The Limits of Skepticism: Descartes as a Case Study
by Kevin Winters

In his famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes proposed "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" to prove the existence of a stability in knowledge, one that will withstand all questions and doubts.[1] In this desire, Descartes is attempting to epitomize and extend the bounds of skepticism to its absolute limits in order to find a truly unassailable truth.

Did Descartes succeed in his desire of achieving ultimate skepticism? Did he truly reach the ultimate depths, the ground zero, of skeptical inquiry? Within this essay, I will endeavor to show inherent limits of skepticism, thresholds past which one cannot step. In showing basic limits of skepticism, in both potentiality and actuality, I will use Descartes as a case study of one who attempted to realize such limits. In the end, Descartes failed in his attempt, perhaps to an incredible bias in his own argumentation.

Skepticism

Skepticism, in the words in Sextus Empiricus, is "an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgements [sic] in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' [sic] or quietude."[2] Thus, skepticism attempts to doubt, or create objections to, all possible propositions in an attempt to find "quietude," or finality, in relation to that proposition. Put another way, skepticism seeks, through

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[1] Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, John Cottingham, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

[2] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. R.G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1933), quoted in Ernest Nagel and Richard R. Brandt, *Meaning and Knowledge: Systematic Readings in Epistemology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1965), 375.

rational application of contraries, to find the most rational and sound basis for all truth claims, ideally beyond which no one can doubt its veracity.

Courageous though the endeavor of skepticism might seem, it has inherent limits beyond which one cannot venture without either doubting everything that one might hold beyond repair or blatantly ignoring ones humanity (if such is possible). These limits could be termed *inherent anthropological thresholds of skepticism*. Here I will address four limits: limits of objectivity, limits of language, limits of rationality, and limits of doubt.[3]

Limits of Objectivity

Utilizing Descartes' conclusion (and assuming its truthfulness), we are, each of us, "only a thing that thinks."[4] The world that we inhabit is the world of thought and conception. If such is true, we can only cogitate according to our individual ability and understanding. Furthermore, if all we are capable of thinking is dependent on our perceptions, we are inherently limited in that we cannot escape our own minds and sensory apparatus. We forever remain prisoners of human perception and conception, never able to become acquainted with the objects of our perception without mediation. Thus, pure objectivity is impossible.

The above has been cogently argued by Immanuel Kant: he proposed, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that there are *a priori* "pure forms" by which we categorize and systematize sense and thought. Thus, "we find existing in the mind, *á priori*, the pure form of sensuous intuitions in general, in which all the manifold content of the phenomenal [i.e. space and time] is arranged

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[3] It may be readily admitted that there are more than four inherent limits (culture being one that immediately comes to mind). For the purposes of this paper, I will limit myself to these four.
[4] Descartes, *Meditations*, 19.

and viewed under certain relations."[5] If, as Kant appears to suggest, we force reality to conform

to our minds, as opposed to our minds conforming to reality, then viewing the world *as it is*

would be unintelligible and even nonsensical:

> The predicates of the phenomenon can be affixed to the object
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> itself in relation to our sensuous faculty; for example, the red color
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> or the perfume of the rose. But (illusory) appearance never can be
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> attributed as a predicate to an object, for this very reason, *that it*
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> *attributes to this object in itself that which belongs to it only in*
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> *relation to our sensuous faculty*, or to the subject in general … [I]f
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> I ascribe redness to the rose as a thing in itself, or to Saturn his
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> handles, or extension to all external objects, considered as things in
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> themselves without regarding the determinate relation of these
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> objects to the subject, and without limiting my judgment to that
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> relation—then, and then only, arises illusion.[6]

Thus, could such conceptions as *sweet*, *hard*, *red*, etc. exist without a human mind to project

these predicative concepts onto "objective reality"? It seems that the answer would be no: we

would have the pure potential for perceiving or cognizing the concepts, but the phenomena itself

would not exist.[7]

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[5] Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, J.M.D. Meiklejohn, trans. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990), 22.
[6] *Ibid.*, 41-42; emphasis mine.
[7] Kant says, elsewhere: "…objects are quite unknown to us in themselves and what we call outward objects, are nothing else but mere representations of our sensibility, whose form is space, but whose real correlate, the thing in itself, is not know by means of these representations, nor ever can be, but respecting which, in experience, no inquiry is ever made" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 28).

This fact was not lost on Nietzsche:

> Because we have for millennia made moral, aesthetic, religious
> demands on the world, looked upon it with blind desire, passion or
> fear, and abandoned ourselves to the habit of illogical thinking, this
> world has gradually *become* so marvellously [sic] veriegate,
> frightful, meaningful and soulful, it has acquired colour – but we
> have been the colourists: it is the human intellect that has made
> appearance appear and transported its erroneous basic conceptions
> into things.[8]

We project a great deal of value on the "objective world" through means of our anthropomorphic measuring and conceptions. The search and projection of meaning onto the world is, in fact, an extremely common practice, ranging from interpersonal associations to scientific data.

Some have argued that, despite the above limitations, it is possible to be completely objective within our human frame of reference. Even this claim is idealistic; to fulfill this claim one would have to be able, through unerring intellectual ability, to judge the evidence that comes before them. However, such is truly impossible. As F.H. Bradley rightly argues:

> …the facts before us in space and time remain always
> incomplete… The ideal fact after all and the sensible fact will still

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[8] Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All Too Human*, R.J. Hollingdale, trans. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986 (1996)), 20.

differ, and this difference left outside condemns truth even as an ideal.[9]

Given the limitation of "facts," including the inability to interpret them inerrantly, it is difficult to imagine that one can be "objective" in any sense of the term, even within the human sphere. One *could* posit a threshold of facts past which one could not gain more relevant information on a particular subject, though how that could be done or posited without being completely arbitrary is beyond my ability to say.

Limits of Language

That which we term "language" is a composite of symbols. These symbols, in turn, have been given meaning by which we can mix and match them to form words, representing objects and thoughts. Furthermore, we utilize the words to form complex ideas, in one form or another, of what we term reality. We further form, categorize, and construct elaborate theses' from these complex sentence forms, resulting in multifaceted and intricate worldviews. Thus, words, their meanings, and their applications are, through and through, constructs of our minds in that they have no inherent meaning in-and-of themselves, but only in as much as we invest meaning on them.

Wittgenstein, standing as a pivotal figure in the philosophy of language, has cogently argued that "one cannot guess how a word functions. One has to *look at* its use and learn from

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[9] Bradley, F.H., "On Truth and Copying," quoted in Simon Blackburn and Keith Simmons, ed., *Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1999)), 37.

that."[10] For example: within English dialectic, the word "hot" has many different applications, depending on the context and the purpose behind using the word. In popular vernacular one may say, "She is hot," but mean that the woman in question is physically desirable, not that she has a fever or her core body temperature is exceedingly high. It can be used in reference to an automobile, speaking of a "hot" design or paint job. One can speak of "hot" as in a good comeback in a game of insults, in which other terms such as "sizzling" and "burned" can likewise be used. One quickly notices that there is no "special feature through which all things"[11] are what they are, providing a universal connection between the uses of the term. Rather, as Wittgenstein would say, there is a "family resemblance" between each use, showing a loose connection within each context, further accentuating the subjective and generally insecure nature of language and meaning.[12] Thus, our use of the language here expressed (and we can suppose language in general) supports a subjective basis for information gathering and producing in the form of symbols.

The above view is clearly attributable to Nietzsche, who proposed that "the significance for language for the evolution of culture lies in this, that mankind set up in language a separate world beside the other world, a place it took to be so firmly set that, standing upon it, it could lift the rest of the world off its hinges and make itself master of it… The sculptor of language was not so modest as to believe that he was only giving things designations, he conceived rather that with words he was expressing supreme knowledge of things; language is, in fact, the first stage

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[10] *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 340, quoted in Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* (London [England]; New York: Routledge, 1997), 15.

[11] Plato, "Euthyphro," in Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant, trans., *The Last Days of Socrates* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 12.

[12] "We are in inclined to think that there must be something in common to all games, say, and that this common property is the justification for applying the general term 'game' to the various games; whereas games form a *family* the members of which have family likeness… The idea of a general concept being a common property of its particular instances connects up with other primitive, too simple, ideas of the structure of language" (Wittgenstein, Ludwid, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basic Blackwell & Mott, Ltd., 1958), 17).

of the occupation with science… [A] great deal later—only now—it dawns on man that in their belief in language they have propagated a tremendous error."[13] The Platonic reference is unmistakable: the assumptions of Socratic dialectic, as a means of knowing the Forms (the "other world"), continue to be held by the masses as language is used indiscriminately in reference to things-in-themselves (to borrow from Kant).

Furthermore, in speaking of objectivity, words do not, and cannot, fully embody reality. For example: when I say the word "dog," the collection of symbols "d," "o," and "g" placed in a certain order do not embody what a "dog" truly is. Paul Ricoeur, in speaking of the semantics of personal identification, states that proper names "are limited to singularizing an unrepeatable indivisible entity without characterizing it, without signifying it on the predicative level, and so without giving any information about it."[14] In other words, the word "dog" has no existential reality past that which the individual may attribute to it in representational form.[15]

One more concept needs to be addressed: the syntax of the language in question. Within the Anglo-Saxon linguistic tradition, we have become accustomed to subject-predicate usage of words. In personal indexical reference, one may say, "I have black hair," which may be interpreted, "The subject termed *I* has the property of *having black hair*." By placing the emphasis on the subject, we naturally bias ourselves to certain views, particularly in relation to the endurance of the subject through accidental change (essential to "substance" metaphysics, which Descartes adheres to). Now consider the paradigm shift that may be found in other languages (such as in ancient Hebrew) wherein the verb is given precedence. Such an alteration

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[13] Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 16.
[14] Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself As Another*, Kathleen Blamey, trans. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 29.
[15] The same case can be made for experience: propositions (even an extensive number of them) can never capture even the simplest experience. Thus, the subjective perspective is necessary for understanding experiential propositions.

in linguistic emphasis cannot help but alter one's perception and categorization of reality (in this case probably towards more Heraclitean and Process circles of thought).[16]

As has already been argued, in relation to Kant, the same subjective linguistic status is true of predicative designations, making it impossible to make predicative statements about "reality" and fully expect it, meaning reality, to embody such traits apart from the human mind. Though we could say that language, and the symbols inherent in them, have "representational" power in relation to referencing "reality," we can posit no more than that fact, understanding that its representational power is endowed by us, individually or collectively, to the object in question. Furthermore, by taking away words' power to embody reality, one may further accentuate the subjective nature of language. Perhaps we may find refuge in the laws of logic, that we might escape our subjective nature.

Limits of Rationality

Anthropomorphic beings pride themselves on their ability to logically examine the world around them and hope, thereby, to come to a close approximation of reality through those means. We seek logical consistency and coherence in our propositions of reality that thereby we can guarantee, in one form or another, the truthfulness of our worldviews. Yet there is one inherent limitation in what we commonly term "rationality": it has limited bearing on truthfulness.

Harold H. Joachim, in his work *The Nature of Truth*, observes that "The form [i.e., logical coherence] under which the infinitely various materials are ordered, is the universal form of all thinking…. This arrangement under the form of thinking cannot *of itself* guarantee the truth

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[16] Interestingly enough, David Bohm has recently opted for the verbal emphasis in language (what he calls the "rheomode") due to the discoveries of quantum physics that displaces the substance view of reality (as expressed in Newtonian physics and the Ruthefordian atom model). See his *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (New York: Routledge, 1980 (1995)), 27-47.

of the result. For false materials, as well as true, may be painted with the royal colour. But the result cannot be true *without* this arrangement, which is thus a *sine qua non* or a 'negative condition' of truth."[17] Thus, according to Joachim's theory of truth, logical coherence is a necessary attribute of all true statements but it is not, in-and-of itself, an indicator of truth. With this William Hasker appears to be in complete agreement:

> One might say we have learned to distinguish good reasoning from bad by noticing that good inference-patterns generally give rise to true conclusions, whereas bad inference-patterns often give rise to falsehood… But this sort of "logical empiricism" is at best a very crude method for assessing the goodness of arguments. There are plenty of invalid arguments with true conclusions, and plenty of valid arguments with false conclusions. There are even good inductive arguments *with all true premises* in which the conclusions are false.[18]

Such is the precarious footing of logical inference.

As an example of the above, in our history there have been various theories that, though coherent, have not accurately described what we have now come conceive of in relation to reality. We have the antiquated Ptolemaic, geocentric cosmology at its strongest around the 14th and 15th centuries C.E. Within this elaborate system of cycles and epicycles was what was seen to be a completely coherent, albeit incredibly complex, explanation of the movements of the

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[17] Joachim, Harold H., "The Nature of Truth," in Blackburn and Simmons, *Truth*, 48-49.
[18] Hasker, William, *The Emergent Self* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 74-75.

heavenly spheres. With the Copernican revolution and the advent of the heliocentric model, the cosmos came to be seen as an exceedingly simple set of internally coherent explanations represented through elegant mathematical equations that were relatively simple. Today, with the principles of quantum physics, we find that even this conception of the physical universe may be overly simplistic and optimistic.

Logic stands as the basis of much, if not all, of scientific and philosophical thought. It was once thought, through the positivist/modernist school, to be the end-all of a truly objective understanding of the world. The scientific method, by which we compare our theories with closed experiments on reality, was seen as an objective, dispassionate measurement and explanation of the world.[19] To one degree, we have to admit that it has succeeded, with the increase of technological advances and the incredible achievement and accuracy of many scientific hypotheses. Despite this, we must always be open to the fact that, though coherent, these theories could be off base in fundamental ways.[20] Coherence does not necessitate truth. Thus, we come to examine the concept of which we are questioning: doubt.

Limits of Doubt

The extent to which one may doubt about their preconceived notions or once-held truths has no inherent limitations. In critiquing this view, our use of the term "limits" must have a different meaning. Whereas before the term "limits" had negative connotations (in that one cannot achieve them), here we must posit a positive limitation to doubt: the positive threshold to which doubt should/could be held.

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[19] This "myth" is still prevalent today as many refuse to admit the subjectivity of the scientific endeavor.

[20] In our day, Thomas Kuhn has provided the paradigm model of science that is much more amenable to our epistemic limitations. By focusing on the context of scientific discovery and allowing for natural biases according to that context, Kuhn's theory does not dichotomize science and subjectivity but sees the immense benefit of the latter in the pursuit of the former.

Skepticism and doubt only have limitations that we place on them. There are no gimmicks by which we can discern when skepticism has been satisfied, no internal light that clicks on in our heads once we have exceeded the bounds of what we could term "reasonable doubt." One could, as in the above exposition, doubt everything: one could hold that objectivity is the *only* basis by which reality can be conceived and, as such, one could never come to an even somewhat accurate view of it. One could posit that words do not, in fact, even give a glimmer of reality as they would wish to know it. One could doubt that what is commonly termed "rationality" is, in fact, a phantom of the mind by which the masses erroneously think they can categorize and effectively pigeonhole reality. Furthermore, one could state that mind itself is a phantom.[21] Thus, should one take skepticism and doubt to its ultimate end they would effectively have to become a vegetable and would most certainly die of starvation (for surely this feeling of hunger is not real).

As there are no inherent limitations on skepticism and doubt we are forced to place personal "skeptical limitations" as we utilize the skeptical endeavor. We must ask ourselves: how much doubt is sufficient for my search for truth? How much can I doubt my concepts and percepts before any worldview, of any type, becomes impossible? What type of evidence will be necessary for me to accept a certain truth claim? Through these searching questions we each come to our own "epistemic threshold of skepticism."

Understandably, the threshold that we would wish to create is highly subjective, being subordinate to the intellectual ability of the individual, their stress-managing ability and their general emotional well-being in the face of doubts. Some will have a very low "epistemic threshold of skepticism" wherein they will almost immediately cave in intellectually if they

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[21] This view is inherent in Nietzsche's philosophy, to be given later.

come to doubt too much or if their views are challenged to a sufficiently severe degree.[22] Others will have a rather large "epistemic threshold of skepticism" whereby they can weather enormous amounts of doubt and skepticism (we can include challenges to truth claims) without so much as the batting of an eyelash.[23]

There is yet one more point to be made on the limits of doubt: skepticism cannot, no matter the degree we take it, give us a completely objective view of what is around us. If we take an extreme view of the need of evidence to *ensure* objectivity and truth, we still stand in deficit in relation to F.H. Bradley's comments above: the facts are never complete, there is always more to find and we will never achieve the point wherein all the facts are known in relation to a certain truth-claim (or if we did we would be hard pressed to recognize it). Furthermore, the anthropomorphic basis by which we interpret reality, as in Kant's pure categories, places limitations on the *kind* of knowledge we can gain. If we are to hold that we can have any genuine knowledge, *we must understand our inborn subjective position in relation to the reality we desire to know*. If we ignore the above fact then we must forever remain ignorant for our aim will never be reached; we will always fall short.[24]

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[22] I had this experience once, outside of a diner, where a friend and I were discussing post-modern epistemology with a woman. She became incredibly distraught because, for her, the possibilities for doubt that my friend and I were positing were too much for her skeptical threshold. Eventually we succeeded in convincing her of the general rightfulness of her beliefs and that she had little reason to doubt the good majority of them. For her, skepticism could not be stretched very far.

[23] This pertains directly to my personal view that Apologetics (or even philosophy) is not for everyone, for everyone will have different thresholds by which to consider the counter-arguments given by others. Some can enter Apologetics and come out literally emotionally and intellectually maimed for life. Care must certainly be given both as to who we suggest for Apologetic work and to whom we direct such Apologetic work. In this sense, the distribution of thought enters the realm of ethics.

[24] Or we will fall into Nietzsche's rut: "Half knowledge is more victorious [and hence more common] than whole knowledge: it understands things as being more simple than they are and this renders its opinions more easily intelligible and more convincing" (*Human, All Too Human*, 188, number 578).

Descartes as Case Study

In the beginning of this study, I quoted Descartes as saying:

> 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.[25]

This was Descartes goal: to achieve an ultimate saturation of skepticism whereby he could discern an unassailable truth that could weather any, and all, counterarguments. Thereby he came to the statement, *Cogito, ergo sum*,[26] from which basis he felt he could prove the existence of God and the material world. The question then remains: did Descartes reach the edges of skepticism to come to the above conclusion? Further, is the above conclusion truly objective in nature?

Limits of Objectivity

Descartes failed, in his aim, to escape himself. It can readily be seen that throughout the M*editations* he never doubted his own personhood. Interspersed with I's and me's and other self-referential pronouns, Descartes' *Meditations* appear to start on the grounds of his foundational conclusion: that he exists. Furthermore, from this base/conclusion, Descartes epitomizes the fact that he cannot achieve true objectivity: if he is limited to being a "thinking thing" then he thereby

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[25] Descartes, *Meditations*, 12.
[26] "I think, therefore I am." This stands as a summary statement of Descartes' conclusion *after* the composition of the *Meditations*.

limits his ability to get away from himself.[27] Even his wax experiment shows this deficiency: though the wax changes the only thing that remains constant is his own, individual, subjective thought of what the wax is, even though its chemical composition changes in its melting.[28] He continues to extend the word "wax" to this object even though, chemically (and we could almost say "objectively"), it is different.[29]

Furthermore: Descartes, in his skeptical basis, still does not achieve the omniscient state necessary to come to a completely objective basis. He does not have all the facts of what it truly is to be a "self" or even a "thinking thing," two concepts that have plagued philosophy of mind since Descartes' day. Had he been born in our era he could extend his doubt, according to "the facts," to his own self-hood. He could have added the possibility that that which he might call "himself" or the "self" is an apparition, a figment of his brain and its chemical processes, and that, in fact, he is a deterministic biological being. Such doubt could directly discredit the *cogito* and would have forced Descartes to reframe his entire philosophy (if, in fact, he could create a systematic philosophy after denying his own reality). Thus, Descartes remained well within the threshold of skepticism in relation to objectivity.[30]

Limits of Language

It is obvious that Descartes did not doubt his own language. Had he considered doubting his own language, the medium by which he was "meditating," he might have concluded:

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[27] Paul Ricour states: "The certainty of the cogito gives a strictly subjective version of truth; the reign of the evil genius continues, with regard to whether certainty has any objective value" (*Oneself as Another*, 8).
[28] One can rightly add the syntax limitation, to be given in the next section, which allows him to make this designation on the assumption of the substance metaphysic.
[29] See Descartes, *Meditations*, 20-22.
[30] We could add that Descartes was limited by his ignorance of such things that would appear three centuries later, thereby making it even harder, if not impossible, to come to a completely objective stance on the issues in question (assuming, wrongly, that we can today). The specific limitations of era, knowledge, and cultural bias directly interfere with any semblance of objectivity.

language and symbols stand as subjective values *we* attribute to our perceptions. The concept of language does not enter into the picture until his "wax experiment" whereby he unwittingly admits to our conclusion: the word "wax" stands only as a concept within the mind of the "thinking thing." No matter the waxes chemical (and hence "objective") composition, the mind continues to extend the concept "wax" onto the perceived thing.[31]

Furthermore, Descartes obviously takes the view that words can capture reality. This is most blatantly seen in his view of God:

> By the word "God" I understand a substance that is infinite,
> <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent,
> supremely powerful, and which created both myself and
> everything else (if anything else there be) that exists.[32]

In this formulation, Descartes claims that this word, "God," necessarily entails all the given traits. This he posits without any further doubt as to the characteristics of that which we could term "God." Hence, Descartes' obvious dependence on Anselm's arguments for God and the basic presuppositions inherent in them are never questioned.[33]

Lastly, the issue of the syntax of Latin, with its emphasis on the subject-predicate categorization of reality, presented a natural bias to the interpretation and presentation of the line of argumentation given. With the subject emphasis, lavishly used in the "Second Meditation,"

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[31] "I must therefore admit that the nature of this piece of wax is in no way revealed by my imagination, but is perceived by the mind alone" (Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 21).
[32] *Meditations*, 31.
[33] David Paulsen, of Brigham Young University, argues quite forcefully in demonstrating what these unquestioned presuppositions are. See his "The Logically Possible, the Ontologically Possible and Ontological Proofs of God's Existence," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984), 41-48.

could Descartes come to any conclusion other than that the predicate of "thinking" must be attached to a noun, such as a "thinking thing" or a substance? The linguistic foundations of the *Meditations* allowed for a number of implicit assumptions utilized in an explicit attempt to demonstrate what is simply assumed within the language structure.[34]

Limits of Rationality

Descartes takes the assumption that since he has come to what he considers a coherent logical inference (termed "clear and distinct")[35] then the proposition must be truth. Inherent in what was given in the *Limits of Objectivity* section, had Descartes been given sufficient reason to doubt his own identity and self-hood he could just as easily have come to rationally, and coherently, acknowledge his own non-existence. Furthermore, there are explicit underlying assumptions, hidden premises, within Descartes' analysis: that thinking entails a thinking thing,[36] that the term "God" necessarily entails certain attributes, etc., that support his argument but are not included in it, making the analysis incomplete, at best.

If one were to flesh out these hidden assumptions in the *Meditations*, they might find two conclusions: 1) the arguments are valid in form and/or 2) further doubts could be exhibited in relation to certain claims/assumptions. Thus, Descartes, in not establishing all his presuppositions, which he was supposed to have jettisoned, came to what he felt were logical

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[34] This could explain the squeamish and uncertain feeling that people initially have when asked, "Do you know that you exist?" Our linguistic substructure, inherited from Greek thought (particularly Aristotelian logical analysis), inherently makes such a question silly. Such a question can only have immediate relevance when the foundations of the question are challenged in relation to both reference and meaning.

[35] See *Meditations*, 43.

[36] "'There is thinking: therefore there is something that thinks': this is the upshot of all Descartes' argumentation. But that means positing as 'true *a priori*' our own belief in the concept of substance – that when there is thought there has to be something 'that thinks' is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed. In short, this is not merely the substantiation of a fact but logical-metaphysical postulate – Along the lines followed by Descartes one does not come upon something absolutely certain but only upon the fact of a very strong belief" (Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*, Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale, trans., New York: Vintage Books, 1967, p. 268, number 484).

inferences from his *Meditations*, which he took for evidence of their truthfulness. It is unfortunate that Descartes did not fully flesh out his presuppositions whereby he would have been in a better position to judge the soundness of his claims, as this very likely would have helped his discovering their truthfulness, apart from their validity.

Limits of Doubt

It seems obvious, in light of the above analysis, that Descartes did not transcend, or even reach, the *inherent anthropological threshold of skepticism*. As already expressed: Descartes did not doubt the reality of his own *cogito*, and hence the truthfulness of his *sum*. This is precisely Nietzsche's objection to Descartes conclusion:

> The "spirit," something that thinks: where possible even "absolute, pure spirit" – this conception is a second derivative of that false introspection which believes in "thinking": first an act is imagined which simply does not occur, "thinking," and secondly a subject-substratum in which every act of thinking, and nothing else, has its origin: that is to say, both the deed and the doer are fictions.[37]

Nietzsche, thus, performed an "exercise of hyperbolic doubt taken further than that of Descartes and turned against the very certainty that the latter believed he could eliminate from doubt." In the end, "Nietzsche says nothing other than simply, *I doubt better than Descartes*."[38]

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[37] Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 264, number 477.
[38] Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, 15.

Descartes did not doubt the veracity and cogency of his own language, allowing it to stand on its own without a critical examination. He did not doubt the rationality of his own argument, which can be readily seen, but, further, he did not doubt that coherence was equivalent to truth. Furthermore, as Descartes continued to assume his own existence he did not get close to the threshold of skepticism that he had originally planned to reach. In fact, it *could* be that Descartes' coherence was circular (giving us a false coherency) for he began with the assumption of his own existence and ended with the same.[39]

Conclusion

Descartes ultimately failed in his desire "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations." In the above I have highlighted the specific issues of objectivity, rationality, language and doubt in relation to skeptical inquiry, proposing that Descartes, not understanding certain limits inherent within skepticism, and inherent in his own humanity, utilized too many presuppositions that he did not question into his logical inference as to his own existence. He simply took too much (essentially *everything*) for granted in light of his desired goal.

Of course, the above does not prove the falsity of Descartes claims, neither are they grounds to discredit one of the great philosophers. Descartes' contributions to philosophy are not in question. I do desire to cast doubt on his methodology in that he asserted his design and then fell dreadfully short of it on multiple levels. Perhaps we, at this later date, can learn from Descartes' misconceptions of skepticism and develop a better methodology by which to evaluate

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[39] "In its very stubbornness to want to doubt, it confirms its will to certainty and to truth…" (Ricoeur, Paul, *Oneself As Another*, 6). The issue of circularity in Descartes' methodology and conclusion is not new (see *Meditations*, 102-106), but it stands beyond the bounds of this paper.

and produce truth-claims more in line with our humanity. Indeed, maybe we will finally discard the fable of "pure objectivity" and embrace that which we are, which move would be a great service to humanity.