

How Does Descartes Know that He Thinks?

In his Second Meditation, Descartes argues that, because he is thinking, he must exist. But on what grounds does he accept the premise of this argument, viz. that he is thinking? Several commentators suggest that Descartes has a ‘logical’ argument for this claim: One cannot be deceived into believing that one is thinking unless one is thinking, because being deceived is itself a kind of thinking. For example, Shoemaker writes:

“I think” is indubitable for a logical reason; it is a logically necessary condition of my being deceived about anything that I think, since being deceived is a matter of having false beliefs, which in turn is a special case of thinking – in the sense of “think” in question. (Shoemaker, 1990: 190.)

It is also said that the belief that I am thinking is “self-verifying” (cf. Williams, 1978): Having the belief, and even doubting its truth, makes the belief true.

But these ideas only seem to give us a conditional: *If I believe that I am thinking, then, necessarily I am thinking.* For this conditional to generate Descartes’s first certainty, namely that he is thinking, the subject has to know that its antecedent is true. Her reasoning would have the following form:

- (1) If I believe ‘I am thinking’, then, necessarily, I have a true belief.
 - (2) I believe ‘I am thinking’.
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- (3) Therefore, necessarily, my belief ‘I am thinking’ is true.

But to know that I believe that I am thinking (premise (2)) is to have some self-knowledge. So the ‘logical’ argument (premise (1)) can only provide Descartes with the certainty that he is thinking if he already has some equally certain knowledge of the fact that he believes that he is thinking. This knowledge does not itself seem to be of the self-verifying kind. But if such non-self-verifying self-knowledge is possible, and indeed necessary, to get the ‘logical’ argument off the ground, why should not our knowledge that we are thinking be of the non-self-verifying kind as well?

In this paper I argue that, for Descartes’s purposes, the self-verifying nature of the belief that I am thinking is irrelevant and does not contribute to the certainty which is supposed to stop the Cartesian doubt. Rather, the certainty must rest on some other, perhaps introspective, special access we have to our own mind. This finding has some interesting implications for constitutive explanations of first person authority (cf. e.g. Wright, 1989; Heal, 2003). According to these theories, under normal circumstances, authoritative beliefs about one’s own propositional attitudes are constitutive of these attitudes, and in this sense the beliefs in question are self-verifying. While these theories might well be correct, the argument about Descartes suggests that they do not elucidate how we can justify to ourselves that we are *certain* about having the attitudes in question.