Descartes' *Cogito*
Saved from the Great Shipwreck

Perhaps the most famous proposition in the history of philosophy is Descartes' *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am." Husain Sarkar claims in this provocative new interpretation of Descartes that the ancient tradition of reading the *cogito* as an argument is mistaken. It should, he says, be read as an intuition. Through this new interpretative lens, the author reconsiders key Cartesian topics: the ideal inquirer; the role of clear and distinct ideas; the relation of these to the will; memory; the nature of intuition and deduction; the nature, content, and elusiveness of 'I'; and the tenability of the doctrine of the creation of eternal truths. Finally, the book demonstrates how Descartes' attempt to prove the existence of God is foiled by a new Cartesian Circle.

Husain Sarkar is Professor of Philosophy at Louisiana State University.

Descartes' *Cogito*

Saved from the Great Shipwreck

HUSAIN SARKAR
Louisiana State University

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http: // www.cambridge.org

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/13.5 pt. *System* LaTeX 2ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Sarkar, Husain, 1942–
Descartes' *cogito* : saved from the great shipwreck / Husain Sarkar.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and indexes.
ISBN 0-521-82166-5
1. Descartes, René, 1596–1650. 1. Title.
B1873 .S37 2003
194–dc21 2002073601

ISBN 0 521 82166 5 hardback

For

Ashifa

part ballerina, part lover of children, my daughter

وَجَادِلْهُم بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

Reason with them in the most courteous manner.

(The Koran, Chapter 16, "The Bee," verse 125)

What are you saying? You *know*? Is this certain and beyond all doubt? Is this the sole surviving timber from the great shipwreck that is to be hung up as an offering in the temple of truth?

Pierre Bourdin, "Seventh Set of Objections," in *The Philosophical Writings of Rene Descartes*, Volume 2, 317.

Contents

Preface

Rene Descartes offered an ultimate truth, famously known as the *cogito*. But there have been virtually no takers. Some have thought that it was merely an analytic statement, a statement empty of content; some have thought that he should have begun with a less complex, a less unwarranted statement (but then he could not have derived the *cogito* from it); some have averred that it was an argument that was badly in need of repair (and when repaired, one that could not possibly do what Descartes had wanted it to do); and a distinguished philosopher once argued that the truth of the *cogito*, if that is what it is, is at best odd, "degenerate." This has been the litany for 350 years.

Here is Descartes in *Discourse on the Method*:

> But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth, "*I am thinking, therefore I exist*" was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Then, in his "Replies to the Second Set of Objections":

> When we observe that we are thinking beings, this is a sort of primary notion, which is not the conclusion of any syllogism; and, moreover, when somebody says: I am thinking, therefore I am or exist, he is not using a syllogism to deduce his existence from his thought, but recognizing this as something self-evident, in a simple mental intuition.

In effect, Descartes is saying both that the *cogito* is an argument (reading the 'therefore' as a conclusion indicator) and that it is not. There is simply no interpretation of Descartes that will not fail to explain at least *some* of the text. One might as well try to square a circle.

Consequently, in this book I have attempted to do the next best thing, to provide an interpretation that will save as much as possible of what is profound and interesting in Descartes. There are two sides to the *cogito* debate: what it is and what it is not. There are novel and fairly conclusive reasons why the *cogito* cannot be construed as an argument. I offer these and thereby show what the *cogito* is not. A great deal of what Descartes has said militates against construing the *cogito* as an argument. It was with some of those reasons that this book was begun.

But if the *cogito* is not an argument, what then is it? It is an experiment. When that experiment is conducted, the mind intuits – learns through an insight – the truth that the *cogito* expresses. The experiment will teach an individual thinker by example what he cannot learn by relying on someone else's experiment, or on that of a collection of individuals, no matter how well conducted the experiment and precise the reporting. However, it is an experiment that can be performed only after the mind has been cleansed and prepared. Now, these two claims are, of course, independent. Whether the view that the *cogito* is an experiment, to be performed by an individual thinker, is true has no implication for whether the *cogito* is an argument. In fact, I think that the negative claim offered here, namely, that the *cogito* is not an argument, is decisive. But that is not so with the positive thesis as to what the *cogito* is.

The investigation into the *cogito*, this first principle, led me to uncover the basic structure of Descartes' method. I wanted to focus not on the details but on the essence of his method. For I was certain that the *cogito* and the method were too intimately linked to be understood one without the other. At any rate, getting the method right was a prerequisite to being right about the *cogito*. The focus on method and *cogito* inevitably led to other issues in Descartes, such as logic and skepticism, will and memory, discovery and explanation, reason and experience, eternal truths and the general rule. I have explored none of these as fully as I might have. I have had a more limited aim: In each instance, the scope of the inquiry was sharply restricted by what it had to contribute to the *cogito* and the method. Thus, I have tried to

bring in a sequence of distinct issues in Descartes and to balance and counterbalance them. The result, I trust, is a fresh perspective.

Montaigne wrote an essay entitled, "That Our Happiness Must Not Be Judged until After Our Death." Borrowing the same theme from Ovid, I propose a principle of reconstruction and call it the Sulmo principle, namely, that a philosopher's system must not be reconstructed and judged until after his death. For what he once assumed, he may later radically question (as did Descartes on the certainty of mathematics); what he once sketched, he may in time expand in great detail (as did Descartes on the unity of the sciences); what he once wrote, he may subsequently abrogate (as did Descartes, virtually, on the immortality of the soul); what he once wrote, he may remain silent about for the rest of his life (as did Descartes on the taxonomy of problems). Only after his death can one say that, if he had tied his views together at the end into a single consistent system, he would have done so in this way or that; only then can one judge the worth of the system. When attempting to reconstruct, there are enough avenues to explore, in harmony with the philosopher's general view. This allows for much guesswork. The whole, and only the whole, reconstructed at the end, should be judged for historical plausibility and philosophical soundness. At any rate, it is the principle of Sulmo that I have used in this book.

The ideal author of a book on Descartes would be someone who has mastered all of the French and Latin texts of Descartes as they currently exist in Charles Adams and Paul Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, and in F. Alquié, *Oeuvres philosophiques de Descartes*. He would be familiar with all of the responses of Descartes' contemporaries, and with the commentaries from the seventeenth century, such as Tepelli's *Historia Philosophiae Cartesiane*; with eighteenth-century works, such as Rousseau's *The Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Priest*; and with items from the nineteenth century, such as Duboux's *La Physique de Descartes*, down to the commentaries of the twentieth century. Not only would he have kept track of all these items, their moorings and interconnections, and how each of them measures up to the original, he would also be familiar with all of the recent work in metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, history of physics, and mathematics and logic, so that he could determine how far ahead of Descartes we are in a given field, or how far behind. Then, and only

then, would he write a book on Descartes. I fall miserably short of that ideal.

This book is not in the same line as the works that sweep over a vast range of the philosophy of Descartes, such as those of Baker and Curley; Gaukroger, Kenny, and Kemp Smith; Wilson and Williams. It is a commentary on Descartes' *Meditations*, which he called "my little book dealing with First Philosophy." It is, moreover, a commentary on only the first few pages. Such, I think, is the power of his views. I have strenuously aimed to be fair to the history of philosophy, and struggled not to be silly in any anachronistic way: In short, I have tried to argue with Descartes as if I were his contemporary, not he mine. This, in part, explains the frequent citation of page and passage from Descartes. My ultimate aim has been to reconstruct Descartes' ideas in a manner that demands that we see Descartes' achievement for what it is: He achieved in his field what Archimedes had only dreamed about in his.

Baton Rouge, Louisiana
February 1, 2002

Acknowledgments

In the fall of 1989 I went to England with the oldest version of this book, commenced in November or December of the year before, and returned in the spring of the following year with lots of notes and marginalia for the making of a better one. The result of subsequent attempts at doing just that is here. For that result, and the trip across the Atlantic and back, I am grateful to two institutions: Louisiana State University, for granting me sabbatical and other leave, and the University of Cambridge, for electing me a Visiting Scholar for 1989–90. But nearly as much is owed to the commons flanking Victoria Avenue, with a narrow part of the River Cam providing the margin, where I spent long hours, day and night, and did my best thinking, such as it was, under the rarely clear English sky. The second version was completed at the end of September 1992.

Then, for several years, I turned to work on other things (while intermittently thinking about and teaching Descartes). Nine years later, in February 1998, I went to the University of Oxford as a Faculty Visitor for the Hilary Term. I owe a debt not only to the University of Oxford but also, once again, to Louisiana State University for making this possible by granting me sabbatical leave. This time I went with a somewhat better version of the book, in hopes that good things might come from my visit. They did. Anthony Kenny provided written comments; he was encouraging in several details, found the second version better than the skimpy first, but remained steadfast in his belief that the *cogito* is an argument. I mulled a long time over his detailed written comments.

I then rewrote the relevant material to show that his view is confronted by some very serious difficulties. Of my readers, he was the only one to clearly perceive that, among other things, I was trying to show that a continuum can be seen, or forged, between the early and later work of Descartes; he is not entirely convinced by it, although he was kind enough to say that I have made a serious case for it.

Gordon Baker not only proved to be a very kind host but also, through many long conversations on the manuscript, led me happily to believe that perhaps there is something to the central thesis of this book; nevertheless, I reconsidered several of my arguments in light of his remarks and upon reading his own book on Descartes (which he wrote with Katherine J. Morris). In the final analysis, I have always relied on his written, rather than his spoken, word. (Oxford's best gift to me, however, was the discovery of the novels of Jim Crace.)

I am grateful to Katholieke Universiteit Leuven for the invitation to participate in their Thursday Lecture series. In October 1998 I read a paper there entitled "In Defense of Skepticism," an early draft of what now sits as sections II–IV of Chapter 4. I started work on the penultimate version in May 1999, furiously working for about five months, doing minor editing work for several weeks thereafter, and finishing in January 2000. The final version was started in late July 2001 and ended in January 2002.

I am grateful to Richard A. Watson for his generous encouragement. Alas, even what he approved I had to remove for lack of space. Although he agreed substantially with the core thesis, John Compton's trenchant and detailed written criticisms – especially on the self and self-identity – left little doubt about what he thought of Descartes' positive thesis. Had I even fragmentary knowledge of the work of Edumnd Husserl, I know he would have found my responses better informed and my subsidiary theses less objectionable.

Jeffrey Tlumak commented in the margins of the manuscript, virtually on every third page. I refrained from answering every one of his objections, or the book would have been twice as long. I have answered, at least to my own satisfaction, several of his objections; several others have remained unanswered simply because I did not know how to accomplish that within the confines of the allotted space. The force of his other objections I have duly acknowledged. I owe him additional

gratitude because he provided me with his painstaking comments at a time when he was passing through an incredible hardship.

Of the anonymous referees for Cambridge University Press, I single out three: for their old-fashioned, easily discernible, Kantian goodwill; and for resonating with the central thesis of this book and saving it from a thousand infelicities, thus making it a better book, both in form and substance – I thank them for that favor, too. Whatever appeal this book may possess by way of artwork and diagrams is owed entirely to my son, Casim Ali. I am grateful as well to Russell Hahn for his superb copyediting. Without the persistence – I almost said protection – of Terence Moore, the editor, this book would have seen the light of day, but under a very different seal.

Last and greatest is my debt to Catherine Wilson. She has been a provider of innumerable corrections, a host of tough philosophical questions, and acute analysis; she has also been a dispenser of encouragement. No doubt this manuscript is far less objectionable than it would have been otherwise, had she not given it her time and expertise. Indeed, the title of the book stands a bit modified, thanks to her.

For my ending I will adapt one of Machiavelli's beginnings and address my benefactors collectively thus: "With this I send you a gift. I have endeavored to embody in it all that long experience and assiduous research have taught me. But you may well complain of my lack of talent when my arguments are poor, and of the fallacies of my judgment on account of the errors into which I have doubtless fallen many times. This being so, however, I know you have a right to complain that I should have written without giving you cause to be satisfied, which, if it bears no proportion to the extent of the obligations that I owe you, is nevertheless the best I am able to offer you."

Abbreviations

AN	Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*. Translated and edited by Jill Vance Buroker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
AT	Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, editors, *Oeuvres de Descartes*. Volumes 1–12, revised edition. Paris: Vrin/CNRS, 1964–76.
C	Edwin M. Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978.
CSM	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volumes I and II. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
CSMK	*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume III. *The Correspondence*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
G	Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
K	Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy*. New York: Random House, 1968.
M	Michael de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*. Translated and edited by M. A. Screech. New York: Penguin, 1987.
R	Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, *Descartes: His Life and Thought*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999.
V	Jack Rochford Vrooman, *Rene Descartes: A Biography*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970.
W	Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*. New York: Penguin, 1978.

WC	Bernard Williams, "The Certainty of the *Cogito*." In Willis Doney, editor, *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*. London: Macmillan, 1968, pp. 88–107.
WM	Margaret D. Wilson, *Descartes*. New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.

Descartes' *Cogito*
Saved from the Great Shipwreck