P. 1983. Descartes's Diagonal Deduction. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **34**: 13–36.

——. 1988. Was Descartes a Liar? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **39**: 379–88.

Sorensen, R. 1986. Was Descartes's *Cogito* a Diagonal Deduction? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **37**: 346–51.

Sosa, E. 2009. Knowing Full Well: The Normativity of Beliefs as Performances. *Philosophical Studies* **142**: 5–15.

STEPHEN HETHERINGTON
School of History and Philosophy
University of New South Wales
Sydney, NSW 2052
Australia
s.hetherington@unsw.edu.au

Notes

[1] I will not repeat Slezak's detailed case for the textual merits of his interpretation. For that case, see his 'Descartes's Diagonal Deduction' (Slezak 1983). For critical comment, see Sorensen 1986 and, for Slezak's reply, see Slezak 1988.

[2] How, precisely, is this result to be derived? Section 4 will show us.

[3] Perhaps there is more besides to the nature of doubt. But the 'more besides' need not include belief. Even in part, to doubt that p need not be to believe, in a continuing way, that not-p.

[4] That is a simplified rendition of how Descartes begins 'Meditation II': 'But I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies.' See *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes 1996), 16.

[5] We need only presume that there is not *more* than one person attempting the doubting. But this is apposite, since the sceptical supposition is that there is nothing — that all views are false, including therefore the view *of* there being more than one person in existence. If need be, at this stage of the interpretation we may be presuming (at least for argument's sake) that there is not *even* one person overseeing the attempted doubting.

[6] See 'Meditation II', *op. cit.*, 18–9, for a detailed listing of some of these thoughts.

[7] Even a fallibilist, though, may agree that *if* — counterfactually — p is indubitable at time t for an inquirer it is thereby known by her at t. A distinction remains, nonetheless: the fallibilist, unlike the infallibilist, will not insist that *only* what is indubitable is known.

[8] For Descartes, to believe actively and consciously that p is at least to represent p as true or real; whereas to doubt all is in part to represent p as false or nothing. The incompatibility between these actions is manifest.

[9] All of this, it should be understood, is about a single *person* at a single time. The same is true of the two related theses I am about to present.

[10] Bear in mind that, for Descartes, each of those phenomena — believing and doubting — is active. Each is present, when it is, only by occupying his conscious awareness. Hence, the belief occurs only before or after the doubting, not simultaneously.

[11] Wittgenstein's private language argument has also been regarded as establishing this sort of limitative result. Can we achieve it, though, in Cartesian terms, using Cartesian materials?

[12] 'Surely', it will be objected, 'the *indubitability* in his attempt to doubt everything is an instance of *certainty* on his part: indubitability is, or at least entails, certainty. And certainty can be knowledge: to be certain is to know, other things being equal.' But Descartes's inability to doubt that he is doubting is just that — an *in*ability. (In Cartesian terms, it is either a negation or a privation.) He is *trying* to doubt — yet failing. And this process is not at all, in itself, an affirmation. Strictly, there is no 'being certain' in 'trying yet failing to doubt'. To fail in doubting is not, *ipso facto*, to succeed in being certain — *at least not at that same moment*. (Could one reflect *subsequently* upon that failure, so as to *derive* certainty? Even if one could do this, it would be a separate effort.)

[13] A version of this point is made by Ernest Sosa (2009) at p. 11. In conceiving of belief as a performance (akin to a hunter's), Sosa distinguishes between believing that *p* and forbearing to believe that *p*. *Each* can be a performance, reflecting different aims — respectively, the aim of being correct and the aim of not failing to be correct. The latter performance — but not the former — involves an assessment of the risks inherent in the former one.

[14] Peter Slezak made very helpful comments upon a draft of this paper.