Doubting, Thinking, and Possible Worlds

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Abstract. Kripke has noted that possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered, and that the stipulation of these worlds allows us to separate accidental from essential properties. In this paper I argue that possible worlds theory gives us an important tool for analyzing what Descartes is doing in the Meditations. The first Meditation becomes a thought experiment in which possible realities are stipulated in a search for one or more essential properties. Viewing the doubt in this manner sheds new light on the cogito and sum res cogitans and shows the limitations of some contemporary discussion of the cogito, namely, the positions taken by Ayer and Hintikka.

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to the full extent of Descartes' doubt.

I

What is the method of Descartes' doubt? His project can be seen as the gradual refinement of a set of possible worlds. The goal in setting forth these worlds is to determine what is essential in each one and, in the final limiting case, what is essential in any world, i.e., what has to exist. The method by which the doubt proceeds is careful and deliberate. In contrast to the overgrowth of disputable essences fostered by the scholastics, Descartes seeks to discover a new "foundation" by deliberately stipulating as accidental as many properties as he possibly can. His goal, set forth at the beginning of Meditation I, permeates the kinds of worlds Descartes will construct.

After reflecting on how dreams sometimes make illusions appear so real that "there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep," Descartes deliberately sets up the possibility that our everyday reality might be a dream.[2]

Now let us assume that we are asleep and that all these particulars, e.g., that we open our eyes, shake our head, extend our hands, and so on, are but false delusions; and let us reflect that possibly neither our hands nor our whole body are such as they appear to us to be.

Descartes then investigates the characteristics of this dream-world and finds that not all the characteristics have the same epistemic status. Any particular sense experience can be duplicated in a dream. But how is such duplication possible? Certain properties Descartes finds are necessary in order for us to represent objects in any world, including dreams. These properties include extension, figure, number, duration, and some underlying concept of color. Extension is essential in that it permits the accidental properties of the other world to be stipulated. To generalize Kripke's point about the identification of gold, to identify any "thing" in any possible world is to utilize extension. The identity of objects in the dream-world depends on certain essential properties existing across worlds.

This point is basically the same one Descartes makes with the piece of wax. His discussion there can also be viewed as a series of counterfactuals. In the wax argument Descartes uses possible worlds to make positive statements about the essence of the wax. No matter what form we imagine the wax to have, it always has to have extension in order for us to even conceive of the various accidental forms. Thus, extension can be said to be an essential property of wax.[3] Descartes' intent in the dream discussion is pri-
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marily negative. He wants to show that the entire possibility of a "dream-reality" rests on properties independent of any accidental features of that world. These underlying properties are "more simple and more universal" and we are, Descartes says, bound to admit to their existence at the same time that we are considering our eyes, head, and hands to be imaginary.[4] Whatever images we might conjure up in our minds, all of the features involved (descriptive, accidental, empirical aspects) are formed by utilizing these essential properties. Since properties like extension, figure, and number are the foundation for stipulating the dream-world and since they permit identification of the forms existent in that world (without which the world itself could not exist), Descartes reaches the tentative conclusion that the reality of extension, figure, and number takes precedence over the reality of any and all possible images in dreams. His argument is not intended to prove the reality of sensible images in our everyday world; taken alongside the conclusions of the wax discussion, the argument as a whole shows that something more essential underlies the sensible images of both worlds.

But imagine a world in which God has, in Descartes' words, "brought it to pass that there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no place, and that nevertheless they seem to me to exist exactly as I now see them."[5] This is the second possible world Descartes stipulates and in it he attempts to purify the first one of any lingering properties that could even possibly be construed as accidental. He moves beyond worlds in which extension, figure, and number must necessarily exist in the only way that he can—by positing a world in which that which allows such a world to exist and is its sole reality has itself none of these qualities. Descartes takes deliberate advantage here of the claim that God is beyond human comprehension. It is exactly our inability to picture God that allows this world to be possible. What now becomes essential is something that has no reference at all to sensible qualities. God, specifically God's power, is what remains the same in both worlds.

Descartes uses God to make his doubt universal, but he has problems with this world. Some of these problems he acknowledges.[6] What does this world do to claims about God's goodness? And if the only essential feature in such a world is something that has no extension, figure, or number, the difficulty of accepting such a situation might aid and abet those who want to deny God's existence. It is also extremely difficult to keep such a world in consciousness. But Descartes has one more problem, more severe philosophically than the others. He wants to have no extension, magnitude, or place but nevertheless "they (referring to recognizable bodies, places, etc.) seem to me to exist just exactly as I now see them." But if, in this other world, these forms seem to exist as they do in this world, Descartes is identifying images across worlds and thus exten-
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sion, figure, and number are being utilized. It is no argu-
ment in Descartes' favor to say these are illusions gener-
ated by God. Descartes' point in the dream discussion was
that even illusions of hands and eyes force us to admit ex-
tension is essential. Descartes could not identify the im-
ages as the same if he did not smuggle extension, figure,
and number into the second world.

In this regard it is interesting to note the possible
difference in interpretation when one looks at the above
passage in the later French version of the Meditations:
"But how do I know that He has not brought it to pass that
there is no earth, no heaven, no extended body, no place,
and that nevertheless I possess the perceptions of all these
things and that they seem to me to exist just exactly as I
now see them."[7] "They" refers back to "things" (Descartes
is not Berkeley) but it appears here that Descartes has
driven a deeper wedge between dreams in which the mind forms
images (thus actively using extension, figure, and number)
and a world in which the sole essential property is God's
power. In the French version God has endowed Descartes' mind
with perceptions; the emphasis is more on passively owning them rather than actively forming them. But in order
for the second world to actually be purer than the first,
not only would Descartes have to possess the perceptions
passively but the identification of these perceptions would
have to be forced on him by God. Only then could he avoid
transferring extension, figure, and number across worlds.
This is Descartes' problem which the French version still
does not solve. He has admitted in the dream discussion
that the perception, even in dreams, of any recognizable
image (head, hands) forces one to admit to essential proper-
ties like extension. Therefore, he cannot have a world in
which God's power alone is essential and in which the recog-
nizability of images forces one to bring extension, figure,
and number actively into play. Possessing the perceptions
passively is not enough. If extension, figure, and number
are to be genuine illusions, the function of both perceiving
and identifying exactly what he is seeing must be totally
God's doing. The mind must be absolutely passive in which
case there is no point at all in talking about being "de-
ceived." I will return to this issue below, but for now
Descartes' project of purifying possible worlds continues.

Descartes attempts to maintain universality while
avoiding the theological assumptions about God by positing
the evil genius in his third and final world.[8] He admits
again that such a world is hard to keep in front of his mind
but at last he has what he considers a limiting case. He
has gone beyond extension, figure, and number as essential
properties. He now faces an unknown entity, having no rela-
tion to any physical properties or theological assumptions,
whose only goal is to deceive Descartes. What, if anything,
is an essential property in this world? What allows the
stipulated accidental property, namely, pure deception, to
function and be identified? Descartes concludes that the thinking self, and only the thinking self, is essential across all possible worlds. It alone is what allows all conceivable descriptive characteristics, including the limiting case of pure deception, to be stipulated and identified.

The thread of criticism begun with the discussion of the second world can be picked up again here. Is it possible both to stipulate pure deception and to reach Descartes' conclusion without being forced to deliberately ignore extension? Put another way, can identity of any possible world occur without the properties Descartes mentions in the dream analysis? I think the answer is no. All we are given to know about the evil genius is that he is out to deceive Descartes, but the very use of language which identifies an action and an agent presupposes a carry-over into that world of some undifferentiated ideas of extension, figure, and, certainly, number. After all, it is one evil genius, not two, and there is but one God. Moreover, Descartes never fully succeeds in doing away with the mind's active role in identifying images. Worlds in which illusions and deception occur and in which I can only be sure of my own existence are worlds in which I must know deception is occurring; otherwise, I would think I knew much more than my own existence. But in worlds in which illusions and deception are occurring and I know it, I must have criteria for knowing I am being deceived. These unacknowledged criteria, the criteria of identification, are what Descartes ignores in his analysis of the second and third worlds. I think a more cogent position with regard to limiting cases is that, to use Descartes' own categories, the essential properties that allow any possible world to be stipulated are a thinking self, extension, figure, number, place, and duration (and perhaps more). Cartesian selves are essentially incarnate in a world.

II

The cogito is a synopsis of Descartes' refinement of possible worlds. Descartes discovers the necessary existence of the "I" through the act of thinking, i.e., deliberately manipulating accidental properties. The limiting case of pure deception brings the necessary existence of the "I" to the forefront. Ayer argues against Descartes' conclusion that the "I" somehow necessarily exists by claiming that the "I" in the cogito says nothing at all descriptively and thus must function only indexically with regard to experiences.[9] All that "exists" refers to on his view is an actual or possible experience and "I" points to that experience demonstratively. The theory of descriptions, on which this criticism of the cogito is based, precludes the possibility that there might exist an owner of experiences, a "self," which remains the same across situations and which itself
cannot be described totally by empirical properties. Given this assumption, Ayer's choice between descriptive and indexical expresses the only alternatives available. But Kripke's general criticism of the theory of descriptions opens up the possibility that the "I" in the cogito refers to something despite the fact that it is neither primarily descriptive nor indexical. If I imagine a world in which I could be deceived about everything, the world is only coherent if it is I that am being deceived. In order for what Kripke called "transworld identification" to be maintained, something essential must remain the same across worlds. No possible descriptive properties of the "I" will perform this task; Kripke's criticism of Russell and Wittgenstein applies here. Nor can the I be solely indexical. How can one cross boundaries of possible worlds or identify anything at all with a pure "this?" The identity of the "I" across possible worlds requires one or more essential properties, and the choice given us by the theory of descriptions does little justice to Descartes' insight.

This analysis also adds an important dimension to Hintikka's discussion of the cogito. Hintikka argues that "I think" refers to the thought-act by which the existential self-verifiability of "I exist" manifests itself. Through thinking (and thinking alone could do this), Descartes realized what Hintikka called the "existential inconsistency" of the sentence "I do not exist" and thus the self-verifiability of "I exist." One of the problems with Hintikka's analysis is that it does not do an adequate job of setting the cogito into the context of the doubt. The tortuous route Descartes takes to reach the cogito is hardly necessary if Hintikka's analysis is the heart of Descartes' insight. For Hintikka the doubt is an extended form of trying to think the contrary ("I do not exist") and as such had to be an active doubt. But while the doubt had to be active in order to reach the performative conclusion, it did not have to be extended in the form of postulating three worlds and then examining them. The first Meditation as Descartes actually presents it is not integral to the performative interpretation of the cogito. The details and plan, i.e., the actual method of the doubt, are historical window-dressing that show how Descartes in particular reached that conclusion.

Hintikka leans heavily on Descartes' statement of the cogito in Meditation II, the form of which seems to reinforce the performative conclusion. "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it." But this statement is in a context. It is only "after having reflected well and carefully examined all things" that he can make it. No matter what the evil genius does, "he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something." In this context "I am, I exist" will be true each time Descartes pronounces or conceives it because he has already investigated
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the limiting case. The exploration of possible worlds in the doubt lays the basis for the claim that "I am, I exist" is necessarily true in all situations. The statement may well have a performative dimension to it. But, given the immediate context of the reference to the evil genius and the careful examination of "all things," it appears Descartes was less impressed by the "existential inconsistency" of "I do not exist" and thus the "existential self-verifiability" of "I exist" than he was by the realization of what remains essential in any possible world.

The context of the doubt in which this statement of the cogito is made also highlights another weakness of the performative view. The existential self-verifiability of "I exist" would alone not have satisfied Descartes' project. In order to identify the "I" in "I exist," Descartes' original thought-act had to be drawn out the way it was--through the refinement of possible worlds. Solely as a performative intuition, the cogito tells Descartes nothing about what exists. (Without an essential identifying property, what, really, does it tell Hintikka, especially since he considers the move to sum res cogitans "illicit?"[15] By structuring the doubt as a series of possible worlds, Descartes discovers that "I exist" is necessarily implied by all acts of thinking and he lays the basis for identifying the "I". The performative interpretation must be modified to take Descartes' search for an identifiable essential property into consideration. Much more than Hintikka suggests, the cogito and the exact form of the doubt are closely intertwined.

In a similar vein Hintikka assumes that the move to sum res cogitans was made because Descartes felt that ending the act of thinking "would put an end to the particular way in which his existence was found to manifest itself."[16] Descartes does speak this way in the second Meditation. "I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case that if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist."[17] Hintikka's conclusion is that sum res cogitans follows directly from Descartes' intuition that his existence was contingent on the very process of thinking. As Hintikka puts it, "Ceasing to think would not be like closing one's eyes but like putting out the lamp."[18]

As with the cogito, Hintikka takes sum res cogitans out of the full context of Descartes' project. Already in Meditation II, immediately prior to the statement Hintikka uses, Descartes says, "What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me."[19] And in Meditation VI we have a more developed view of what he meant by the phrase.[20]

... therefore, just because I know certainly that I exist, and that meanwhile I do not remark that any other thing necessarily pertains to my
nature or essence, excepting that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing.

With these citations in mind I submit the following hypothesis which treats the method of the doubt as critical for understanding sum res cogitans and does more justice to the context. In Meditation II Descartes realized that the essential property he discovered in the first Meditation was thinking. He had already also discovered in the dream-world that the identity and existence of objects depended on extension, figure, and number. His concern about ceasing to exist if he ceased to think comes from the insight that essential properties are coterminous with that which they identify. As Putnam notes, to say that H2O is the essential property of what we call "water" is exactly to define what is necessary in order for "water" to exist.[21] Likewise, the essential property of thinking exists if and only if Descartes exists. Thus Descartes can talk on the one hand about thinking being a property which identifies the self and on the other hand about existence of the self being synonymous with thinking. The basis for the apparent viability of the performative interpretation lies in the relationship of essential properties to that which they identify. Given the context, it is unlikely the claim about ceasing to exist is based directly on the process of thinking and its relationship to the self-verification of "I exist." Rather, Descartes is expressing in another way what he says in the previous sentence—that thought is an attribute that "alone cannot be separated from me."

The method of Descartes' doubt is the stipulation of three possible worlds. These worlds, gradually refined, supply a background or "stage" for the doubt and are needed in order to give content as well as certainty to the claim "I exist." Based on the worlds Descartes examines, the move from "I think" to "I exist" is a process of seeing sequentially what is necessary in any possible world and sum res cogitans expresses the identity of the essential property he discovers. As noted earlier, I think a strong case can be made that the other essences Descartes finds in the dream-world are also present in the world of God's power and in the world of the evil genius. If they are included with the thinking self, Descartes would not have needed God to bring the physical world back into the picture. One of the perplexing problems in Kripke is what exactly the essential properties of a human are. Granting the existence of other essential properties, sum res cogitans may be part of the answer.


3. HR I, 154-55.

4. HR I, 146.

5. HR I, 147.


7. HR I, 147. "Or qui me peut avoir assuré que ce Dieu n'ait point fait qu'il n'y ait aucune terre, aucun ciel, aucun corps étendu, aucune figure, aucune grandeur, aucun lieu, et que néanmoins j'aie les sentiments de toutes ces choses, et que tout cela ne me semble point exister autrement que je le vois?" *Oeuvres et Lettres de Descartes* (librairie Gallimard, 1953), 270. Emphasis mine.


10. Kripke, op.cit., 270. "... it is because we can refer (rigidly) to Nixon, and stipulate that we are speaking of what might have happened to him (under certain circumstances), that 'transworld identifications' are unproblematic in such cases."


12. Ibid., 18.

13. HR I, 150.

14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.

17. HR I, 151-52.

19. HR I, 151.

20. HR I, 190.