

Gillespie, A. (2006). Descartes' Demon: A Dialogical Analysis of Meditations on First Philosophy. *Theory & Psychology*, 16 (6), page 761 - 781

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0959354306070527>

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THE GHOST IN DESCARTES' SCHEME: A DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF
MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY

(8,948 words)

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Title

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Philosophy

Abstract

Descartes argued that reflective thought should be the first principle of philosophy because it is most easily known. The present paper draws on Bakhtinian and Meadian theories to analyse the three key paragraphs in the *Meditations* in which Descartes argues this point. The analysis demonstrates that: (1) Descartes' text contains the traces of significant others and the discourses of his time, (2) that the sequence of thoughts that establish Descartes' first principle is fundamentally dialogical, (3) that Descartes' self-awareness, which he takes as primary, depends upon his reflecting upon himself from the perspective of a more or less generalised other, and finally (4) that Descartes takes the perspective of the other by reversing his own reactions towards others, such that he reacts to himself in the same way that he previously reacted to others. This re-analysis challenges Cartesian solipsism, showing how the mind, or self-reflection, is fundamentally intersubjective and thus neither primary nor necessarily private.

Key words:

Descartes, solipsism, intersubjectivity, Bakhtin, Mead, dialogicality

The assumption that an individual knows their own mind better than anything else, and that this knowledge is private, has profoundly influenced psychology. Descartes was a key figure in institutionalising this idea almost four hundred years ago. While searching for an indubitable axiom, Descartes found that the only thing he could not doubt was his own reflective thought. Taking reflective thought as his 'first principle' (1637/1980, p.17), Descartes proceeded to elaborate a dualism between mind and body, which has been the object of significant and varied criticism (Ryle, 1949; Marková, 1982; Hurley, 1998). In one way it is surprising that Descartes is best known for this dualism, because, when stated explicitly, it is almost universally rejected. The present paper is not concerned with Descartes' dualism. Instead, this paper concerns our more pervasive Cartesian inheritance, namely, the idea that the mind is primary and private.

The main problematic caused by taking reflective thought, or mind, as prior to anything else, is Cartesian solipsism (Hocutt, 1996). Descartes himself avoids this outcome by invoking God to guarantee truth. However, subsequent scholars, reluctant to invoke God, have found themselves marooned on Descartes' 'first principle.' Brentano (1874/1995) plays a key role in bringing Descartes' method of radical doubt into contemporary psychology, because he turned it into a rigorously empirical method for analysing psychical phenomena. From Brentano threads lead to the school of Graz and the tradition of Gestalt Psychology, to James' science of mental life, and to Husserl and the tradition of phenomenology. All these traditions, however, having abandoned God, have struggled with solipsism. This is particularly clear in Husserl's (1931/1988) struggles with the problem of intersubjectivity. If the mind is primary,

and there is no God who is the source of truth, then how can anyone know the mind of anyone else?

In 1874, the year that Brentano published his empirical method, a second, and arguably more influential psychological text was published: Wundt's *Foundations of Physiological Psychology*. These two texts, Titchener (1921) argues, inaugurated opposing traditions in psychology. While Brentano offered a science of experience, Wundt offered a science based on experiments. Wundt's contribution was to modify the method of introspection so as to make it more objective (Danziger, 1980). He did this by controlling the stimuli which produced the subjective experiences which were to be reported by introspection. This innovation meant that introspective reports, in so far as they pertained to the same stimuli, could be compared across individuals. Arguably, this basic approach continues today in the widespread use of self-report questionnaires. But self-report questionnaires, like Wundt's original method, still assume that the subject him/herself has primary access to their own minds and attitudes, and that the best access to the mind of the subject is through some form of introspection, or self-report. Thus again we find the assumption that mind is primary and private.

Of course there is a strand of psychology that relies neither upon introspection nor self-report. As the contradictory findings and criticisms (e.g., James, 1884) of introspection accumulated, a rhetorical ground opened up for behaviourism. Watson (1913) introduced his influential variant of behaviourism with a critique of introspection. Watson's rationale for rejecting the study of mind hinges upon the unreliability of introspection. A consequence of this argument, has been to exclude the phenomenology of the mind from study not just in behaviourism, but also in some forms of neuroscience and cognitive psychology. In such traditions, the mind, as it is

experienced, is often reduced to an epiphenomenon, and excluded from the analysis, while the functional and statistical properties of the mind are brought to the fore. Clearly such approaches do not assume that the mind is primary. But the price for escaping this assumption has been high. The analysis of the dynamics of reflective thought, as it unfolds, or, in James' phrase, the stream of consciousness, has been abandoned.

The question is, must we ignore the self-reflective stream of thought simply because we have abandoned introspection? If one takes the mind to be primary, separate from the 'objective' world, and thus private, this conclusion follows. But what if the mind is neither primary nor essentially private, but intersubjective? The present analysis aims to rescue the mind from its Cartesian desert island, and bring it into the domain of social interaction.

To this end I analyse Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy in which are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction Between the Human Soul and the Body* (1641/1984), henceforth the *Meditations*. This is the text in which Descartes (p.16) establishes 'the nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body.' The analysis of this text draws upon the theoretical work of Mead and Bakhtin, whose relevance I will describe in due course. Before getting into the substance of the analysis, let me first introduce the *Meditations* and Descartes' method of radical doubt.

The method of radical doubt

The *Meditations* has a surprising structure. Although Descartes is a rationalistic philosopher, very much influenced by mathematics, he does not outline and then systematically develop a set of formal axioms. Rather the text is written, in the first

person, as a series of six mediations. It is in the genre of a handbook of meditative practices. Indeed, Descartes intends his readers to meditate with him, spending days, or even weeks, on each short meditation. The *Meditations* are not intended merely to communicate a new idea, but to fundamentally restructure the way in which the reader thinks.

Descartes begins the first meditation by stating the doubtful nature of his own knowledge, and proposing to do away with all uncertain knowledge. 'I realized it was necessary,' Descartes (p.12) writes, '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.' Recognising that this is a formidable task, Descartes (p.12) sets aside 'a clear stretch of free time' to be 'quite alone,' during which he will devote himself 'sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition' of his opinions.

Instead of going through each opinion one-by-one, Descartes lunges straight for the basis of these opinions, namely sense perception. The question is, can he trust knowledge based on sense perception? Descartes (p.13) clearly perceives himself 'sitting by the fire' and 'wearing a winter dressing-gown.' It may seem absurd to doubt such clear perceptions, but Descartes raises the possibility that he is dreaming. 'How often, asleep at night,' he writes, 'am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!' Reflecting upon this thought, Descartes realises that 'there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.' Because of the possibility of such error, he decides to dismiss all knowledge coming from the senses. Descartes' method, then, is not simply to reject opinions that

are false, but to reject all knowledge that has even the slightest potential of being false, so as to isolate that which is absolutely indubitable.

To sustain such profound doubt is challenging. The problem for Descartes (p.15) is that his 'habitual opinions keep coming back.' In order to further his meditation Descartes introduces the mental heuristic of a 'malicious demon' whom he supposes is trying to deceive him.

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement. I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know the truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. (p.15)

The 'malicious demon,' usually referred to in the Latin text as the *deceptor*, is like an illusionist. The intelligentsia of the 17th century was awed by optical illusion.

Concave and convex mirrors, scenographic manipulations, *trompe-l'oeil*, the camera obscura and anamorphosis were technologies of the day. Descartes himself wrote extensively on optics, vision, and illusion, moreover, his philosophy is filled with the metaphor of visual illusion (Judovitz, 1993). The image of the *deceptor* is one such

manifestation. The *deceptor* calls upon the reader's experience of visual illusions to imagine that the entire visual, and even sensory, world is an elaborate illusion. In short, Descartes takes the optical illusion as a metaphor for all sense perception, and thus tries to subvert the reader's faith in perception.

This method of radical doubt is a precursor to introspection. During the course of his meditation, Descartes does not leave his seat by the fire. Looking at him, one would not know what he was thinking. The thoughts he describes are thoughts that were private to him, and to which he had privileged access. The question is: is this really an isolated and solipsistic act? Is Descartes really, as he describes himself, 'quite alone'?

Who is doing the talking?

The first analytic question I ask is: Who is speaking in Descartes' text? This is a Bakhtinian question (Wertsch, 1991, p.63). It is premised upon Bakhtin's idea that discourse reverberates with its own history. According to Bakhtin (1986, p.93) every utterance is 'furrowed with distant and barely audible echoes of changes of speech subjects and dialogic overtones.' 'Each individual utterance,' Bakhtin continues, 'has clear-cut boundaries that are determined by the change of speech subjects (speakers), but within these boundaries the utterance, like Leibniz's monad, reflects the speech processes.' That is to say that each utterance reverberates with the echoes of the conversations of which it is a product. Even though an utterance may appear to originate from one speaker, or author, dismantling that utterance can reveal the conversations of the speech community of which it is a product.

Such dialogicality is evident in the *Meditations*. Consider the following first two paragraphs of the second mediation, in which Descartes is ostensibly coming to

terms with the profound doubt he has discovered. I have added italics and underlining to indicate the dialogic overtones.

So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top. Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty.

Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains as true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain. (p.16)

The frequent use of 'I' in the extract provides a deceptive veneer of constancy. Taking an I-position to indicate, not what is being talked about, but the perspective from which one is talking, one can identify three analytically distinct I-positions: there is

the naïve meditator (*italics*), the sceptic (underlined) and Descartes the narrator (normal text).

(1) The I-position of the naïve meditator

When Descartes states that 'yesterday's mediation filled my mind with so many doubts' and that he does not 'see how they are to be resolved' he is not speaking from his authorial I-position. As author and philosopher, Descartes knows how the doubts are to be resolved. So who is this 'I' which is filled with doubts? This, I call, the naïve meditator I-position.

The naïve meditator is, partly, Descartes' objectification of the reader. The reader who Descartes is orienting to is the typical philosopher of his time, namely a Scholastic Aristotelian. Although criticising these traditional beliefs, Descartes is also particularly concerned to make his philosophy acceptable to the powers that be (Ariew, 1992). In this context Descartes appears to have used the naïve meditator as a way to draw the philosophers of his day into his theoretical system/scheme.

The naïve meditator has been caught in a 'whirlpool' of doubt because of the sceptical arguments presented in the first meditation which have challenged the scholastic belief that knowledge comes through the senses. That vision was 'the noblest of the senses' and a path to truth was taken for granted at this time (Jay, 1993, chapter 1). And it is precisely this belief that the first meditation, and the invocation of the 'malicious demon,' is meant to destroy. The naïve meditator is now meant to be ready to be saved by Descartes' 'unshakeable' truth. In this sense, Descartes can be seen to present his own dualistic philosophy to the scholastics, not as a challenge, but as a life raft. The I-position of the naïve meditator is thus a bridge that is meant to convey the reader from Scholastic Aristotelianism to Descartes' own philosophy. Accordingly, as the meditations progress, and the naïve meditator comes to realise

Descartes' insights, the discourse of the naïve meditator becomes increasingly Cartesian and decreasingly scholastic.

The discourse of scholasticism, however, is also refracted through Descartes' own experiences and personality. In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes (p.8) states that the meditations contain 'the very thoughts' that he himself journeyed through in his search for truth. Indeed, the attitude of the naïve meditator conforms to the image Descartes gives us of his own youth [endnote 1]. For example, Descartes (1637/1980, 10, p.5) wrote that he 'always had an especially great craving for learning to distinguish the true from the false.' Not surprisingly, the young Descartes 'took especially great pleasure in mathematics because of the certainty and the evidence of its arguments' (1637/1980, 8, p.4). This 'great craving' for certainty, which is essential to Descartes' own personality, seems to be objectified in the I-position of the naïve meditator.

As described by Josephs (2002, p.162-3), an I-position lies at the intersection between personal experience and a collective discourse that organises those experiences. Descartes' own 'great craving' finds expression in the discourse of scholasticism, as do his own prior scholastic beliefs, and he animates this prior aspect of himself in order to fill the scholastic discourse with life.

(2) The I-position of the sceptic

The I-position of the sceptic, in the given extract, says 'I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious.' By emphasising that all vision is false, the sceptic is undermining the scholastic beliefs of the naïve meditator. The naïve meditator, provoked by such scepticism asks, somewhat feebly, 'So what remains as true?' And again we can hear the voice of the sceptic in the response – 'Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.'

When we ask who is speaking here, we must answer that a whole discourse of sceptical philosophy is speaking. For example, the phrase 'nothing is certain' (*nihil esse certi*), which also appears elsewhere in the *Meditations*, is a catch-phrase in the discourse of scepticism. One can find it in the writings of ancient philosophers such as Pliny the Elder and in the writings of Descartes' contemporaries (e.g., Montaigne, 1902, Volume 2, chapter 14).

This catch phrase is, however, only the tip of an extensive discourse which Descartes animates. Philosophical scepticism was a waxing theory in Descartes' day. The recent invention of the printing press greatly increased the circulation of theories, thus making contradictions more salient (Burke, 2000). Descartes himself experienced the uncertainty wrought by the printing press. While at school in La Flèche, Descartes recalls that he was exposed to such a diversity of philosophical theories that Descartes was led to remark that 'one cannot imagine anything so strange or unbelievable that it has not been said by some philosopher' (1637/1980, p.9). There is, he was forced to conclude, 'nothing about which there is not some dispute – and thus nothing that is not doubtful' (1637/1980, 9, p.5).

These experiences of doubt were first articulated, at a theoretical level, for the young Descartes, by the work of Charron (Rodis-Lewis, 1998, p.44ff). Charron aimed to cultivate an ignorance and doubt more learned and noble than the presumption of knowledge. Later, Descartes was further socialised into the discourse of scepticism through Mersenne's circle (Collins, 1988, p.568). Scepticism must both have appealed to and appalled the young Descartes. On the one hand, philosophical scepticism would have resonated with Descartes' experience of the diversity of theories in philosophy. On the other hand, such a stance would have frustrated Descartes' 'great craving' for truth and certainty.

Troubled, or rather motivated, by this scepticism, Descartes (1637/1980, p.5) left the world of academia, in order to study 'the great book of the world.' For nine years Descartes travelled around Europe, but his 'great craving' for truth remained unanswered.

[D]uring my travels, having acknowledged that those who have feelings quite contrary to our own are not for that reason barbarians or savages, but that many of them use their reason as much or more than we do, and having considered how the very same man with his very own mind, having been brought up from infancy among the French or the Germans becomes different from what he would be had he always lived among the Chinese or among cannibals; and how, even to the fashions of our clothing, the same thing that pleased us ten years ago and that perhaps might again please us ten years from now seem to us extravagant and ridiculous. Thus it is more custom and example that persuades us than certain knowledge. (1637/1980, p.9)

If it is custom and example that 'persuades' people of the certainty of knowledge, then this knowledge, according to Descartes, cannot be considered true. Despite finding the same diversity of opinion, and the same doubtable knowledge, among the people of Europe as among the philosophers, Descartes did not give up his search for truth. We can gain some insight into the earnestness of his quest from the following anecdote. After returning from Italy, Descartes competed in a duel for a woman. Descartes, who practiced fencing for sport, defeated his opponent (but spared his life). He later then confessed, to the lady for whom he had risked his life, that he 'found no beauties comparable to those of truth' (Rodis-Lewis, 1995, p.66).

Descartes' experience of the diversity of philosophies, and the diversity of beliefs among people, provided an experiential basis to his receptivity to the discourse of scepticism. That is to say, Descartes did not simply appropriate the discourse of scepticism, but the discourse of scepticism answered to his own experience, and articulated it at a philosophical level. As with the I-position of the naïve meditator, the I-position of the sceptic is both culturally structured and personally meaningful.

(3) The I-position of Descartes the narrator

The dialogue between the discourse of scholasticism, animated through the naïve meditator I-position, and the discourse of scepticism, animated through the sceptic I-position, forms the central dialogic tension in the *Meditations*. Yet there is a third important I-position, namely Descartes the narrator, which sets up, organises and adjudicates the debate. Descartes the narrator, somewhat artificially, forces these two discourses to collide, and out of the ruins of both, advances his own 'first principle.'

Both the naïve meditator and the sceptic I-positions, necessarily, do not know the outcome of the meditation – if they did, the dialogue would stop. The meditator, for example, keeps on meditating, becoming drawn ever deeper into the whirlpool of doubt. If the choice were really with the naïve meditator, one might expect that the meditator would give up this depressing meditation. But the meditator does not resign. In a somewhat forced fashion the text reads: 'Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday' and 'I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.' At such points in the text, one can hear the voice of Descartes the narrator inhabiting and animating the voice of the naïve meditator, in effect, forcing the meditation to continue, and in the latter case, even promising 'great things.' These words 'sound foreign in the mouth' (Bakhtin, 1981, p.294) of the naïve meditator.

The intentionality and tone of Descartes the narrator is evident just beneath the surface.

Taken together, these three I-positions, the naïve meditator, the sceptic and Descartes the narrator, comprise part of Descartes' 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002, p.147). Although these I-positions arise within Descartes' own text, they have their origin in the social world. By identifying these I-positions we see the 17th century society manifesting in Descartes' utterances. And they begin to suggest that Descartes is not 'quite alone' in his meditations.

Voices in dialogue

Bakhtin (1982, p.348) states that one way for the artist to creatively use the heteroglossia inherent in language, is to objectify different languages in different characters, and then let the characters interact. In this process, the author liberates himself from the discourses being spoken, such that the languages that the characters speak gain a degree of autonomy and can thus interact in novel ways (see also, Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.42). This leads me to a second analytic question, having identified the three I-positions, how do they interact to produce Descartes' 'first principle'?

To address this question, I continue our reading of the *Meditations*, moving to the third paragraph of the second meditation. This is the key paragraph in which Descartes articulates the argument for his first principle. In this paragraph, we can see Descartes force together the discourses of scholasticism and scepticism, which are normally held apart by virtue of being in different individuals, and even in different academic circles.

*Yet apart from everything I have just listed, how do I know that there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt? Is there not a God, or whatever I may call him, who puts into me the thoughts I am now having? But why do I think this, since I myself may perhaps be the author of these thoughts? In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? *Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them?* But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? *No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.* But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. *In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.* So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (p.16-17)*

When dismantling this extract, the 'echoes of changes of speech subjects,' described by Bakhtin, are clearly discernable. The paragraph is essentially a dialogue between the naïve meditator (italics) and the sceptic (underlined) moderated by Descartes the narrator (normal text).

The paragraph begins with the naïve meditator, replying to the discourse of the sceptic in the second paragraph, and insisting that there must be something 'which

does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt.' These thoughts that Descartes has must have come from somewhere, thus, argues this I-position, there must be a God who created these thoughts. The first 'but' (*sed*) marks the interjection of the discourse of scepticism, which argues that maybe these thoughts originate within Descartes himself? Then the naïve meditator retorts, 'in that case am not I, at least, something?' Again the naïve meditator's quest for certainty is shattered, by a second 'but' and the discourse of scepticism points out that, according to the mental heuristic of the malicious demon, 'I have no senses and no body.' The naïve meditator asks the somewhat rhetorical question, can one exist without sense perception or body? The third 'but' marks the discourse of scepticism driving home the point, and pushing the discourse of scepticism to its absolute limit by questioning the very existence of the subject: 'does it not follow that I too do not exist?' This absurdity draws out a firm 'no' from the naïve meditator, marking the introduction of a new found certainty. The discourse of scepticism reiterates, somewhat in vain, the power of the deceiver to create all kinds of illusion and deception. But the discourse of the naïve meditator seizes the statement, and turns it around. If there is a deceiver deceiving the meditator, then it follows that the meditator, as a being aware of this deception, or at least imagining this deception, must exist. At this point, the discourse of scepticism is silenced. There is no fifth 'but.' In conclusion, the voice of Descartes the narrator breaks through, and adjudicates the conclusion of the meditation: 'So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind' [endnote 2].

Valsiner (2002) has systematically outlined forms of dialogical relation between I-positions within the dialogical self. Some of the relations that he describes,

are visible in the above extract. Initially the dialogue would seem to be what he calls 'mutually escalating' (p.257). That is to say, each I-position is driven towards increasingly extreme positions. Each 'but' marks a change to the perspective of the sceptic, and the introduction of an even more extreme sceptical argument. In response to each of these, the naïve meditator attempts to formulate a new possible basis for certainty. This 'mutually escalating' dialogue, culminates when the voice of the naïve meditator says 'no.' In the following turn, the dialogical relation changes to what Valsiner, borrowing from Bakhtin, calls 'ventriloquation' (p.260). The naïve meditator ventriloquates the voice of the sceptic, appropriating the sceptic's words, turning them against the sceptic – 'if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.' This turn marks the emergence of novelty. The sceptic overextends the sceptical argument to the point of questioning the existence of the subject, thus accomplishing a *reductio ad absurdum* of the sceptical argument. However, it is the voice of the naïve meditator who recognises this and appropriates it in order to assert the necessary and certain existence of reflective thought. One could say that we have here a creative three-step process, as described by Marková (1990), except that rather than occurring between people, it is occurring within the twists and shifts of Descartes' own self-reflective stream of thought.

The outcome of this intrapersonal dialogue is the relatively novel semiotic mediator: '*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me.' Every time Descartes becomes aware of himself putting forward the proposition that 'I am, I exist,' this statement is necessarily true, for regardless of any delusions that the 'malicious demon' may cause, the demon can never delude Descartes of his own self-awareness. This thought, or semiotic mediator, stops the dialogue. The voice of the sceptic dissolves. When the voice of the sceptic surfaces later in the *Meditations* and

in other texts, Descartes invokes this semiotic mediator, and repeatedly the discourse of scepticism falls apart. This truth is 'so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics' are unable to shake it (1637/1980, 32, p.17).

Descartes does not arrive at his 'first principle' by means of rationalistic thought as commonly conceived; rather his thought is fundamentally dialogical. It is the 'dialogical tensions' (Marková, 2003) between discourses that produce Descartes' 'first principle.' The 'first principle' is the semiotic means of silencing the voice of the sceptic. The process of Descartes' thought is dialogical, and his 'first principle' can be made explicable as an utterance within this dialogical stream of thought.

'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me'

Now I want to turn to the content of Descartes' 'first principle.' The crux of Descartes' argument has, according to Baker and Morris (1996), often been misunderstood as proving the existence of a mind-world, which exists, so to speak, side-by-side with the material world. This is incorrect, Descartes does not espouse a two worlds theory. Indeed the idea that mind is 'internal' is absurd for Descartes, because he defines mind, or *res cogitans*, as that which is not extended in space. What Descartes does discover is the essential (i.e., clear and distinct) property of the mind, namely, its reflexivity. The essence of mind is not 'an image in the head' but rather an awareness of self. Descartes' argument is that the 'proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me.' The Latin word which Descartes uses here for 'put forward' is *profertur* – which also means to mention. The key point is that the truth of the proposition is conditional upon awareness of conceiving of or uttering the proposition. Only the self-awareness is indubitable. Accordingly, the third analytic question I want to ask concerns Descartes' own self-awareness. What is the

content of Descartes' self-awareness? Is his self-awareness a bounded entity, a clear and distinct idea, entirely separable from the social world, or is also intersubjective?

In order to address this question, I will shift from a Bakhtinian to a Meadian theoretical framework. From a Meadian standpoint, self-awareness always comprises two components. There is the object self, the 'me,' and the subject self, the 'I' (Barresi, 2002). By 'I' Mead means the same as what I have hitherto been calling an I-position, namely the position, or perspective, from which one speaks or acts. Correspondingly, the 'me' refers to that aspect of self that becomes visible from a particular I-position. A 'me' is, thus, a certain content of self-awareness which is transient and dependent upon a certain 'I' (Marková, 1987, chapter 4; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1988, p.131; Gillespie, 2005).

In the case of Descartes' *Meditations*, the 'me' which arises in Descartes' own experience is 'me-being-deceived' and 'me-mentioning.' The question then becomes, which I-positions correspond to each 'me'? Still working with the third paragraph of the second meditation, I analyse each of these aspects of Descartes' self-awareness in turn.

(1) 'Me-being-deceived'

Toward the end of the third paragraph of the second meditation, Descartes states that there is a 'deceiver of supreme power' who is 'deceiving me' and that 'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me.' The content of this 'me' is of being deceived. Of course while being aware of the possibility of being deceived, Descartes' I-position cannot actually be in alignment with the 'me-being-deceived.' The nature of deception is such that while one is being deceived one does not know that one is being deceived. As soon as one knows, one is no longer deceived. So, while a part of

Descartes is being deceived, the question is which part of Descartes is observing this deception?

The phrase 'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me' is a sharp observation – sharp enough to puncture Descartes' more abstract and solipsistic formulations. In this instance Descartes' I-position seems to be aligned with the 'deceiver of supreme power.' It is as if he sees himself being deceived from the perspective of the hypothetical 'malicious demon.' It is, I suggest, from the perspective of this 'malicious demon' that Descartes is able to become aware of himself as deceived. Thus, in a classic Meadian sense, Descartes becomes aware of himself by taking the perspective of an other.

To say that Descartes becomes self-aware from the perspective of the *deceptor* is of course simplistic. The 'malicious demon' is a hypothetical construct. If we dismantle the *deceptor* we find that it is a complex construction, comprising many I-positions. The demon is a mental heuristic in the service of the discourse of scepticism. Moreover, as mentioned above, it appears to draw upon the imagery from and feelings towards the illusionists of the day. But, however complex the 'malicious demon' is, as a system of I-positions, the key point remains. Descartes' self-awareness needs at least two perspectives. If we allowed Descartes only one perspective, he might either be deceived or not deceived, but he could not be aware of either.

(2) *'Me-mentioning'*

Now we arrive at Descartes' more abstract formulation: 'this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me.' The 'me' here is 'me-putting-forward' or 'me-mentioning.' Again the question is, from which I-position is Descartes aware of this 'me'?

In this instance we cannot point to any one particular perspective that Descartes might be taking, as we can with the perspective of the 'malicious demon.' Descartes is taking what Mead called the perspective of the generalized other (Mead, 1922, p.161; Dodds *et al.* 1997). This refers to I-positions which have, so to speak, become detached from any one persona or discourse. The generalized other is abstracted out of specific I-positions forming a general frame of reference. It transcends the specific I-positions of the discourses of scepticism and scholasticism. It extracts from such I-positions only that which is most common, and thus constructs a general self-awareness. It is through this structure that self can get outside of self, become aware of self, and in Descartes' instance, listen to self's own utterances.

In the standard English translation of Descartes, which I have used, the '*I am, I exist*' is in italics. In Cress's (1980, p.61) translation, the phrase is in quotation marks. In the original Latin, it appears to be in neither. From my point of view, it would be more correct to use quotation marks, because this indicates Descartes' own distance from himself. 'I am, I exist' is a 'proposition' which is 'put forward' or mentioned by Descartes. As such Descartes is quoting himself. To put the phrase in quotation marks makes clear that Descartes is standing apart from himself, and listening to his own utterances. How can someone quote himself? Quoting oneself implies moving I-position, such that one is referring to oneself in the same way that one might refer to others. James (1884, p.2) saw this clearly:

The present conscious state, when I say "I feel tired," is not the direct feeling of tire; when I say "I feel angry," it is not the direct feeling of anger. It is the feeling of saying-I-feel-tired, of saying-I-feel-angry, - entirely different matters.

The problem is that once self is described as a 'me' (i.e., 'I feel tired') this is no longer a description of the 'I,' as the 'I' has moved on and is now uttering that description. The 'I' is never the 'me,' because the 'me' is always other. Equally, when Descartes arises to himself as 'me-mentioning,' Descartes' own I-position is not in the act of mentioning anything, rather, Descartes' I-position is observing or listening to himself. However, when we try to specify exactly the nature and origin of this I-position, we can only say that it is a generalised I-position, one whose origin is in all the I-positions. Nevertheless, 'me-mentioning' has demonstrably the same social psychological structure as 'me-being-deceived.' The awareness of 'me-mentioning' necessitates an I-position that is not mentioning, but rather observing, to bestow the awareness.

Descartes assumes that when he introspects he finds himself as a complete 'clear and distinct idea,' that is, as an indubitable truth. But this is not the case. His self-awareness is fragmented. There is 'me-being-deceived' and there is 'me-mentioning.' Moreover, each of these conceptions is incomplete. Both of these momentary 'me' experiences have complementary I-positions that, in the moment of self-reflection, are invisible to Descartes, and yet which are the condition of his self-awareness. The phrase 'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me' crystallises my argument most clearly. It contains the dialogical essence of Descartes' argument and reveals the blind spot, the hidden I-position, that necessarily accompanies every 'me.' This phrase demonstrates the intersubjective basis of Descartes' so-called primary and private self-awareness.

Constructing the architecture of intersubjectivity

The generalized other contains numerous I-positions, which are more or less generalised. In Descartes' generalized other we find I-positions associated with the discourses of scholasticism and scepticism, with Descartes the narrator, with the 'malicious demon' and even the illusionist. A closer analysis would uncover many more I-positions, articulating Descartes' stream of thought at an even finer resolution. For thought is the movement between, and thus integration of, these various I-positions. Within this architecture of intersubjectivity (Rommetveit, 1974), at the points where these I-positions are turned in upon one another, domains of self-awareness are created. But how does this intersubjective, or dialogical, structure develop? How does society get 'inside' Descartes? Where do these diverse, and seemingly social, I-positions come from? Or more simply, how does Descartes take the perspective of the other?

Within a Cartesian framework, taking the perspective of an other is problematic. If the individual's mind is primary, then other minds must be secondary. If the only certainty concerns one's own mind, how can one know the mind of anyone else? This line of thought, as mentioned at the outset, is the basis of Cartesian solipsism. And so long as one assumes that the mind is primary, this problem seems intractable.

According to Mead (1913), the individual mind is not primary. Rather social interaction and position exchange, are prior to the individual mind. Position exchange means that social positions within the social structure are, at times, reversed. Examples include: people both buy and sell things; people both talk and listen; people both help and are helped. Given such position exchange, taking the perspective of the other is explicable in the following way: self does not take the actual perspective of

the other, but rather takes the perspective of self when self was previously in the position of the other.

This dynamic is clearly evident in Descartes own sceptical self-reflections. The young Descartes, as mentioned, was dismayed by the diversity of opinion to be found amongst the philosophers. Descartes recognised that they could not all be right, and thus that some must be wrong, despite holding their opinions very firmly. A part of Descartes' genius was to apply this insight to himself, and recognise that he too might hold equally false beliefs. For example, Descartes, while trying to doubt his own knowledge, argues:

[S]ince I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? (1641/1984, p.14)

The doubt begins with the other. Initially it is the 'others' that 'go astray' in propounding their knowledge. But Descartes also propounds his own form of knowledge. That is to say, Descartes is in an equivalent social position to the other, and so the critique returns – 'may I not similarly go wrong.' In this act of self-reflection, whose perspective is Descartes taking? He is taking his own perspective that he previously held towards others. Central to this possibility is position exchange. Descartes moves from the position of reading the work of philosophers to becoming a philosopher and writing his own works. The perspective that he previously held towards other philosophers, thus became redirected toward himself.

A second illustration of this dynamic weaving of intersubjectivity is evident in Descartes' experience of travel. While travelling around Europe, Descartes saw the various and contradictory beliefs of other peoples. Initially he thought that these peoples must be in error. However, again he came to reverse this critique, and used it to undermine his own knowledge:

Thus the greatest profit I derived from this [travel] was that on realizing that many things, although they seemed very extravagant and ridiculous to us, did not cease being commonly accepted and approved by other great peoples, I learned to believe nothing very firmly concerning what I had been persuaded to believe only by example and custom (1637/1980, p.5-6)

The 'extravagant and ridiculous' beliefs of others, led Descartes to self-reflectively question whether his own beliefs might not be equally extravagant and ridiculous. First is not the individual's mind, but the individual's reaction to the other. It is our reaction to the other which precedes our awareness of self. For the awareness of self is self's reacting to self in the same way that self previously reacted to other. Again position exchange is fundamental. Descartes both lived his life, and toured the lives of others, and thus became able to approach his own life with the attitude of an outsider.

The same analysis can be made in regard to the position of the person deceived and the *deceptor*. But the point is the same. Having occupied both positions within a social interaction, self can become aware of self within that interaction. The architecture of intersubjectivity is woven by self occupying diverse positions within the social structure, cultivating the associated perspectives, and then integrating these perspectives such that they are redirected toward self. In this way self as object, that is

'me,' arises. Although the architecture of intersubjectivity comprises reversed images and feelings originating in the individuals' relation to others, this process of construction is not an individual phenomenon. As with the I-positions of the sceptic and the naïve meditator, embodied feelings and images originating in the experience of the individual are cultivated and given expression by cultural discourses. Thus the construction of the architecture of intersubjectivity is simultaneously both an individual and a historical phenomenon.

The ghost in Descartes' scheme

Descartes (p.22-23) concludes the second meditation by stating that: 'I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.' Accordingly he establishes reflective thought as the 'first principle' of his 'First Philosophy.' While Descartes' philosophy is usually rejected, this first principle has lived on in psychology, having diverse consequences, from solipsism to a rejection of the study of the self-reflective dynamics of mind as intractable.

It has not been my intent to provide yet another critique of Descartes, nor to deny or replace his dualism. Indeed my analysis does not undermine Descartes' conclusions that self-reflection cannot be doubted, that self-reflection is different from matter, or that self-reflection can be a starting point for philosophy. However, it does challenge his conclusion that one's own mind is better known than 'anything else.'

I have argued that Descartes' argument for the 'first principle' is dialogical, that this dialogicality is essential to the structure of his argument, that the self-awareness that he takes to be primary pre-supposes intersubjectivity and that the primary building block of this intersubjectivity is self's reaction to other. Self-reflection draws upon imagery and feelings that are initially directed towards others,

and turns those reactions upon self. Accordingly, our reactions toward others are prior to our reactions toward self, that is, self-reflection.

When Ryle (1949) argues that there is no ghost in the machine, he, like so many others, was in pursuit of objectivity at the expense of the phenomena of mind. There is a ghost in Descartes' scheme, and one that has proved difficult to exorcise. I suggest that we recognise this ghost, and call it the trace of the other. The trace of the other is evident in every I-position that begets a 'me.' It is the ingrown perspective, the blind spot, that escapes Descartes' introspective effort. Yet this trace of the other, this I-position, is evident in Descartes' argument and essential to his own self-awareness. The ghost in Descartes' scheme most simply is the perspective of the other, but more precisely, I have argued, it is Descartes' previous perspective toward others (philosophers, people from other cultures and those taken in by the illusionist) turned toward self.

Acknowledging the ghost in Descartes' scheme, does not mean recognising the limits of scientific knowledge, if anything, it expands the domain of science. The trace of the other, the ghost in Descartes' scheme, is like an umbilical cord that leads straight out of the marooned Cartesian mind, and into the social world. The trace of the other constitutes the intersubjective, and thus paradoxically, objective, basis of the individual mind. The trace of the other is objectively observable, and explicable in terms of social and historical interaction.

The foregoing analysis concerns Descartes' stream of self-reflective thought, yet it does not rely upon introspection. Descartes' text is a constructed and artificial account of introspection, but that does not matter. The stream of thought it contains, is, nonetheless, a stream of thought. It can be followed by a reader as much as by Descartes. As Merleau-Ponty observed: 'when a text is read to us, provided that it is

read with expression, we have no thought marginal to the text itself, for the words fully occupy our mind' (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p.180). When reading the *Meditations*, Descartes' thoughts become our thoughts. A good text, like Descartes' *Meditations*, fits to the receptive readers mind, guiding the readers thought, leading the reader through a stream of self-reflective thought. Descartes' text, its every twist and turn, and change of perspective, is a publicly observable instance of reflective thought in action. Descartes' text itself is evidence of the fact that mind, as a self-reflective stream of thought, is often public, and easily accessed, not by introspection, but, by reading and listening.

Endnotes

[1] Much of what is known about Descartes comes from his *Discourse on Method* (1637/1980). In this work Descartes aims to present 'the paths that I have followed and to present my life as a picture, so that each person may judge it' (p.4). The problem is that he also refers to this narrative as a 'fable' (p.4). Nevertheless, this work is not fiction, although historians have discerned small deviations between this text and other historical sources (e.g., Ariew, 1992 p.59-60), overall, the text seems reasonably reliable (Rodis-Lewis, 1998, p.12).

[2] The reader will note that in this extract Descartes does not say 'I think, therefore I am.' That famous phrase appears in Descartes' earlier publication, *Discourse on Method* (1637/1980, p.17 - which was written in French, not Latin). The argument in this original publication has the same dialogical structure as in the *Meditations*, however, because this earlier analysis is given by Descartes somewhat reluctantly and is very brief, I decided to focus upon the *Meditations*. A further, and particularly dialogical, variant of the argument can be found in Descartes' *The Search for Truth* (1984).

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