I

The Logic of Omnipotence

George Mavродеев has recently presented an analysis designed to show that, despite some appearances to the contrary, a certain well-known puzzle actually raises no serious difficulties in the notion of divine omnipotence.¹ The puzzle suggests a test of God's power—can He create a stone too heavy for Him to lift?—which, it seems, cannot fail to reveal that His power is limited. For He must, it would appear, either show His limitations by being unable to create such a stone or by being unable to lift it once He had created it.

In dealing with this puzzle, Mavродеев points out that it involves the setting of a task whose description is self-contradictory—the task of creating a stone too heavy for an omnipotent being to lift. He calls such tasks "pseudo-tasks" and he says of them: "Such pseudo-tasks, not falling within the realm of possibility, are not objects of power at all. Hence the fact that they cannot be performed implies no limit on the power of God, and hence no defect in the doctrine of omnipotence."² Thus his way of dealing with the puzzle relies upon the principle that an omnipotent being need not be supposed capable of performing tasks whose descriptions are self-contradictory.

Now this principle is one that Mavродеев apparently regards as self-evident, since he offers no support for it whatever except some references which indicate that it was also accepted by Saint Thomas Aquinas. I do not wish to suggest that the principle is false. Indeed, for all I know it may even be self-evident. But it happens to be a principle which has been rejected by some important philosophers.³

² Ibid., p. 223.
³ Descartes, for instance, who in fact thought it blasphemous to maintain that God can do only what can be described in a logically coherent way: "The truths of mathematics . . . were established by God and entirely depend on Him, as much as do all the rest of His creatures. Actually, it would be to speak of God as a Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Sirens and to the Fates, to say that these truths are independent of Him. . . . You will be told that if God established these truths He would be able to change them, as a king does his laws; to which it is necessary to reply that this is incorrect. . . . In general we can be quite certain that God can do whatever we are able to understand, but not that He cannot do what we are unable to understand. For it would be presumptuous to think that our imagination extends as far as His power" (letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630). "God was as free to make it false that all the radii of a circle are equal as to refrain from creating the world" (letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1650). "I would not even dare to say that God cannot arrange that a mountain should exist without a valley, or that one and two should not make three; but I only say that He has given me a mind of such a nature that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley or
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Accordingly, it might be preferable to have an analysis of the puzzle in question that does not require the use of this principle. And in fact, such an analysis is easy to provide.

Suppose, then, that God’s omnipotence enables Him to do even what is logically impossible and that He actually creates a stone too heavy for Him to lift. The critic of the notion of divine omnipotence is quite mistaken if he thinks that this supposition plays into his hands. What the critic wishes to claim, of course, is that when God has created a stone which He cannot lift, He is then faced with a task beyond His ability and is therefore seen to be limited in power. But this claim is not justified.

For why should God not be able to perform the task in question? To be sure, it is a task — the task of lifting a stone which He cannot lift — whose description is self-contradictory. But if God is supposed capable of performing one task whose description is self-contradictory — that of creating the problematic stone in the first place — why should He not be supposed capable of performing another — that of lifting the stone? After all, is there any greater trick in performing two logically impossible tasks than there is in performing one?

If an omnipotent being can do what is logically impossible, then he cannot only create situations which he cannot handle but also, since he is not bound by the limits of consistency, he can handle situations which he cannot handle.

... a sum of one and two which would not be three, and so on, and that such things imply contradictions in my conception” (letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648). “As for the difficulty in conceiving how it was a matter of freedom and indifference to God to make it true that the three angles of a triangle should equal two right angles, or generally that contradictions should not be able to be together, one can easily remove it by considering that the power of God can have no limits... God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictions cannot be together, and consequently He could have done the contrary” (letter to Mesland, 2 May 1649).
2

Descartes’s Discussion of His Existence in the Second Meditation

The epidemic doubt that Descartes generates in the First Meditation is arrested early in the Second, when he finds in his own existence a belief apparently immune to even the most virulent skepticism. There are versions of this discovery in many of Descartes’s works, but it is the Meditations which provides his most mature and fully developed account of it. Moreover, some of his most important statements elsewhere concerning the belief that he exists refer to the discussion in the Second Meditation. My aim here is to understand what he says in that discussion.

1

A novel and provocative interpretation of Descartes’s views concerning his existence has recently been proposed by Jaakko Hintikka. According to Hintikka, Descartes’s assertion of his existence in cogito ergo sum is best understood as performatory in character rather than as primarily a matter of inference. Although I find Hintikka’s approach fresh and interesting, it is difficult for me to evaluate his analysis of the cogito because I cannot make good sense out of the logical apparatus which he brings to bear in the course of developing his interpretation. Let me illustrate this difficulty by considering what he says about construing the cogito as an inference.

While he naturally places most emphasis on his original notion that cogito ergo sum has a performatory aspect, Hintikka does not deny that sum may also be regarded as inferred:

There is no incompatibility whatsoever between saying that cogito ergo sum is a performance and that it is an inference. There is no need for one to deny, even if one should claim that the Cogito is essentially performatory, that in it sum is inferred from . . . cogito, provided that the sole basis of this inference is the fact that the denial of the corresponding implication “if I think, then I exist” – namely, “I think, but I do not exist” – is existentially inconsistent (self-defeating).2

Hintikka defines existential inconsistency as follows:

1 “Cogito Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?,” Philosophical Review, LXXI (1962), 3–32; and “Cogito Ergo Sum as an Inference and a Performance,” Philosophical Review, LXXII (1963), 487–496. I will refer to these articles as “H-1” and “H-2,” respectively.
2 H-2, p. 489.
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$p$ is existentially inconsistent for the person referred to by $a$ to utter if and only if... $p$; and $a$ exists" is inconsistent (in the ordinary sense of the word).\(^3\)

Now to begin with, this definition of existential inconsistency is defective and surely does not adequately capture the notion which Hintikka wishes to define. For, according to his definition, $p$ will automatically be existentially inconsistent for $a$ (or, for that matter, for anyone) to utter whenever $p$ is itself inconsistent. If $p$ is inconsistent, any conjunction in which it is a term will, of course, be inconsistent, including "$p$; and $a$ exists." And since an inconsistent statement entails any statement, a person who utters an inconsistent $p$ will be making a statement which entails that he himself does not exist — the "awkwardness" which Hintikka says is characteristic of existentially inconsistent utterances. To be sure, this defect in Hintikka's definition is not serious. It can readily be eliminated by making explicit the condition that an existentially inconsistent statement or sentence must not be self-contradictory or false for logical reasons alone.

There is, however, a more interesting difficulty in what Hintikka says about *cogito ergo sum* as an inference. His point is that the basis of the inference from *cogito* to *sum* is the existential inconsistency of "I think, but I do not exist." This statement is existentially inconsistent because its conjunction with "I exist" is self-contradictory. But the trouble here is that *any* conjunction in which "I do not exist" is a term will be existentially inconsistent, since it will be inconsistent with "I exist." For instance, the statement "Johnson is a Democrat, but I do not exist" is existentially inconsistent (self-defeating). Now this statement is the denial of "If Johnson is a Democrat, then I exist." Hintikka seems committed to claiming that "I exist" can be inferred from "Johnson is a Democrat": the same basis of inference is available here as in the case of the inference, which Hintikka endorses, from *cogito* to *sum*. That is, the denial of the corresponding implication is existentially inconsistent. Perhaps "I exist" can (in some funny sense) be inferred from "Johnson is a Democrat," but such an "inference" would seem to be rather vacuous. Although Hintikka concedes that the *cogito* is an inference, then, his concession does not seem to amount to much and it is hard for me to understand what he has in mind.

Instead of focusing my attention, in what follows, on Hintikka's interpretation, I propose to develop my own account of Descartes's views by examining his text directly. In the course of doing so, however, I shall call attention to various important respects in which Hintikka misreads the key passage in the Second Meditation. Moreover, I shall argue that he fundamentally misconceives Descartes's purpose in discussing his existence. My interpretation of Descartes and my criticisms of Hintikka do not prejudice the question of whether the statement *sum* is performatory. They do indicate, however, that *sum* has an important characteristic which is not brought out by characterizing it as performatory. Hintikka's emphasis on performatoriness is, in my opinion, not so much erroneous as inade-

\(^3\) H-1, p. 11.
Descartes's Discussion of His Existence

It is far from my mind to deny the value of some of Hintikka's insights. But he does not tell the whole story and, because of his logical and textual errors, he does not even tell half the story well.

II

Descartes begins the Second Meditation with a brief review of the skeptical position to which he has so far been led. Then he asks a question: "I myself, am I not at least something?" In thinking of himself, he is struck by the possibility that he has come across a belief which is not rendered uncertain by the First Meditation's arguments. This belief is formulated only in the vaguest way: "I am something," or "sum. But without first seeking to make it more precise or explicit, Descartes undertakes to confront it with the grounds for doubt which he has already developed in his examination of sensory beliefs.

His discussion of sum proceeds in four steps, following the question with which it begins:

I myself, am I not at least something? (a) But I have already denied that I had either senses or a body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without them? (b) But I persuaded myself that there was nothing at all in the world—there was no heaven, no earth, no minds, nor any bodies. Did I not, then, also persuade myself that I was nothing? Certainly not. I doubtless did exist if I persuaded myself of something or if I merely thought of something. (c) But there is some sort of very powerful and cunning deceiver, who employs all his ingenuity to deceive me about everything. Then there is no doubt that I exist, if he deceives me; and though he deceive me as much as he likes, he can never bring it about that I am nothing as long as I think that I am something. (d) Hence, after having thought about it thoroughly and carefully examined everything, we must come to the settled conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it or that I conceive it in my mind. 4

This passage is clearly related to the dictum cogito ergo sum; indeed, Hintikka describes it as "Descartes's formulation of the cogito in the Second Meditation." It is worth noticing at the start, however, that the passage consists of a number of different statements, some of which is the cogito. The statement I think, therefore I am simply does not occur in the passage at all; nor does any exactly equivalent statement. In fact, so far as I know, the cogito as such does not appear anywhere in the Meditations.

In the course of his discussion, Descartes does make a statement which closely resembles the cogito. This statement occurs in his argument's second step, along the

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4 Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.), (Oeuvres de Descartes (Paris, 1957), VII, 24–25 (Latin); IX, 19 (French), hereafter cited as "AT"; Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (eds.), The Philosophical Works of Descartes (New York, 1955), I, 150, hereafter cited as "HR." I have made some changes in the HR translation. In general, I will cite only the easily accessible HR, rather than AT. I will give no citations for quotations from the familiar and readily available First and Second Meditations.

5 HR-2, p. 490.
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way to the conclusion, when he affirms that his having thought of something renders his existence certain. It seems clear to me, for reasons I shall give below, that in this step and elsewhere Descartes regards his existence as something inferred. The purpose of the inference, however, is not to prove that iam is true. One indication of this is that Descartes’s argument does not terminate with the affirmation of his existence in (b); it proceeds until another conclusion is reached in its final step. Analysis of this conclusion reveals that Descartes’s concern is not to decide whether or not he exists, or to offer a proof of iam, but to establish that his existence is in a rather unusual sense certain or indubitable. To clarify the significance of his conclusion concerning his existence, and to illuminate the intent of his inquiry, I shall follow the dialectical development of his views through the four steps of his discussion.

The first ground for doubt with which Descartes confronts iam is the supposition, arrived at in the First Meditation, that he has neither senses nor a body. Interestingly enough, the confrontation is inconclusive; Descartes does not know what to make of the logical relation between iam and this supposition:

(a) But I have already denied that I had either senses or a body. Yet I hesitate, for what follows from that? Am I so dependent on body and senses that I cannot exist without them?

It is unclear to him what his supposition implies, if anything, as to his existence. He hesitates; he cannot decide whether the nonexistence of his senses and body constitutes a reasonable basis for doubting that he is “something.”

Descartes’s puzzlement is readily intelligible, for his conception of his own nature at this stage is vague to the point of vacuity. Questions about existence require, in general, some nonvacuous description of what it is whose existence is being questioned. Since Descartes thinks of himself only as a “something,” he is understandably unable to discern the logical relation between the proposition that he exists and the supposition that he has no body or senses. He cannot cope with the question of whether iam is undermined by this supposition, for coping with it requires a fuller understanding of his own nature than he is currently able to command.6

It is noteworthy, therefore, that in the next step of his discussion Descartes copes in quite a direct and decisive manner with a question which seems to be of an essentially similar kind. In (b), he recalls having been persuaded in the First

6 Some of the difficulties in comprehending Descartes’s discussion of iam, and his subsequent analysis of his nature, derive from the fact that his discussion must contribute as much to developing an understanding of “I” as to determining the acceptability of iam. Descartes cannot deal with the belief that he exists in isolation from the question of what he is. It is to be expected, then, that the views which he subsequently develops about his nature will be foreshadowed in the course of his examination of iam. The legitimacy of the way in which he handles this matter is a problem of very great interest. I shall make no attempt to deal with it here, however, even though I recognize that limiting the scope of my essay in this way may interfere with a thoroughly satisfactory elucidation of the passage (a)–(d).
DESCARTES’S DISCUSSION OF HIS EXISTENCE

Meditation that there are no real things at all, either of a physical or of a mental character. When he asks whether reaching this conclusion was tantamount to being persuaded of his own nonexistence, he answers with no hesitation whatever: “Certainly not. I doubtless did exist if I persuaded myself of something or if I merely thought of something.” Now this answer is the closest thing to cogito ergo sum in his entire discussion. Without altering its significance in any substantial way, it may in fact be rewritten as “I thought, therefore I existed,” which differs from the classical formula only in tense.

Curiously, Hintikka mistranslates the final statement in (b), rendering it in the present tense instead of in the past tense that both the Latin and French texts plainly require. Without wishing to speculate concerning the origins of Hintikka’s error, I may suggest that “I thought, therefore I existed” does not fit nearly so well as “I think, therefore I am” with the notion that Descartes’s affirmation of his existence is of performatory rather than simply of inferential character. Descartes’s use of the past tense makes it much more natural to understand him as concerned with an ordinary inference than with a self-verifying thought-act or performance. There is another matter which may be mentioned in passing. In supporting his interpretation, Hintikka places considerable emphasis on the claim that Descartes derives the belief in his existence from a specific thought. This claim is important to Hintikka, but it is quite mistaken. In (b), Descartes makes a point of saying that the belief that he existed can be derived from the mere fact that he was thinking of something — that is, of anything at all.8

Because of its resemblance to the cogito, there is a special interest in clarifying Descartes’s final statement in (b) and its role in his examination of the belief that he exists. We must begin by asking what accounts for his ability to grasp so straightforwardly the relation between his existence and the supposition recalled in (b), when he is unable to decide in (a) how a belief in his existence is related to the supposition which he considers there. The critical difference between the two steps must lie in the suppositions with which he confronts sum, but exactly what is the relevant difference between them?

III

The supposition which Descartes considers in (a) has to do with the nonexistence of various things, whereas in (b) he attends to the fact that he was persuaded or thought of something. Thus, there is a conspicuous difference in the content of the suppositions which figure in his first two steps. This difference, however, does not account for Descartes’s ability to cope readily in the second step with a matter beyond his grasp in the first. After all, why should it be easier for him to discern

8 Cf. esp. H-1, pp. 16–18. It is true that Descartes does refer to particular thoughts later in his discussion. I shall consider the significance of these references below.
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the logical relation between *sum* and a statement about his thinking (or mind) than between *sum* and a statement about his body?

To be sure, he decides later in the *Meditations* that mind is essential to him while body is logically irrelevant to his existence. This doctrine would be relevant to the problem at hand if Descartes drew a conclusion about his existence in (b) but maintained in (a) that no such conclusion is warranted; for that could be explained by the different logical relationships between himself and his mind on the one hand, and himself and his body on the other. In fact, however, he does not claim in (a) that his supposition does not entail *sum*. On the contrary, he is at a loss in (a) to understand the relation between the two beliefs.

It is not because he starts from body rather than from mind that Descartes cannot, in (a), see either that a conclusion about his existence is warranted or that it is not warranted. When he passes in (b) from "I persuaded myself of something" to "I existed," the nature of the transition is no different than if he had derived "I exist" from "I have a body"; the one transition is no more problematical than the other. In each case, the mere fact of predication suffices and the content of the predication plays no essential role. The transitions are straightforward inferences of the form "B(a) implies (Ex) (x = a)."9

Thus, the critical difference between (a) and (b) is formal rather than substantive. Descartes’s denial that he has a body or senses is not a predication, such as "I have the property of being bodiless and without senses." If it were, his hesitation would be unaccountable; for "I exist" follows as directly from this statement as "I existed" does from "I thought of something." His supposition in (a) is equivalent to "If there are bodies and I do exist, then no body is related to me in such a way as to be mine." In making this statement, he ascribes no property to himself and therefore in no way commits himself to an affirmation of his own existence.

At this stage of his inquiry, in any case, Descartes has not yet developed his doctrine concerning the logical connections between himself on the one hand and his mind and body on the other. He no more knows whether he can exist without a mind than whether he can exist without a body, and it would be inappropriate to invoke his metaphysical theory of the self to explain his hesitation in (a) or his lack of hesitation in (b). The only considerations upon which he relies for his conclusion in (b) are formal, and they have nothing particularly to do with minds or bodies.

This is confirmed in his reply to a remark by Gassendi. Gassendi attempts to denigrate the special interest of the *ogito* by claiming that Descartes might just as well have inferred his existence from some activity other than thinking, "since our natural light informs us that whatever acts also exists."10 Although he rejects this suggestion, Descartes accepts the logical point. He insists that there is a vital

9 Cf. *H*-1, p. 6.
10 HR, II, §37.
Descartes’s discussion of his existence

difference between the cogito and such an inference as “I walk, hence I exist”; but he
locates this difference in the premises of the two inferences rather than in their
logical structures, which he conceives to be the same. The peculiarity of the cogito,
he maintains, lies in the fact that “there is none of my activities of which I am
wholly certain (in the sense of having metaphysical certitude, which alone is
involved here) save thinking alone.” Deriving sum from cogito is superior to
deriving it from ambulo, but only because ambulo does not enjoy the metaphysical
certainty which characterizes cogito.

Two further pieces of evidence bearing on the character of the derivation in (b)
may be mentioned briefly. Descartes is explicitly concerned with inference in (a),
where he asks what “follows” from the supposition he considers there. It is most
plausible to read (b) as continuing the pattern of inquiry in (a) and, accordingly, to
understand the second step as similarly concerned with what follows from the
supposition with which it begins. Moreover, near the end of the Second Medita-
tion, Descartes says: “it follows . . . clearly that I am or that I myself exist from the
fact that I see [this piece of wax].” This too suggests that he regards his existence as
something which is inferred.

Now in his Reply to the Second Set of Objections, Descartes asserts:

He who says, “I think, hence I am or exist,” does not deduce existence from thought by a
syllogism but, by a simple act of mental vision, recognises it as if it were a thing that is
known per se. This is evident from the fact that if it were syllogistically deduced, the major
premise, that everything that thinks it, or exists, would have to be known previously; but yet
that has rather been learned from the experience of the individual – that unless he exists he
cannot think. For our mind is so constituted by nature that general propositions are formed
out of the knowledge of particulars.

Hintikka takes this passage as evidence that Descartes does not regard sum as
inferred, but it is a mistake to do so. In the passage, Descartes denies that the cogito
involves a syllogism, but not that it involves inference altogether. He despised the
syllogism, which he thought to be worthless in inquiry, but he did not have similar
countervail for inference in general. Thus, the term “inference” can surely not be
substituted for “syllogism” in the passage’s first sentence. Nor is Hintikka’s sub-
stitution justified when he reads that sentence as expressing a claim by Descartes
that in the cogito “he does not logically (syllogistically) deduce sum from cogito.”

Descartes is interested only in maintaining that the cogito is not an enthymeme
with a suppressed major premise. He does not deny that it is a logical inference of the
immediate variety. Indeed, the specificity of his concern with the syllogistic
model even suggests that he does have immediate inference in mind.

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11 Ibid., p. 207.
12 It seems to me, nonetheless, that Descartes’s reply to Gassendi misrepresents the uniqueness of the
cogito. Cf. my discussion of the point in Sec. IX below.
13 HR, II, 38.
14 HR, p. 4.
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It is true, as Hintikka points out, that Descartes says that existence, rather than the cogito as a whole, is recognized "by a simple act of mental vision... as if it were a thing that is known per se." But Hintikka is wrong to regard this as "very good evidence" that Descartes finds sum self-evident.15 Hintikka wishes to construe Descartes's simple act of mental vision as one by which the self-evidence of sum is intuitively grasped. But then why does Descartes say that he recognizes existence only as if it were a thing known per se? If sum were intuited as self-evident, it would be known per se and not just as if. On the other hand, Descartes's qualified statement is not incompatible with the view that sum is inferred and that the inference involved is immediate and so unproblematical that it is almost as if sum were known per se. The act of mental vision might then be one by which sum is inferred from cogito. What Descartes says here, however, seems too vague to be relied upon as very good evidence for anything.

Hintikka's "gravest objection" against the view that Descartes infers sum is that using an inference of the form "B(a)" implies (Ex) (x = a)" begs the question:

We in fact decided that the sentence "I exist" is true when we decided that the sentence "I think" is of the form "B(a)." That we were then able to infer "(Ex) (x = a)" from "B(a)" is undoubtedly true, but completely beside the point.16

In my opinion, Hintikka is right about this: Descartes's inference does presuppose sum. I disagree, however, with Hintikka's claim that this is a good reason for denying that Descartes infers sum. First of all, there is a good deal of textual evidence that Descartes supposes himself to be inferring sum, and no good textual evidence that he does not.17 At the worst, then, it would be necessary to concede that Descartes is guilty of a blunder. But second, as I will explain below, Descartes is not trying to prove that sum is true. To charge that his inference is a petio principii misses the point, therefore, since the question with which he is concerned (which is not the question of sum's truth) is not begged in it.

IV

Although the premise from which Descartes derives his existence in (b) is "I thought of something," he acknowledges in his exchange with Gassendi that any other premise of the form "B(a)" yields a similar conclusion. The special interest of

15 H-1, p. 5;
16 H-1, p. 8;
17 Since he maintains that Descartes was no more than dimly aware of the performatory character of his assertion, it is easy for Hintikka to cope with statements in which Descartes indicates plainly that he regards sum as inferred. He needs only to suggest that these statements come from the dark side of Descartes's imperfect and confused understanding of his own insight. This would be fair enough, if there were good reason to suppose that there is in fact another side. But in citing passages to support his claim that performatoriness plays a role in Descartes's assertion of sum, Hintikka misreads the text. Additional evidence to support this claim will be presented below.