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## The Certainty of the *Cogito*: A Modal Perspective<sup>1</sup>

Descartes' intellectual trajectory, as articulated in his *Discourse on the Method*, shows his obsessional quest for certainty. It seems as though the quest for truth was, for him, the quest for certainty. We know that it led him ultimately to *Cogito ergo sum* (*I think, therefore I am*), the first proposition that he believed to be the most certain - *certissima* - of all.<sup>2</sup> However, what he meant by the word *certissima* is not clear. Does he simply mean that it is, in an epistemological sense, the most secure or best justified of our beliefs? It should be noted that Descartes often refers to modal notions such as *necessary* and *impossible* when he talks about certainty. This indicates that his sense of certainty might be better construed from a modal than from an epistemological point of view. In what follows, I discuss the Cartesian *Cogito* to show that its privileged certainty derives from a certain impossibility that Descartes discovered delimited the essential part of our being.

### *Probability and certainty*

The concept of certainty (*certitudo*) may be taken for an indicator of belief in that we test the firmness of our belief by the grounds available to justify it. Although it is true that Descartes sometimes talks about certainty in a comparative manner, as in his use of the terms 'equal certainty', 'greater certainty', or 'the most certain', certainty in the Cartesian sense has, in reality, little to do with the degree of belief. He ranks beliefs, however strong they may be, in the category of 'merely probable cognition' and opposes them to the '*cognitio certa & indubitata*', knowledge that is certain and indubitable. He states: "So, in accordance with this Rule, we reject all such merely probable cognition and resolve to believe only what is perfectly known and incapable of being doubted".<sup>3</sup> This firm creed, operative for him since *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, reflects his understanding of certainty: what is certain is what is incapable of being doubted, *dubitari non potest*. The expression clearly relates to a modal notion of impossibility. We are certain of a thing, apart from any apparent grounds, when we find it impossible to think that it may be otherwise than we

<sup>1</sup> This is the revised version of the article 'Cogito no kakujitsusei: yohsoh no kanten kara' (in Japanese) first appeared in the *Metaphysica: The Journal of Philosophy and Ethics*, No.35, Dec. 2004.

<sup>2</sup> *Principia Philosophiae* I, 10, AT [*Oeuvres de Descartes* publiées par Ch. Adam & P. Tannery, Vrin, Paris, 1996] VIII, p.8. All quotations from the works of Descartes taken from, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, Cambridge University Press 1985.

<sup>3</sup> *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* II, AT X, p.362.

think it to be. Cartesian certainty, then, will be better construed from a modal point of view.

His rejection of the humanities and love for mathematics in his youth has an import in this respect. He says that the sciences contained in books are based upon “merely probable, not demonstrative, reasoning”.<sup>4</sup> He adds, “We would always be uncertain which of them to believe, for hardly anything is said by one writer the contrary of which is not asserted by some other”.<sup>5</sup> In such matters it is always possible to suppose the contrary may be true. The only exception, according to Descartes, is mathematics. Later, in the French version of the *Principles of Philosophy*, he gives an account of the ‘absolute certainty’ typical in mathematics:

Absolute certainty arises when we believe that it is wholly impossible that something should be otherwise than we judge it to be.<sup>6</sup>

“Mathematical demonstrations,” he continues, “have this kind of certainty, for we see clearly that it is impossible that two and three added together should make more or less than five; or that a square should have only three sides, and so on.” What he calls ‘moral certainty’, in contrast, constitutes another kind of certainty:

[S]ome things are considered as morally certain, that is, as having sufficient certainty for application to ordinary life, even though they may be uncertain in relation to the absolute power of God. Thus those who have never been in Rome have no doubt that it is a town in Italy, even though it could be the case that everyone who has told them this has been deceiving them.<sup>7</sup>

While moral certainty permits supposition that the contrary could be the case, it is utterly impossible that two and three could make other than five; thus, mathematics allows an absolute certainty. When he declares in the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* that “of all the sciences so far discovered, arithmetic and geometry alone are free from any taint of falsity or uncertainty,”<sup>8</sup> Descartes clearly draws a line between absolute certainty and mere moral certainty from an exclusively modal point of view, a perspective that is quite different from an epistemological concern regarding the justification of belief. There is no doubt about something when we cannot imagine that something to be otherwise than we actually think it to be. “P is indubitable” is equivalent to “not-P is impossible” or at least to “it is impossible for us to think that not-P is possible”. It is fairly true to say, then, that the certainty Descartes talks about in describing “certain and indubitable knowledge” is closely related

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<sup>4</sup> *Discours de la méthode* II, AT VI, p.12.

<sup>5</sup> *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* III, AT X, p.367.

<sup>6</sup> *Principes* IV 206, AT IX, p.324. We follow the suggestion of the editors Adam and Tannery that the phrases inserted by Pico in the French translation were probably approved by Descartes. Cf. AT IX, Avertissement, p.X.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.323.

<sup>8</sup> *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* II, AT X, p.364.

to the impossible we encounter in thinking.<sup>9</sup>

This also makes it understandable why Descartes had a strong conviction in his youth that mathematics, though a particular discipline among others, could serve as a universal norm for philosophical inquiries:

Now the conclusion we should draw from these considerations is not that arithmetic and geometry are the only sciences worth studying, but rather that in seeking the right path of truth we ought to concern ourselves only with objects which admit of as much certainty as the demonstrations of arithmetic and geometry.<sup>10</sup>

The phrase ‘as much certainty as...’ is hardly intelligible unless it refers to an equally impossible concept of *not-P* that blocks out our thinking.

### *Hyperbolic doubt*

The consideration above makes clear why the concept of ‘hyperbolic doubt’ was indispensable for Descartes in identifying the first foundation of science. Cartesian doubt is not, as it might be imagined, intended to examine our faculty of knowledge for the purpose of screening out errors. As is generally admitted, Cartesian doubt is not introduced because things are doubtful. It applies to cases that we usually take as certain; for what it involves is not simply the screening out of possible errors but the determination of whether there is anything that is wholly impossible to think of as otherwise than as we judge it to be; i.e., whether there is any P such that it is absolutely impossible to suppose the contrary not-P. Cartesian doubt is more than a suspension of judgment for the sake of avoiding errors, and this is why the doubt that he tags ‘hyperbolic’ goes so far as to pretend that the contrary of the belief is the case.<sup>11</sup> The following is notable in this respect from the *Meditations of First Philosophy*:

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<sup>9</sup> This point is argued by Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, Vol.2, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2001, p.68: Descartes ‘would equate our finding not-P unthinkable with our discovering that P, and would have the only kind of warrant for “If necessarily P, then P” that interested him’.

<sup>10</sup> *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* II, AT X, p.366.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Martial Gueroult, *Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons I: L'âme et Dieu*, Aubier Montaigne, 1968, pp.40–41: ‘Le doute méthodique et systématique qui est feint et procède, non des choses, mais de la résolution de douter, diffère du doute véritable qui résulte de la nature des choses... Le double principe de ce doute: traiter comme de l'absolument faux ce qui n'est que simplement douteux, rejeter universellement, comme toujours trompeur, ce parquoi j'ai pu être quelquefois trompé...’.

Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false.<sup>12</sup>

That is, it revolves around the question of whether the contrary could be the case. It is completely beside the point to bring into question, as one of the rebutters of the *Meditations of First Philosophy* did,<sup>13</sup> the sound reasons for discarding one's former beliefs, given that Cartesian questioning is focused on something other than on justifiable grounds for belief.

Therefore, the drive of Cartesian doubt is the question of the impossible. This is clearly seen in his use of the word '*feindre*' in the *Discourse on the Method*. He resolved to 'pretend (*fendre*)' that all the things that had ever entered his mind were no more true than the illusions of his dreams.<sup>14</sup> His astonishment was that there was hardly anything to be found of which the contrary could not be pretended or supposed to be the case. The *Second Meditation* of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* reads:

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.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, if the contrary of what has so far been believed can be supposed to be possibly the case, then, however incredible, it is not impossible; and, if it is not impossible, there is no warranty that things should not be so in reality, despite my belief.

It is exactly at this moment that the certainty of the *Cogito* reveals itself, by an exceptional impossibility to suppose the contrary. I quote again from the *Second Meditation*:

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.<sup>16</sup>

It is absolutely impossible to pretend or suppose that one does not exist. The same is true in the *Discourse*: "I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist".<sup>17</sup> Therefore, "I am, I exist". It is now clear that the mark of the certainty of the *Cogito* is nothing else than the impossible nature of the proposition 'I do not exist'. But, if so, is there any difference between this impossibility and

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<sup>12</sup> *Meditationes de prima philosophia* II, AT VII, p.24.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 7 *Object.*, AT VII, p.470.

<sup>14</sup> *Discours de la méthode* IV, AT VI, p.32.

<sup>15</sup> *Meditationes de prima philosophia* II, AT VII, p.24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>17</sup> *Discours de la méthode* IV, AT VI, p.32.

the impossibility that “two and three added together should make more or less than five; or that a square should have only three sides, and so on”? This question will be addressed in the next section.

### *Mathematical and metaphysical certainty*

Descartes draws a clear line between mathematical certainty and the certainty of the *Cogito* that he sometimes calls metaphysical. In the replies to the *Second Objection*, he claims that an atheist who is clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on that matter, while such is not the case in the *Cogito*.<sup>18</sup> Since there is no apparent difference with respect to clarity and evidence between the mathematical and the metaphysical certainties, the difference in question lies not in the degree of clarity but in the nature of their impossibility of being otherwise, i.e., in the nature of being necessarily so. Curiously, Descartes thinks that mathematical truth, such as the truth of the sum of the three angles, is not absolutely necessary.

God did not... will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise.... On the contrary, ... it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal to two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise....<sup>19</sup>

It is true that we cannot think that the three angles of a triangle are not equal to two right angles, but we are not entitled to say for that reason that God cannot make that to be the case, for it is false to believe that our imagination delimits the range of God's power. According to Descartes, God could have made it, if He willed, that the three angles of a triangle were not equal to two right angles:

... [A]lthough God willed that some truths be necessary, it does not imply that he willed so necessarily, for to will that they be necessary is one thing and to will so necessarily or to be necessitated to will so is another.<sup>20</sup>

Such is the Cartesian theory of the creation of eternal truths, according to which mathematical truths, wholly dependent on the free decision of God, are not necessarily necessary.<sup>21</sup> There is no ground of

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<sup>18</sup> 2 *Responsiones*, AT VII, pp.140-141.

<sup>19</sup> 6 *Responsiones*, AT VII, p.432.

<sup>20</sup> *Lettre à Mersenne, 2 mai 1644*, AT IV, p.118.

<sup>21</sup> For detailed arguments, see Hidé Ishiguro, 'The status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes', in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Amélie Rorty, University of California Press, 1986, pp.459-471, and also see E. M. Curley, 'Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths', *The Philosophical Review*, 4 (1984), reproduced in

necessity for those matters to be so, for the matters in themselves could have been otherwise. If it is impossible for us to think that two and three make more or less than five, or that a rectangle has only three sides, it is only because God has willed so, and created our minds to perceive so inherently.

It is this necessity of mathematical truth that Descartes, towards the end of the section on hyperbolic doubt in the *Meditations*, contrasts with the necessary truth of the *Cogito* by introducing the assumption of a “malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning”. “How do I know,” asks Descartes to himself, “that I am not also deceived each time I add together two and three, or number the sides of a square, or form some judgment still more simple, if more simple indeed can be imagined?” And yet, “if he is deceiving me, I too undoubtedly exist”.

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.<sup>22</sup>

True, it is impossible to imagine that ‘I am’ is not the case, no less than to imagine that ‘two and three makes five’ is not the case, but there is a fundamental difference between the two. Although we cannot imagine the product of the addition otherwise than five, we can still imagine that some being of the utmost power could have made the matter otherwise. The impossibility involved here might be dependent on the factual limit of our cognitive ability imposed by the creator. In contrast, to imagine that ‘I do not exist’ is wholly impossible, even under the supposition of the deceiver. In this case, the impossibility is inexplicable by our cognitive limit alone, for even the being of the utmost power and cunning cannot make the proposition ‘I do not exist’ true!

... [L]et him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something.<sup>23</sup>

Descartes does not explain why the deceiver can never do so. We need to inquire further into the nature of the impossibility in question, which makes the *Cogito* ‘necessarily true’.

### *Necessity sui generis*

When Descartes declares that the proposition “I exist” is “necessarily true”, what necessity is he talking about? Naturally, he does not claim that he exists necessarily. Along with his contemporaries, he believes that it is God alone who can be said to exist necessarily. Certainly, Descartes may not

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*Eternal Truths and the Cartesian Circle*, ed. by Willis Doney, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1987, pp.353-5.

<sup>22</sup> *Meditationes de prima philosophia* II, AT VII, p.21, p.25.

have existed in this world, and a proposition ‘a philosopher named Descartes exists’ would be a mere contingent truth. If the proposition ‘I exist’ is necessarily true at all, the necessity in question is not about a person or object that happens to be in the world.

Nor is he talking about a necessity to the effect that ‘it is necessary to exist while thinking’, which is no more than to say ‘it is necessary to have a body while walking’, or ‘it is necessary to have extension while having shape’. Descartes himself puts the proposition “he who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks” among the eternal truths that reside within our minds and do not concern things that actually exist.<sup>24</sup> An eternal truth always holds, regardless of any actual existence, and hence has nothing to do with the truth of the *Cogito* which, conversely, seems to concern the very existence of the subject who says ‘I’.

So the truth of the *Cogito* seems to be *sui generis*, differing from both the ontological truth of the existence ascribed to God and the logical truth about the nature of thinking objects in general. In all probability, its truth does not belong to the world of objects, where some are said to exist necessarily, others contingently. The reality of the world being put in question during the doubt, the necessity of the *Cogito*, or the impossibility of ‘I do not exist’ must be sought elsewhere.

#### *The impossible emerging in saying I do not exist*

Let us return to the text of the *Meditations*. It stipulates: the proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true “whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (“*quoties a me profertur, vel mente concipitur*”). The condition ‘whenever...’ is not unimportant. Descartes seems to say that the *Cogito* becomes necessarily true in relation to someone who expresses it (in mind perhaps) and who conceives it by so doing. Hintikka’s paper ‘*Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?*’ is of considerable importance in this respect.

The sentence ‘De Gaulle does not exist’ is perfectly correct as a sentence, but, as Hintikka puts it, it is *existentially inconsistent* for De Gaulle to utter. By the same token, a sentence ‘I do not exist’ is *existentially inconsistent* for whoever happens to utter it. “In the same way as existentially inconsistent sentences defeat themselves when they are uttered or thought of, their negations verify themselves when they are expressly uttered or otherwise professed. Such sentences may therefore be called existentially self-verifying”. We know that the Cartesian proposition “I am, I exist” (*ego sum, ego existo*) is of this sort. The *Cogito* is a *self-verifying truth* of a being that knows who is uttering

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>24</sup> *Principia Philosophiae* I, 49, AT VIII, pp.23-4; *ibid.*, I, 10, AT VIII, p.8.



the impossible sentence: 'I do not exist'.<sup>25</sup>

If Hintikka is right, the impossibility that reveals the certainty of the *Cogito* is of a peculiar sort. It concerns the existence of a speaking being alone. Since the impossibility of the proposition 'I do not exist' comes from its performatory character, there is nothing that can be aware of this impossibility except a being who puts itself in the position of that 'I'. This is why a parrot that seems to be chattering and even professing "I do not exist" has no awareness of impossibility and hence, of the self-verifying truth of the *Cogito*. This makes understandable the somewhat abrupt contention made by Descartes that a chattering parrot has no mind, that it is nothing more than an automat without a soul.<sup>26</sup>

We are now in a position to say that the necessity that Descartes ascribes to the truth of the proposition 'I am, I exist' derives from language use. If there is no human language there is no speaking being and hence no *existential inconsistency* as we saw above. Conversely, there is no human language that is immune to the existential inconsistency of saying "I do not exist". Wherever there is language use there is something that denotes itself by the indexical 'I', and this something is exactly that which would be made impossible if the proposition 'I do not exist' were to be true. The certainty of the *Cogito* is therefore inseparable from the impossible that delimits the speaking being, a being who is nothing beyond the confines of language use. Otherwise, it would be extremely difficult to access the meaning of '*necessario*' when Descartes says that the proposition, I am, I exist, is "necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in mind". He goes on to say that, "I do not yet have a sufficient understanding of what this "I" is, that now necessarily exists". Which would sound utterly strange if the indexical 'I' denoted an object known to be existing actually in the world.

What we have discussed above is also bolstered by his argument on the deceiver of supreme power to the effect that "if he is deceiving me, I too undoubtedly exist".<sup>27</sup> To be sure, Descartes is not talking about a trivial truth relating to the idea that if someone deceives another, then the individual who is deceived exists, for this would be no better than saying, if someone hits something, then the thing that is hit exists. Given that deception is possible in so far as it misuses the genuine sense of words, the deceiver, if any, must use the language one knows to deceive at all. To that extent, the sentence 'I do not exist' remains impossible for both. In other words, as to this impossible sentence, even the deceiver can never make it true to 'me'. This seems to be what the passage above means: if the deceiver deceives me at all, 'he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something'. It is very likely that the impossibility that Descartes draws on comes

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<sup>25</sup> Jakko Hintikka, '*Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?*', first published in *the Philosophical Review* (Vol.71, 1962, pp.3-32), reprinted in *Rene Descartes: Critical Assessments*, Vol.II, Routledge, 1991, pp.166-175.

<sup>26</sup> *Discours de la méthode* V, AT VI, pp.57-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

from the use of language in thinking.

All of this amounts to saying that the certainty of the Cartesian *Cogito* comes down to the impossibility for any thinking subject that the indexical 'I' should not denote that very subject who says 'I'. The absolute certainty of the *Cogito* thus emerges at the limit of our language, beyond which the totality of thoughts breaks down along with language.<sup>28</sup> I do not insist that Descartes was fully aware of the matter. Otherwise he could have said "I speak, therefore I am". There must be something more than simply historical or systematic reasons that hindered him from saying so, a point I shall briefly address towards the end of this paper.

### *Summary and prospect*

We have seen that the certainty of the *Cogito* cannot be fully grasped unless we consider it as witness to a certain impossibility of thinking 'I do not exist'. Our reading from a modal point of view has some advantages.

(1) It allows us to consider the Cartesian certainty apart from the more or less subjective qualities of ideas, such as being 'clear and distinct' or 'evident'. We should remember that in the *Meditations* Descartes proposes the *Cogito* as the criterion of truth for further clear and distinct ideas in general. His reason is that the knowledge of the *Cogito* is of an ideal clarity.<sup>29</sup> If so, the property of clarity and distinctness supposedly shared by all true ideas will not explain the certainty *sui generis* of the *Cogito*. Nor will the analogy that Descartes often points to, between evidence and vision, be of much use to characterize the *Cogito*, for its necessity comes with the impossibility of 'I do not exist', which, by its self-defeating nature, can only be touched in blind.

(2) It also allows us to consider Cartesian certainty apart from epistemological contexts of justified belief. As Spinoza points out in his systematic reconstruction of Cartesian arguments, the proposition 'I am' must be known through itself, without any ground prior to it, otherwise it would not be the first and absolute principle.<sup>30</sup> And indeed, the impossibility of the contrary of the proposition 'I am' needs no justification; it is simply imposed on us without any proof or any positive reasons prior to it.

(3) It helps us to understand the nature of Cartesian doubt, especially with respect to the hyperbolic

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<sup>28</sup> On this point, see B. Williams, «La certitude du Cogito» in *Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie No IV: La Philosophie Analytique*, Minuit, 1962, pp.40-57.

<sup>29</sup> *Meditationes de prima philosophia* III, AT VII, p.35.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Spinoza, *Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae Pars I et II, Cogitata Metaphysica*, Geb. I, p.152.

assumption of the deceiver. As we saw above, the drive of hyperbolic doubt is the question of the impossible. Prevention of possible errors is another thing.

(4) It preserves the *Cogito* from any interpretations of a psychological sort. The certainty that Descartes discovered has little to do with an introspective evidence of the reflexivity of the consciousness: I think that I think that I think. . . . The certainty in question, as we have seen, reveals itself at the limit of language and thought. What is impossible to be pictured in mind has no place in the introspection.

(5) Lastly, it allows us to define the nature of the *Cogito* in modal terms. A notion of certainty construed as the degree of belief will be of little help in understanding what it is to be indubitable or *necessarily* true.

The last comment invites further considerations. It is interesting to observe that the Cartesian *Cogito* does not fall into the well-known Leibnizian dichotomy between *truths of reasoning*, which are necessary, and *truths of fact*, which are contingent.<sup>31</sup> The *Cogito* is not among the contingent truths of fact because its contrary is impossible. So its truth should be necessary, but not in the same sense that the existence of God is necessary, for the existence of a philosopher who professes “I exist” is yet contingent. Leibniz seems to miss the point when he counts the *Cogito* in the number of the contingent truths of fact.<sup>32</sup> The Cartesian *Cogito* is a necessary truth of a peculiar sort, deviating from the Leibnizian order. What kind of necessity is it, then, if it is not a modality about a thing in the world?

There is no doubt that Descartes, through a comparison with the eternal truths, which are not necessarily necessary, believed the *Cogito* to be a necessarily necessary truth. In reality, however, that necessity depends on an ungrounded belief that the inner voice constituting his thinking is of a true language, and that he should be the one that the indexical ‘I’ denotes. This belief, seriously taken, has no necessity of its own. A case may occur in which a person who is mentally ill develops a serious disbelief in language and comes to believe that he or she does not exist.<sup>33</sup> How could we persuade him or her to correct the error if he or she has lost the sense for the impossible?

We can put it another way by saying that the impossibility of the proposition ‘I do not exist’ is

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Leibniz, *Monadologie*, 33, in *Oeuvres de Leibniz*, éditées par Lucy Prenant, Tome I, Aubier Montaigne, Paris, 1972, p.401.

<sup>32</sup> See Leibniz, *Réflexions sur la partie générale des Principes de Descartes*, in *op.cit.*, p.290: ‘...il sera loisible, sans difficulté, de ramener les vérités premières de fait aux deux propositions suivantes: je pense, et : ma pensée a divers objets’.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jonathan Harrison, ‘The In corrigibility of the Cogito’, originally published in *Mind*, Vol. XCIII, 1984; reprinted in *Rene Descartes: Critical Assessments*, Vol.II, Routledge, 1991, p.208.

anchored by a certain inhibition, perhaps not necessary in itself, of putting in question the existence of language. It is likely, by virtue of this inhibition, that the Cartesian doubt can remain a transient fantasy, without degenerating into true madness. We should note that the Cartesian doubt never calls into question the existence of language. The whole doubt moves over that inhibition: it is fairly possible to assume a world where there is absolutely nothing, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Since we see no impossibility in this assumption, the possible world, however strange it may be, could be our actual world, which we simply fail to recognize as such. However, it seems to be true, nevertheless, that the world where *I am* is the only actual one, even if I do not know which world I am in. If this is what Descartes invites us to ponder, the proposition ‘I think, therefore I am’ is necessarily true in the sense that it serves as a sort of fixed indicator of the actuality in supposing *whatever* possible world to be actual. The *Cogito* is thus true in whatever world is possible in so far as every possible world is to be thought to be actual *in that very world*.

In any case, the truth of the *Cogito* is necessary, but not necessarily so, for what makes the contrary of the *Cogito* impossible would disappear if there were no language. We human beings are inaugurated and set up upon the inhibition that the suspicion, ‘possibly, this is not a language’, should not expose us to the fundamental contingency of our speaking being and, hence, to the fragility of our actuality. Descartes was no exception to this. It is very likely that the Cartesian idea of God, whose nature is so “immense, incomprehensible and infinite”<sup>34</sup> that He can cancel every truth if He wills, has something to do with the concealed contingency of the *Cogito*. I leave this matter open.

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<sup>34</sup> *Meditationes de prima philosophia* IV, AT VII, p.55.