

Time and Self

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René Descartes, at the beginning of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, finds reasons to doubt every single proposition he ever believed to be true. But already in the second Meditation he writes: “[...] 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.” (AT VII, 25)¹ There is an element of time in this. According to Descartes, it is only while one thinks that one exists with certainty. This point seems to be confirmed by the following notoriously difficult passage: “I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist.” (AT VII, 27)

I do not want to engage in Descartes exegesis here. Especially I refrain from discussing the interesting question whether it is at all possible to make sense of the passage just quoted without assuming that there are different entities the narrator of the *Meditations* refers to when he appears to talk of himself. What I like to draw your attention to is that the Cartesian thinker—as I call the narrator of the *Meditations*—in becoming aware of the certainty of his existence has to do three things—or rather, the following three things have to be true of him:

1. He thinks that he exists.
2. He thereby knows that he thinks that he exists.
3. He knows (arguably he remembers) that whoever thinks that he himself exists is, while doing so, necessarily right in thinking so.

It is well-known that Descartes had some difficulties in saying just how exactly he gained his first certainty—namely the knowledge of his existence.

1 References to Descartes are to the edition by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, *Œuvres de Descartes*, Paris 1897–1913, abbreviated “AT”, followed by number of volume and page. English translations are cited from J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch (eds.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. II, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York 1984.

For neither did he want this knowledge to be the conclusion of a syllogistic argument nor did he want it to be looked at merely as a piece of intuitive knowledge, which did not presuppose *any* other knowledge or engagement in a certain line of thought. Again: Here I will not indulge in a discussion of these difficulties and the solution Descartes came up with. Instead, I shall focus on a rather un-Cartesian and to some extent anachronistic question: Would we really admit that somebody who had no knowledge of himself except for that of his own existence knows that he exists?

Shortly after the so-called *cogito* argument by which the existence of the Cartesian thinker is established Descartes has the thinker say: “[...] I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? [...] I know that I exist; the question is, what is this ‘I’ that I know?” (AT VII, 27) This passage emphasizes the suggestion that in the *Meditations* the very first thing the thinker gets to know is that he exists. Descartes obviously claims that he can know this, without or before knowing anything else about himself. But is it really possible to know or even to think that oneself (and not just anybody) exists if one knows nothing about oneself but the fact that at this very moment one is engaged in thinking that oneself exists? What kind of knowledge is it that is gained here? And what or who is this knowledge about?

It has been pointed out that the I or the self of the *cogito* is a somewhat blood- and colourless thing—as it is indistinguishable from any other thing which thinks—and that, maybe, Descartes should have said, not that he established knowledge of his own existence, but of the existence of some thinking thing (a suggestion which reminds one of Lichtenberg’s suggestion quoted by Wittgenstein that it might be better to say “it thinks” rather than “I think”).² Now, in my opinion Descartes could happily have agreed to this up to a certain point. But be this as it may, by the time the *cogito* argument is advanced in the *Meditations* the Cartesian thinker cannot yet rely on his memory. Maybe it is in consequence of this that Descartes felt the need of putting into doubt the certainty even of his own existence long after the *cogito* argument was given in the second meditation, namely, at the beginning of the third meditation. There he writes: “And whenever my pre-conceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but

2 Moore, G. E., “Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33”, *Mind* 1954, 1955, reprinted in J. Klagge and A. Nordmann (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Philosophical Occasions 1912–1951*, pp. 100–101: “Instead of ‘I think’ we ought to say ‘It thinks’ (‘it’ being used, as [Wittgenstein] said, as ‘Es’ is used in ‘Es blitzet’).”

admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye." (AT VII, 36) Descartes goes on to give as examples of things that can be doubted on such grounds in spite of their clearness and distinctness the facts that two and three added together are five and that he exists while thinking that he exists. He then proceeds to call this doubt metaphysical and only a weak one. "And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this belief is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one." (AT VII, 36)

There is an ongoing argument whether in this passage Descartes really voices a doubt concerning his existence or not—if only a weak and metaphysical one. And even if one thinks he does, as I do, and even if one assumes that this has something to do with the fact that before he has proved the existence of a benevolent God he cannot fully rely on his intellectual capacities, it is far from clear how exactly the reliability of memory affects the *cogito* argument. The recollection of perceiving something clearly and distinctly, as for example the truth of propositions like "Whoever thinks he exists, at the same time does exist" or "Thinking presupposes existence", is not the only thing which can be called in question. (This, by the way, is one of the problems Descartes wishes to address when he insists that the *cogito* argument should not be taken to be a syllogism.) It is also the recollection of engaging in certain cognitive activities which is at stake—activities like doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining and sensing things. It is by these activities that the thinking substance, or the self, or the I of the *cogito*, is characterized in the *Meditations* just between the *cogito* argument, where the thinker is not yet assumed to know something about himself, and the passage at the beginning of the third meditation where Descartes voices his metaphysical doubt which arguably applies to his own existence as well as to mathematical propositions. The thinking substance, or the self, is characterized by the Cartesian thinker the way it is—namely as something which doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, is unwilling, imagines and has sensations—because these are activities he could be sure to have been engaged in even if he did not have a body, or so Descartes thinks. What is of interest to us here is the following: The thinker did all these things, he was aware of doing them, and now he recollects having done them.

The reference to himself which is involved in being aware of doing something and in remembering that he did something is of a special kind. He so

to speak refers to himself as himself. If somebody refers to himself as himself, not only does he refer to himself, he also knows that he refers to himself. If somebody perceives himself as himself, he not only perceives himself, but also knows that it is himself that he perceives. Not only does he, for instance, see his reflection in the mirror but also recognizes it to be his reflection instead of mistaking it for somebody else's. It has become common to explain this special sort of self-reference which occurs in thoughts, beliefs, hopes etc. which one has about oneself in terms of the immunity to error through misidentification. What can allegedly not be misidentified here is the entity something is being attributed to. For reasons I cannot discuss here I take this to be either false or unhelpful.³ When I speak of referring to oneself as oneself I mean that one does so knowingly and not just by chance. In discussions about the self it is this special sort of referring to it that we are particularly interested in. For it might seem to us that this faculty—the faculty of consciously referring to oneself—is what self-consciousness manifests itself in. And self-consciousness in turn indicates that there is a self involved in this. Only an individual which can be called a self can knowingly refer to itself as itself. Now, the ability to refer to oneself as oneself may be a sufficient condition for something to count as a self. Whether it also is a necessary condition remains to be seen.

Self-consciousness in the sense we are interested in here may manifest itself not only in cases of referring to oneself as oneself. The idea, though, is that everything which self-consciousness manifests itself in to some degree presupposes or implies the ability of an individual to refer to herself knowingly. But self-consciousness seems to manifest itself in various rather complex ways. When we say that as human beings we possess self-consciousness we are claiming all sorts of things. We claim that we know certain things about ourselves, that we know some of our physiological as well as some of our psychological properties. We claim that we are aware of things that are happening to us, to our body as well as to our mind. We claim that we know some of the things that have happened to us in the past. We often know where we have been, whom we met and what we did. In conceiving of ourselves as self-conscious beings we take it that we have needs, desires and goals that we try to achieve, and that we are capable of considering different ways of acting to achieve them, that we make plans for the future etc.

3 See my article "Ich-Gedanken", in U. Haas-Spohn (Hg.), *Intentionalität zwischen Subjektivität und Selbstbezug*, Mentis, Paderborn 2003, pp. 369–96, where I discuss this sort of question at some length.

etc. We also assume that we can assess ourselves in moral terms, that we can ask ourselves whether we have become the kind of person we wanted to be or should be. We can also ask ourselves whether we are true to ourselves, whether we act in a way that accords with who we are. When we say that we are self-conscious beings we claim to be capable of doing all these things and many more. Every attempt to find something which is common to the various abilities we possess, to all the different sorts of things we do and know and which are in some way or other connected to the fact that we are self-conscious beings, involves a risk in that it tempts one to say something false or something trivial.

“Everything in which self-consciousness manifests itself seems to presuppose the ability to refer to oneself as oneself or seems to involve having thoughts about oneself as oneself.” Even if claims like this one may be justified, they are risky because they seem to tell us more than they actually do. They delude us into believing that we discovered something about self-consciousness that we did not know when we simply enumerated things we believe a self-conscious being to be capable of. The illusion is fuelled by saying that self-consciousness *manifests* itself in different ways. For the things we take self-consciousness to manifest itself in are the same things of which we assume that they presuppose self-consciousness; and at that point we have no theory yet of self-consciousness or the self. Maybe to possess self-consciousness just is to possess and exercise a number of abilities which cannot be shown to have yet another common denominator.

Do all these considerations about self-reference give us a clue as to how to characterize the self? So far everything which can knowingly refer to itself seems to be a self. This brings us back to a question asked before. Is it possible to refer to oneself knowingly, or to refer to oneself as oneself, if as yet one knows nothing about oneself? To some extent Descartes wants us to believe just this. In the *cogito* argument the Cartesian thinker refers to himself when he thinks that he exists. And at this point the only thing he seems to know about himself is that he is the one who is entertaining that very thought. It is him that he thereby knows to exist, or so Descartes claims. It is all too easy to manoeuvre oneself into a kind of well-known circle here. It seems not to be possible to refer to oneself as oneself without knowing something about oneself, and at the same time it seems not to be possible to know something about oneself unless one is capable of referring to oneself as oneself. This consideration has been used to construct a so-called paradox of self-consciousness. The alleged paradox has been said to show that

self-consciousness is impossible to achieve or that we are unable to explain self-consciousness. Luckily there is no paradox here and the interdependence of self-knowledge and self-reference does not amount to more than that: it is an interdependence which shows, if it shows anything, that you cannot have one without the other, and that should not really come as a surprise.

There is another kind of alleged circle here which may be of slightly greater importance. By thinking “I exist” the Cartesian thinker refers to himself as himself: to himself as the one who is having this thought. But how, one might ask, is it possible that he can ever capture the content of the thought “I exist” if this thought is about himself as the one who is having this thought? In truth this is not a circle but an infinite regress we are dealing with. But it is a regress which gets started only if one construes thinking as having a mental representation, and thinking about oneself as involving having a representation of this representation. I do not wish to discuss the possibilities of refining this crude version of mental representationalism here. For it seems obvious to me that the only move that will ultimately do the trick and help us to get out of the sort of trouble which is generated by concentrating on the formal aspects of self-reference alone is to let the self enter the stage. Until now the self figuring in our considerations is nothing more than that which is referred to by a being who knowingly refers to himself. We will have to enrich this notion in some way. This is just what Descartes does when he makes his thinker investigate the nature of the self whose existence was established by the *cogito* argument. And what the thinker falls back on is his memory. He recollects having doubted certain things, recognized other ones, affirmed, denied, willed, imagined and sensed different things. He recollects having been in various conscious states, states which differed in content and kind.

Imagine an individual who does not have different conscious states, whose only conscious state, if it can be said to have one, never alters. It is hard to see how such a being could refer to itself. It seems to me that the phenomenological fact of having or experiencing a so-called stream of consciousness is a necessary condition for something to count as a self. Somebody who would have but one unchanging sensation would not qualify as a sensing being, just as somebody who thought but one and the same thought would not count as thinking at all. I am not concerned here with the relation between conscious states and their bearer or between the stream of consciousness and whatever has or experiences it or maybe just is that stream. What

I am driving at is that there has to be some change involved for there to be something we can refer to as ourselves. If somebody refers to himself, then what enables him to do so is, besides many other things, that he is in a certain conscious state, recollects that he has had various other conscious states in the past and expects to have certain conscious states in the future (or expects to have none). Our own conscious states or experiences or whatever you want to call them present themselves as being past, present or yet to come. Also they seem to be ordered throughout by the relations before, simultaneous and after. For we think that some of our experiences lie further in the past than others and expect to have some in a nearer future than others. I am not concerned with the individuation of conscious states. Instead of talking about different conscious states, you may talk of one changing experience we undergo. And in case you find it inappropriate to talk about any such thing as a stream of consciousness or different conscious states or experiences, which in certain philosophical moods I do, you can make the point without all these paraphernalia. If one refers to oneself, one refers to that individual who did the things he did, met the people he met, recollects doing what he recollects having done, experiences now what he experiences now, has the expectations and plans he has and is going to do what he is going to do. Only if one has memories of things one did in the past, and only if one is presently aware of things and expects to do things in the future, can one refer to oneself, and only then is there something one would be able to count as a self. Imagine someone who suffers a serious brain damage and is unable to remember anything: every moment everything is new to him and is just the way it is. Obviously there would be nothing for that person to refer to as herself. For this person could never notice any change she undergoes.

To talk about our changing conscious states rather than about the things we perceive or the things we do, remember doing and expect to do may prevent us from presupposing more than we have to if we want to tackle questions of self-consciousness or the ability to refer to oneself as oneself. On the other hand, it may also be true that this limitation just results in a funny way of speaking which if it is to make any sense has to be translatable into ordinary language. And any such translation would show that we presupposed everything all along—presupposed a physical world as well as people interacting and sharing a language. But as I am not sure whether these things bear on the question I am concerned with I shall just go on pretending that it is a good idea to talk of conscious states.

Arguably one has to remember, presently experience and expect a few things involving oneself to be able to refer to oneself at all or, in other words, for there to be a self at all. This in turn seems to me to presuppose changes in one's conscious states. And change of course presupposes the passage of time. Nothing can change unless time passes. So what I want to defend comes down to the thesis that there can be no self without change, no change without the passing of time, and therefore no self without the passing of time. I take it for granted that our conscious states present themselves as being past, present and future and as occurring before, simultaneously with and after each other. I thereby do not want to assume more than that we have the impression that our conscious states are ordered in what has been called an A- and a B-Series by McTaggart.⁴ I hope to have made it plausible that to have this impression at least is a necessary condition for knowing enough to be able to refer to oneself as oneself, or for there to be a self. But now we might ask whether our impression agrees with reality. Do our conscious states really change? Do they occur while time is passing? Did we have some of them in the past, are some of them present and others yet to come? If we do not want to prejudge matters we are not to assume that our conscious states or their occurrences are events in a sense in which they or their occurrence presuppose the passing of time. For only then can we ask whether time has to pass for there to be self-conscious beings. Is it possible that there is no time when it seems to us that time passes and that our conscious life undergoes various changes? Could time just be a formal feature of our conscious experience while reality is not temporally structured?

I admit that I find it rather hard to make sense of any of these questions. But following McTaggart one could ask whether there really is any change in our conscious life or whether our conscious states really are past, present and yet to occur. For this to be the case McTaggart would regard it as insufficient that our conscious states form a B-series, i. e. are ordered in the sense that they occur before, after or simultaneously with other ones. For according to McTaggart, there would be no change unless these states would form an A-series too. That is, they would have to be ordered in the sense of being past, present or future states. When McTaggart introduces his A- and B-series he does not talk of states or events but of positions in time which are to form the respective series. And he speaks of events as being the contents of the positions in time. The B-series by itself does not constitute time

4 McTaggart, J. E., "The Unreality of Time", *Mind* 18 (1908), pp. 457–84.

because it does not allow for change, or so McTaggart believes. Not only does change imply time, but according to him time implies change. There can be no passing of time without there being change. The entities that in McTaggart's view undergo changes are events. But according to him nothing ever changes if there is a B-series only. For every single event would remain what it is, forever occupying the very same position within the B-series. Now one may be tempted to say that every event is or involves change in the sense that if an event occurs something happens which in turn means that things change. This amounts to the following claim, which is sometimes put forward against McTaggart, that he overlooks the possibility that not only events but things too may change. But even if one grants that every event which takes place involves a change in things, this would according to McTaggart presumably not be a change which takes place while time passes or within time. For it would not be a change of positions in the B-Series. There would not be a transition from one position to another. Alternatively one could claim that the contents of the ordered points are to be taken as events, if these points turn out to be interpretable as points in time. If they are not, we will have to put up with the result that there are no events.

Maybe it would be more suitable anyway to characterize the events which are the contents of the positions so ordered as to form the B-series as sets of occurrent properties of things. According to McTaggart, there could be change only if we take the positions in time to form not only a B-series but to have the A-properties of being past, present, or future too. As time passes and things change, the points in the B-series would change their respective A-properties. They would change from lying in the future to being present to being past. As is well known, McTaggart believes this to lead to a contradiction, and he concludes that A-properties cannot occur in reality. This leaves us with the B-series which without the A-properties cannot be interpreted as a time-series at all, which means that time is unreal.

Here I do not wish to discuss McTaggart's proof for the unreality of time. What I am interested in is the question whether our conscious states could form something more or less like a B-series without their really being past, present or future, in such a way that it would merely *seem* to us that they were past, present or yet to come. Let us assume that there is no passage of time and that this means the following: There are positions ordered as in McTaggart's B-series—ordered according to their being before, after or simultaneously with each other. One may speak of the contents of these positions as events, where events are characterized as sets of properties

possessed by things. Presumably, if we take all simultaneous positions together we get a state of the world or universe. So we are dealing with an ordered series of discrete states of the world. One could think of these discrete states of the world the way some occasionalists did, who thought that God created the world anew in every single moment. The difference would be that one would take all the different states of the world as being in existence, that is, as not disappearing. They are all there, the whole series, ordered by the relations of being before or after. As long as we do not move along this series of states we have no change and no time-structure. If we do move along this series of states, we thereby single out one of these states as the present one and qualify others as past and others again as future states. This of course would mean to attribute A-properties to the discrete states. I know that this is a highly controversial point, but, for the sake of argument, I would like to grant McTaggart that a B-series alone does not exhibit a time-structure. If we interpret “before” and “after” as “being before” and “being after in time” we can only do so by means of concepts which are concepts of A-properties.

Now, how about our self-conscious states? If, what I have claimed earlier is right, then in order to describe an individual as a self-conscious being you would have to look at more than just one single state of the world. Such an individual would have to be capable of referring to him- or herself. In order for this to make sense the individual would have to recollect having had other conscious states. For this to be the case the individual would have to exist in other states in the series as well—states where he had different properties. What could it mean for something to occur at different positions in a B-series or to exist in more than one of the discrete states of the universe? It would have to satisfy certain criteria of individuation. Maybe we could think up a list of properties, determine a degree of similarity between two items at different positions, or give some functional description which had to be fulfilled. Let us assume that for each individual thing there are criteria that make it possible to identify things across different states of the world. This would make it possible to say that one and the same teapot exists at different B-series positions. And maybe the temporal structure of our experience of the teapot is just this: a structure of our experience—a formal feature of our conceiving things which does not correspond to anything in reality—or so somebody might claim. Again, I am not sure whether we can actually understand such a claim. But assuming we can, it would give us the following result: as far as the existence of teapots goes, time may well be an illusion.

But things are different with individuals that are conscious of themselves. For to recollect having once been in a different conscious state, one not only has to remember something about oneself but one also has to remember something about oneself as oneself. One has to refer to oneself knowingly. Imagine that I remember something about somebody without knowing that it is me the memory is about. I remember somebody in the room making an irritating noise by tapping her shoes against the chair. I never realize that it was myself who did this. In a sense I could be said to remember something about myself without knowing that it is myself I remember something about. This is exactly the sense of reference to oneself we want to exclude here. This is the sense in which you can remember something about a teapot. But the sense that is required for self-consciousness is remembering something about oneself as oneself, or as I also call it, knowingly remembering something about oneself. Sydney Shoemaker tried to characterize this by saying that this sort of self-reference is immune to error through misidentification.⁵ In referring to oneself the way one does in self-conscious states one cannot be wrong about whom one is referring to. This is sometimes more adequately explained by saying that the special way in which a self-conscious being can refer to him- or herself is identification-free—meaning that one does not have to identify oneself as the one one refers to when having thoughts, beliefs, memories etc. about oneself.

How does this bear on the possibility of having or being a self when there is no passage of time? To be a self-conscious individual one must be able to refer to oneself knowingly. And one must have some memories about oneself as oneself. One must at least recollect having had different conscious states. For without changes in one's conscious states one would not qualify as a conscious being. And without memory of a past conscious state one would not be able to refer to oneself as something other than a mere object of reference—which presumably would not qualify as a self. To have different conscious states an individual must exist in more than one of the discrete states of the world, which are ordered in terms of being before or after each other. For something to exist in more than one of these states would be to satisfy certain criteria of individuation. It might be that we think some things do so, and this way these things might somehow generate the illusion of their existing in time. We can always go wrong, of course, and take

5 Shoemaker, S., "Self-Reference and Self-Awareness", *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1968), pp. 555–67.

two different things to be one. In the case of ourselves, however, we should according to Shoemaker sometimes not be able to go wrong. But under the given assumptions we would, in fact, always be able to go wrong. For the only way to locate ourselves in different states of a world forming a B-series but having no temporal structure would be the same way we locate a teapot. Everything would depend on whether the individual we believed to be ourselves met certain criteria. There is no way to identify oneself as oneself in different states of the world. This should not come as a surprise as there is a sense in which identifying oneself as oneself amounts to a contradiction in terms. For referring to oneself as oneself just is referring to oneself without having to identify oneself as the individual one is referring to. Under the assumptions stated we could not knowingly remember having had a different conscious state. Therefore we could not be selves generating the illusion of existing in time. Not only would time have to be a structure we impose upon reality or a mere formal aspect of our experience, but nothing in reality would correspond to our concept of a self or a self-conscious being. I do not wish to claim that time exists or that reality has a temporal structure. Maybe this is an illusion. I do not wish to claim that there are selves. Maybe this is an illusion too. But if there are selves, then there is a passage of time. Or to put it differently: The ability to refer to oneself as oneself through time is a basic aspect of our concept of a self. Selves essentially are beings in time.