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DESCARTES' DEMON: A DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS OF *MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY*
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Title
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Abstract
Descartes argued that the existence of reflective thought should be the first principle of philosophy because it is indubitable. The present paper draws on Bakhtinian and Meadian theories to analyse the three key paragraphs in the *Meditations* in which Descartes argues this point. The analysis demonstrates: (1) that Descartes' text contains the traces of significant others and the discourses of his time, (2) that the sequence of thoughts that leads Descartes to his first principle is fundamentally dialogical, (3) that Descartes' self-awareness, which he takes as primary, depends upon his reflecting upon himself from the perspective of a more or less generalised other, and finally (4) that Descartes takes the perspective of the other by reversing his own reactions towards others, such that he reacts to himself in the same way that he previously reacted to others. This re-analysis challenges Cartesian solipsism, arguing that the mind, or self-reflection, is fundamentally social.

Key words:
Descartes, solipsism, intersubjectivity, Bakhtin, Mead, dialogicality

The assumption that an individual knows their own mind better than anything else, and that this should be the starting point for psychology, has a long history in psychology. It is difficult to say exactly when this assumption first gained ascendancy. Arguably, however, one of the most important figures in institutionalising this idea was René Descartes. While searching for an indubitable axiom, Descartes found that the only thing he could not doubt was his own awareness of doubting. Taking reflective thought as his 'first principle' (1637/1980, p. 17), Descartes proceeded to elaborate a dualism between mind and body, which has been the object of significant and varied criticism across psychology (Hurley, 1998; Marková, 1982; Ryle, 1949). In one way it is surprising that Descartes is best known for this dualism, because, when stated explicitly, it is almost universally rejected. The argument of the present paper is not with Descartes' dualism, but with the idea that the reflective mind is the 'first principle.'

The main unfortunate consequence of taking reflective thought, or mind, as prior to anything else, is Cartesian solipsism (Hocutt, 1996) – the idea that although each mind knows itself it can never know any other mind. Such solipsism is obviously problematic for psychology in general and social psychology in particular (Farr, 1996). Descartes himself avoids this outcome by invoking God. For Descartes, ideas that are clear and distinct are so perfect that they must be created by God, and thus true. In Descartes' scheme there is no solipsism because everyone has access to the divine clarity of truth. However, subsequent less pious scholars, who developed Descartes' method of radical doubt into early psychology in the form of introspectionism, found themselves marooned on Descartes' 'first principle.' Brentano (1874/1995) drew inspiration from Descartes' method of radical doubt, and

from Brentano, historical threads lead to the school of Graz and Gestalt Psychology, to James' science of mental life, and to Husserl and the tradition of phenomenology. All these traditions, however, having abandoned God, have struggled with solipsism. This is particularly clear in Husserl's (1931/1988) struggles with the problem of intersubjectivity. If the self-reflective and self-doubting mind is primary, and there is no God uniting all self-reflective minds in the clear perception of truth, then how can anyone know the mind of anyone else?

The method of introspection further institutionalised the assumption that the individual knows their own mind best. Early introspectionists simply assumed that mind is private and best accessed through the mind's own self-reflection. However, introspection proved to be a problematic method. Logical problems (Danziger, 1980; James, 1884) and contradictory findings (Lyons, 1986) cleared the space for behaviourism. Watson (1913) introduced his influential variant of behaviourism with a critique of introspection. Watson's rationale for rejecting the study of mind hinges upon the unreliability of introspection and the lack of success in resolving divergent accounts. Watson's argument was that psychology must take behaviour, not introspective reports, as its phenomenon. For behaviourism it is behaviour that is primary, not the self-reflective mind. It is not that the behaviourists denied the existence of mind, rather they denied the possibility of studying mind scientifically because, they assumed, the mind was private. Thus, although the behaviourists rejected the assumption that the mind was primary, they still assumed that it was private.

More recently there has been a return to the study of the mind in psychology, though now it often goes under the name of consciousness – a term that Descartes inaugurated (Davies, 1990). However, these developments are not a return to

Cartesian psychology, rather they are founded upon a critique of the assumption that the self-reflective mind is primary. Two strands of this work can be identified. Firstly there has been a materialist attempt to detail the relation between the mind and its neural substrate. This work has been both empirical (e.g., Hurley, 1998) and philosophical (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The accumulating details of the precise relation between the mind ad the brain now make it difficult to accept Descartes basic idea, that the mind can exist without the body. Within this strand of research the brain necessarily precedes the mind. The second strand of research, which is not in conflict with the former, has explored the social basis of the human mind (Gillespie, in press; Hobson, 2002; Marková, 1987). Empirical and philosophical work within this tradition has emphasised mind, or consciousness, develops through social interaction, language and culture. It is this latter line of thought that I develop in this paper.

In order to explore the relation between the mind and the social world, the present paper presents an empirical analysis of the Descartes' life and writings. While we cannot get access to Descartes' mind, we can get access to his words and these words give us insight into the content of his mind, or his stream of thought (James, 1890). The aim of the present analysis is to systematically relate the form and content of Descartes' thoughts to what we know about his social world, thus rescuing his mind from solipsism and demonstrating how the social world precedes the individual mind.

The analysis will focus upon Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy in which are Demonstrated the Existence of God and the Distinction Between the Human Soul and the Body* (1641/1984), henceforth the *Meditations*. This is the text in which Descartes establishes 'the nature of the human mind, and how it is better known than the body' (p. 16). The analysis of this text draws upon the theoretical

work of Mead and Bakhtin, whose relevance is described in due course. Let me begin by introducing the *Meditations* and Descartes' method of radical doubt.

<div align="center">The Method of Radical Doubt</div>

The *Meditations* have a surprising structure. Although Descartes is a rationalistic philosopher, very much influenced by mathematics, he does not outline and then systematically develop a set of formal axioms. Rather the text is written, in the first person, as a series of six mediations. It is in the genre of a handbook of meditative practices. Indeed, Descartes intends his readers to meditate with him, spending days, or even weeks, on each short meditation. The *Meditations* are not intended merely to communicate a new idea, but to provide experiences which will fundamentally restructure the way in which the reader thinks. Thus, paradoxically, although Descartes' message is rationalism, his method of communication is grounded in embodied experience and practice.

Descartes begins the first meditation by stating the doubtful nature of his own knowledge, and proposing to do away with all uncertain knowledge. 'I realized it was necessary,' Descartes writes, 'to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last' (p. 12). Recognising that this is a formidable task, Descartes sets aside 'a clear stretch of free time' to be 'quite alone,' during which he will devote himself 'sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition' of his opinions (p. 12).

Instead of going through each opinion one-by-one, Descartes lunges straight for the basis of these opinions, namely sense perception. The question is, can he trust knowledge based on sense perception? Descartes (p. 13) clearly perceives himself 'sitting by the fire' and 'wearing a winter dressing-gown.' It may seem absurd to

doubt such clear perceptions, but Descartes raises the possibility that he is dreaming. 'How often, asleep at night,' he writes, 'am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!' Reflecting upon this thought, Descartes realises that 'there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep.' Because of the possibility of such error, he decides to dismiss all knowledge coming from the senses. Descartes' method, then, is not simply to reject opinions that are false, but to reject all knowledge that has even the slightest potential of being false, in order to isolate that which is absolutely indubitable.

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

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

The 'malicious demon,' referred to in the Latin text as the *deceptor*, is like an illusionist. The intelligentsia of the 17th century was awed by optical illusion. Concave and convex mirrors, scenographic manipulations, *trompe-l'oeil*, the camera obscura and anamorphosis were technologies of the day. Descartes himself wrote extensively on optics, vision, and illusion, and indeed, his philosophy is filled with the metaphor of visual illusion (Judovitz, 1993). The image of the *deceptor* is one such

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

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

Who is Doing the Talking?

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

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

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

> *So serious are the doubts into which I have been thrown as a result of yesterday's meditation that I can neither put them out of my mind nor see any way of resolving them. It feels as if I have fallen unexpectedly into a deep whirlpool which tumbles me around so that I can neither stand on the bottom nor swim up to the top.* Nevertheless I will make an effort and once more attempt the same path which I started on yesterday. <u>Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false;</u> *and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain,* <u>or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty.</u> Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.
>
> <u>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.</u> *So what remains as true?* <u>Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.</u> (p. 16)

The frequent use of 'I' in the extract provides a deceptive veneer of constancy. Taking
an I-position (Hermans, Kempen & van Loon, 1992) to indicate not what is being
talked about but the perspective from which one is talking, one can identify three
distinct I-positions: the naïve meditator (italics), the sceptic (underlined) and
Descartes the narrator (normal text). Although it is difficult to perfectly disentangle
these voices, as the boundaries are permeable, the three I-positions can be
conceptually distinguished, as the following sections demonstrate.

(1) The I-Position of the Naïve Meditator

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

The naïve meditator is, partly, Descartes' objectification of the reader. The reader to whom Descartes is orienting seems to be an intelligent lay reader who takes for granted the assumptions of Scholastic Aristotelianism, which were dominant in the 17th century. Descartes appears to be using the naïve meditator as a way to draw 17th century philosophers and laypeople into his theoretical scheme. According to Scholastic Aristotelianism, knowledge comes through the senses, and vision being 'the noblest of the senses' is thus the most certain path to truth (Jay, 1993, chapter 1).The naïve meditator is in a 'whirlpool' of doubt because it is precisely this belief that Descartes systematically attacks, largely through the invocation of the 'malicious demon' or illusionist. Undermining the scholastic assumptions of the naïve meditator, and casting the naïve meditator into the 'whirlpool' of doubt, prepares the naïve meditator, and thus the reader, for receiving Descartes' own 'unshakeable' truth. In this sense, Descartes can be seen to present his own dualistic philosophy to the scholastics, not as a challenge, but as a life raft. The I-position of the naïve meditator is thus a bridge that is meant to convey the reader from Scholastic Aristotelianism to Descartes' own philosophy. Indeed, as the meditations progress the discourse of the naïve meditator becomes decreasingly Aristotelian and increasingly Cartesian. In the course of the text, then, this I-position develops.

The voice of the naïve meditator, however, is also refracted through Descartes' own experiences and personality. In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes (p. 8) states that the meditations contain 'the very thoughts' that he himself journeyed through in his search for truth. Certainly Descartes learned the basics of Scholastic Aristotelianism while at the Jesuit school at La Flêche. Moreover, the attitude of the naïve meditator conforms to the image Descartes gives us of his own youth [endnote 1]. Both the naïve meditator and the young Descartes abhor

uncertainty and strive for truth. Descartes tells us that he 'always had an especially great craving for learning to distinguish the true from the false' (1637/1980, p. 5). Not surprisingly, the young Descartes 'took especially great pleasure in mathematics because of the certainty and the evidence of its arguments' (1637/1980, p. 4). This 'great craving' for certainty, which is essential to Descartes' own personality, seems to be objectified in the I-position of the naïve meditator. The naïve meditator is troubled not only because the invocation of the 'malicious demon' challenges the veracity of the senses, but because this challenge appears to confound the quest for truth and certainty.

(2) The I-Position of the Sceptic

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

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

This catch phrase is, however, only the tip of an extensive discourse which Descartes animates. Philosophical scepticism was a waxing theory in Descartes' day. The recent invention of the printing press greatly increased the circulation of theories,

thus making contradictions between theories more salient (Burke, 2000). Descartes himself experienced the uncertainty wrought by the printing press. While at school in La Flèche, Descartes was exposed to such a diversity of philosophical theories that he was led to remark that 'one cannot imagine anything so strange or unbelievable that it has not been said by some philosopher' (1637/1980, p. 9). There is, he was forced to conclude, 'nothing about which there is not some dispute – and thus nothing that is not doubtful' (p. 5).

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

Deeply troubled by the arguments of the sceptics, Descartes left the world of academia, in order to study 'the great book of the world' (1637/1980, p. 5). For nine years Descartes travelled around Europe, but his 'great craving' for truth remained unanswered.

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

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

As described by Josephs (2002, p. 162-3), an I-position lies at the intersection between personal experience and a collective discourse that organises those experiences. Descartes' experience of the diversity of philosophies, and the diversity of beliefs among people, provided an experiential basis for his receptivity to the discourse of scepticism. That is to say, Descartes did not simply appropriate the discourse of scepticism, but the discourse of scepticism answered to his own experience, and articulated it at a philosophical level. Thus, the I-position of the sceptic, like the I-position of the naïve meditator, is both a product of the discourses of the 17th century and a product of Descartes' own personal experiences – which themselves have been constituted by the social context of the 17th century, like the impact of the printing press and opportunities for travel.

(3) The I-Position of Descartes the Narrator

The dialogue between the discourse of scholasticism, animated through the naïve meditator I-position, and the discourse of scepticism, animated through the sceptic I-position, forms the central dialogic tension in the *Meditations* (and arguably in Descartes own self). Yet there is a third important I-position, namely Descartes the

narrator, which sets up, organises and adjudicates the debate. Descartes the narrator, somewhat artificially, forces these two discourses to collide, and out of the ruins of both, advances his own 'first principle.'

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

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

Voices in Dialogue

Bakhtin (1982, p. 348) states that one way for the artist to creatively use the heteroglossia inherent in language is to objectify different languages in different characters, and then let the characters interact. In this process, the author liberates himself from the discourses being spoken, such that the languages that the characters speak gain a degree of autonomy and can thus interact in novel ways. This leads to the second analytic question: How do these three I-positions interact in the constitution of Descartes' 'first principle'?

To address this question, we continue our reading of the *Meditations*, moving to the third paragraph of the second meditation. This is the key paragraph in which Descartes articulates the argument for his first principle.

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

In this extract, the 'echoes of changes of speech subjects,' described by Bakhtin, are clearly discernable. The extract, while ostensibly Descartes' own stream of thought, is in fact a dialogue – echoing the dialogues that occur between people. Specifically, the text is a dialogue between the naïve meditator (italics) and the sceptic (underlined) moderated by Descartes the narrator (normal text).

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

Valsiner (2002) has systematically outlined forms of dialogical relation between I-positions within the dialogical self. Some of the relations that he describes are visible in the above extract. Initially the dialogue would seem to be what he calls 'mutually escalating' (p. 257). That is to say, each I-position is driven towards increasingly extreme positions. The naivety of the meditator gives definition to the sceptic and visa versa. Each I-position, in a dialogical sense, constitutes the other, and each typifies itself in contrast with the other. Every 'but' marks a change to the perspective of the sceptic, and the introduction of an even more extreme sceptical argument. In response to each of these, the naïve meditator attempts to formulate a new possible basis for certainty. This 'mutually escalating' dialogue, culminates when the voice of the naïve meditator says 'no.' In the following turn, the dialogical relation changes to what Valsiner, borrowing from Bakhtin, calls 'ventriloquation' (p. 260). The naïve meditator ventriloquates the voice of the sceptic, appropriating the sceptic's words, turning them against the sceptic – 'if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed.' This turn marks the emergence of novelty. The naïve mediator is not simply ventriloquating the words of the sceptic, but is recasting them to a new end. The first phase of this novel emergence, however, is with the voice of the sceptic which overextends the sceptical argument to the point of questioning the existence of the subject, thus accomplishing a *reductio ad absurdum* of the sceptical argument. In the next phase of the novel emergence, the voice of the naïve meditator recognises the *reductio ad absurdum* and appropriates it in order to assert the necessary and certain existence of reflective awareness. The third phase is the silence of the sceptic, and the emergence of the new semiotic mediator, or idea, proclaimed by Descartes the narrator. One could say that we have here a creative three-step process, as described by Marková (1990), except that rather than occurring between people, it is occurring

within the twists and shifts of Descartes' own stream of thought. That is to say, the dynamic underlying Descartes' stream of thought is an echo of the social dynamics that occur between people.

The outcome of this intrapersonal dialogue is the relatively novel semiotic mediator: '*I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me.' Every time Descartes becomes aware of himself putting forward the proposition that 'I am, I exist,' this statement is necessarily true, for regardless of any delusions that the 'malicious demon' may cause, the demon can never delude Descartes of his own self-awareness. This thought, or semiotic mediator, stops the dialogue. When the voice of the sceptic surfaces later in the *Meditations* and in other texts, Descartes invokes this semiotic mediator, and repeatedly the discourse of scepticism is silenced. This truth, Descartes writes, is 'so firm and so certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics' are unable to shake it (1637/1980, p. 17). The personal impact of this insight, for Descartes, was huge. Brandishing this new semiotic mediator, Descartes was able to silence the demons that had driven him out of the academy. Accordingly he returned to academia and was able to write with great certitude.

Through what process of thought does Descartes arrive at his new semiotic mediator? How can we characterise this obviously creative process? It is, I suggest, the 'dialogical tensions' (Marková, 2003) between discourses that produce Descartes' 'first principle.' Descartes was unusual in the fact that he participated in one of the main dialogical tensions of his time (Collins, 1988). While the discourses of Scholastic Aristotelianism and scepticism were normally found in different individuals and communities, in Descartes both of these discourses are to be found within the same person. This is the precondition of Descartes' internal dialogue. The creativity of dialogue is, perhaps, best described by Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) when

he writes: 'The objection which my interlocutor raises to what I say draws from me thought which I had no idea I possessed' (p. 354). The quotation aptly describes Descartes' response, when in the I-position of the naïve mediator, to the questioning, by his sceptical I-position, of whether he exists. The extremity of the question draws out from the I-position of the naïve meditator the absurdity of the sceptical doctrine, and thus the necessity of existing in the act of self-doubting. The point, then, is that this process of creation is not a rationalistic deduction, instead it is best characterised as a dialogical emergence that echoes social interaction.

<p style="text-align:center">'I Too Undoubtedly Exist, if He is Deceiving Me'</p>

Now I want to turn to the content of Descartes' 'first principle.' The crux of Descartes' argument has, according to Baker and Morris (1996), often been misunderstood as proving the existence of a mind-world, which exists, so to speak, side-by-side with the material world. But Descartes does not espouse a two worlds theory. Indeed the idea that mind is 'internal' is absurd for Descartes because he defines mind, or *res cogitans*, as that which is not extended in space. What Descartes does discover is the essential (i.e., clear and distinct) property of the mind, namely, self-reflection. The essence of mind is not 'an image in the head' but rather an awareness of self. Descartes' argument is that the 'proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me.' The Latin word which Descartes uses here for 'put forward' is *profertur* – which also means to mention. The key point is that the truth of the proposition is conditional upon awareness of conceiving of or uttering the proposition. Self-awareness is indubitable. While Descartes can doubt the veracity of his perceptions, his thoughts and even his own doubting, he cannot doubt his own awareness of any of these. The third analytic question I want to ask is this: Is Descartes' self-awareness primary or does it presuppose something else?

Descartes' insight, that 'this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me,' is that it is fundamentally dialogical. In the standard English translation of the *Meditations*, which I have used, the '*I am, I exist*' is in italics. In Cress's (1980, p. 61) translation, the phrase is in quotation marks. In the original Latin, it appears to be in neither – quotation marks were only just coming into fashion at this time. From my point of view, it is more appropriate to use quotation marks, because this underscores the fact that Descartes is talking to himself.

The first question to ask is: Who is Descartes' talking to when he states '*I am, I exist*'? All utterances are but chains in a succession of dialogue. The utterance 'I am, I exist' would seem to be a defiant response to the voice of the sceptic. The voice of the sceptic is not evident in the text, but without the implicit presence of this voice, the utterance is meaningless, for it is this voice that the utterance is meant to silence. Descartes is motivated to say this in order to quell sceptical thoughts.

The second question to ask is: If Descartes' is quoting his own retort to sceptical arguments, then who is doing the quoting? That is, if Descartes is speaking in he utterance '*I am, I exist*' then who is speaking about this utterance? Quoting oneself implies moving I-position, such that one is referring to oneself in the same way that one might refer to others. James (1884) saw this clearly:

> The present conscious state, when I say 'I feel tired,' is not the direct feeling of tire; when I say 'I feel angry,' it is not the direct feeling of anger. It is the feeling of saying-I-feel-tired, of saying-I-feel-angry, - entirely different matters. (p. 2)

The problem is that once self is described as a 'me' (i.e., 'I feel tired') this is no longer a description of the 'I,' as the 'I' has moved on and is now uttering that description (Barresi, 2002). The 'I' is never the 'me,' because the 'me' is always other (Mead, 1913; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1988, p. 131). Equally, when Descartes quotes himself saying '*I am, I exist*,' his own I-position is not in the act of uttering this.

Rather, Descartes' I-position is listening to himself putting forward the proposition, and commenting to himself, in reflective-awareness, that the proposition must indeed be true because he hears himself speak.

So if Descartes is listening to himself responding to the voice of the sceptic, then can we specify the exact nature of this listening I-position? Which perspective or whose perspective is he taking? In this instance we cannot point to any one particular perspective that Descartes might be taking. Descartes is taking what Mead called the perspective of the generalized other (Dodds, Lawrence & Valsiner, 1997; Mead, 1922, p. 161). This refers to I-positions which have, so to speak, become detached from any one person or discourse. The generalized other is abstracted out of specific I-positions forming a general frame of reference. It transcends the specific I-positions of the discourses of scepticism and scholasticism. It extracts from such I-positions only that which is most common, and thus constructs a general self-awareness. Nevertheless, although we cannot demonstrate that Descartes is taking a specific perspective that clearly originates in the social world, the analysis does demonstrate that the movement of Descartes' self-reflection is social and dialogical: First there is rising scepticism, then there is Descartes defiant response, and finally there is Descartes own comment about he veracity of his own utterance.

While we cannot identify the precise perspective from which Descartes is listening to himself, we can identify the perspective from which Descartes is aware of himself potentially being deceived. Toward the end of the third paragraph of the second meditation, Descartes states that there is a 'deceiver of supreme power' who is 'deceiving me.' Descartes is self-reflectively aware of 'me-being-deceived.' This in turn means, paradoxically, that Descartes the author is not being deceived. For once one knows about a deception, the deception no longer exists. So, while Descartes is

claiming to be deceived, which part of Descartes is outside of the deception observing himself being deceived?

The utterance 'I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me' reveals a clear social basis to Descartes' awareness of being deceived. The 'me' is constituted by the demon 'deceiving me,' and thus the I-position from which Descartes speaks is in fact the I-position of the demon. If Descartes could not take the perspective of the demon upon himself, he could not be aware of himself being deceived. Indeed, this is why Descartes invokes the image of the demon, in order to conceive of himself being deceived. Thus, in a classic Meadian sense, Descartes becomes aware of himself by taking the perspective of an other.

To say that Descartes becomes self-aware by taking the perspective of the *deceptor* is of course simplistic. The 'malicious demon' is a complex hypothetical construct comprising many I-positions. The demon is a cultural heuristic in the service of scepticism. Moreover, as mentioned above, it appears to draw upon imagery from the 17th century fascination with optical illusions. But, however complex the 'malicious demon' is, as a system of I-positions, the key point remains. Descartes' self-awareness of being deceived needs at least two perspectives. If we allowed Descartes only one perspective, he might either be deceived or not deceived, but he could not be aware of either. Thus, Descartes awareness of being deceived presupposes the existence of two or more perspectives within Descartes thought.

The analysis of Descartes' self-awareness of uttering 'I am, I exist' and his self-awareness of being deceived, reveals that self-awareness is, in both cases, dialogical. In both cases self-awareness depends upon a coexistence of at least two I-positions, and some reflective movement between these I-positions. Thus, on the basis

of this analysis, I suggest that two or more I-positions are necessarily primary to self-awareness. The next and final question is: Where have these I-positions come from?

The Social Basis of Descartes' Doubt

The generalized other contains numerous I-positions, which are more or less generalised. In Descartes' generalized other we find I-positions associated with the discourses of scholasticism and scepticism, with Descartes the narrator, with the 'malicious demon' and even the illusionist. A closer analysis would uncover many more I-positions, articulating Descartes' stream of thought at an even finer resolution. It is too big a task to take on all these I-positions, so in this final section the focus will be only upon the I-position of the demon: How has this doubt-enabling I-position been constructed? Can we relate this I-position to the social world beyond Descartes' own mind?

Descartes' doubt of his own experience, I argue, has a social psychological origin in Descartes' own interaction with other people. The young Descartes, as mentioned earlier, was dismayed by the diversity of opinion to be found amongst the philosophers. Descartes recognised that they could not all be correct, and thus that some must be wrong, despite holding their opinions very firmly. The key factor in stimulating Descartes to doubt his own beliefs seems to be in his application of this criticism of others to himself, thus recognising that he too might hold equally false beliefs. For example, Descartes (1641/1984), while trying to doubt his own knowledge, argues:

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

Initially it is the 'others' that 'go astray' in propounding their knowledge. But Descartes also propounds his own knowledge. That is to say, Descartes is in an

equivalent social position to the other, and so the critique returns – 'may I not similarly go wrong.' In this act of self-reflection, whose perspective is Descartes taking? In one sense he is taking the perspective of others who may criticise him in the same way that he has criticised others, but more precisely, he is taking his own perspective that he previously held towards others.

A second set of interactions that seem to have been important in the social formation of Descartes' doubt comes from his experience of travelling around Europe. Descartes left he academy because he was unable to find any certain knowledge there. However, while travelling he found equally diverse and contradictory beliefs. Initially he thought that these peoples must be in error. However, Descartes again came to reverse this critique, thus undermining his own knowledge:

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

The 'extravagant and ridiculous' beliefs of others, led Descartes to self-reflectively question whether his own beliefs might not be equally extravagant and ridiculous. Thus again, primary to Descartes' doubt in his own beliefs, is Descartes' doubt in the beliefs of others. Descartes' reactions to others precede his self-reflective reaction to himself. And again while one could say that Descartes is taking the perspective of the people he met upon his own 'ridiculous' beliefs, it is perhaps more accurate to say that he is reacting to himself in the same way that he previously reacted to the people he met. In either case, the same point emerges: Descartes' interaction with these others is primary to his own self-reflective doubt.

One could argue that the above interpretation is in fact solipsistic, for Descartes does not take the 'actual' perspective of others. In a sense this is correct;

Descartes does not take the actual perspective of others, rather he takes his own perspective on others, and applies this to himself. However, this account is not solipsistic. The reason why Descartes can do this is because he is in the same social position as, for example, the foreigners that he met while travelling. They were alien to Descartes and he was alien to them. Accordingly, the incredulity he had towards their beliefs would have been similar to the incredulity they had toward his beliefs. Accordingly, by reacting to his own beliefs with incredulity, Descartes is, to some extent, taking the perspective of the people he met – though not their 'actual' perspectives. The point, however, is that whether one thinks of it in terms of taking the perspective of the other, or in terms of reversing one's own perspective on the other, a social dimension is necessary. In either case the existence of the other for self precedes self-reflection.

<div align="center">The Ghost in Descartes' Scheme</div>

Descartes concludes the second meditation by stating that: 'I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else' (p. 22-23) thus establishing reflective thought as the basis of his 'First Philosophy.' It has not been my intent to provide yet another critique of Descartes. Indeed my analysis does not undermine Descartes' conclusions that self-reflection cannot be doubted, that self-reflection is different from matter, or that self-reflection should be the starting point for philosophy. However, the analysis does challenge the claim that the reflective capacity of the human mind precedes the social world. Instead, the analysis has advocated a Meadian position:

> Our contention is that the mind can never find expression, and could never have come into existence at all, except in terms of a social environment; that an organized set or pattern of social relations and interactions (especially those of communication by means of gestures functioning as significant symbols and thus creating a universe of discourse) is necessarily presupposed by it and involved in its nature. (Mead, 1934, p. 223)

According to Mead the mind does not precede social relations, but rather social relations, including universes of discourse, precede mind.

The above analyses have shown that Descartes' thinking, as found in the *Meditations*, presupposes a social world in four ways. Firstly, the content of Descartes' thought ventriloquates discourses that were prominent in 17th century Europe, namely, the discourses of Scholastic Aristotelianism and scepticism. Secondly, Descartes' insight emerges not through individual rational deduction, but instead through the dialogical interaction between these discourses. That is to say, the form of Descartes' thought is social in the sense of echoing a social dialogue. Thirdly, Descartes' self-awareness, the crux of his argument, is deeply social because his self-awareness, both of talking to himself and of being deceived, implies the interaction of different perspectives. Finally, Descartes' ability and propensity to doubt himself, I have argued, are rooted in his social interactions with other people. Simply put, the evidence suggests that Descartes doubts other people's beliefs before he doubts his own beliefs.

Ryle (1949) famously argues against Descartes' concept of mind, stating emphatically that there is no immaterial ghost in the bodily machine. Ryle wants to explain the mind in terms of behaviour. More recent attempts have tried to explain the mind in terms of the brain. Despite such attempts, however, the ghost has proved difficult to exorcise. Accounts of the mind solely in terms of behaviour or the physical brain remain lacking in phenomenological validity (McGinn, 1989). The indubitable self-reflective aspect of the mind, so clearly identified by Descartes, remains elusive. Self-reflection, I suggest, has a dialogical quality that originates not in the brain or in behaviour but in social interaction. In this sense, there is a ghost in the machine,

namely the trace of the other encountered in social interaction. The trace of the other is evident in every I-position that begets a 'me.' The ghost is the ingrown perspective, the blind spot, that escapes Descartes' introspective effort by virtue of being the position from which he introspects. Conceiving of the self-reflective I-position that Descartes takes up when doubting in terms of the perspective of the other does not create an ontological dualism. Nor does it render the mind inaccessible to scientific analysis. The trace of the other is like an umbilical cord that leads straight out of the marooned Cartesian mind, and into the social world. By mapping out this thread we can both recognise the indubitable nature of self-reflection and make self-reflection explicable in terms of the social world.

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Endnotes

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

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