

## Temporality and Alterity in Descartes' *Meditations*

The themes of temporality and alterity occupy a central position in Descartes' *Meditations*. They have given rise to a myriad of interpretations, but certain of the fundamental insights of the Second Meditation, and their relations to the proof for the existence of God in the Third Meditation, have not been treated adequately, if at all. It will be the task in what follows to demonstrate the temporality of the *cogito*, the priority of the Other over the self that is manifest in the Third Meditation in the proofs for the existence of God, and finally to show the role of the Other in self-consciousness and the freedom of subjectivity. It seems to us that the claim that the "I" is certain "*as long as it is thinking*" contains an implicit notion of time-consciousness which has not been adequately treated in the secondary literature.<sup>1</sup> The certainty of the *cogito*, as I will demonstrate over the course of this essay, is *temporal*. Thus the *ego* that is certain is itself temporal and conscious of itself as it temporalizes itself reflectively with the ultimate aim of attaining absolute certainty. The *cogito*, therefore, is not an instantaneous utterance or "performance."<sup>2</sup> *It endures*. As Descartes writes, he is certain "*as long as he is thinking*."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, this conception of temporality is *independent of motion, counting, and the body*, and thus serves as both a development and a response to Aristotle's theory of time from Book Four of the *Physics*.<sup>4</sup> This conception of the temporality of consciousness, however, requires the proof of the existence of God from the Third Meditation. It is not until Descartes is certain that there is

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<sup>1</sup> René Descartes. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume Two: Meditations on First Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 18, my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jaakko Hintikka. "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" In *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Edited by Willis Doney (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 108.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 18, my emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle. *Physics*. Trans. W.D. Ross. Oxford: OCT, 1950, pp. 369-378. For a discussion of Aristotle and Descartes on time, as well as other "radical Cartesian" developments of the theme of time in relation to Aristotle, Cf. Tad M. Schmaltz. *Radical Cartesianism: The French Reception of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 182-186, 194-206.

a God and that he is not a deceiver that he is capable of providing grounds for the temporality of certainty attained in the Second Meditation, that he is fully aware of his essential nature, and that he attains a complete notion of self-consciousness. The *self*, I will demonstrate, does not truly understand itself until it understands its dependence on an *Other*.

This task will be divided into three parts. Within Part One, I will discuss the relation between temporality and certainty in the Second Meditation and develop Descartes' implicit notion of time-consciousness in this Meditation. In Part Two, I will move onto the Third Meditation, and provide an account of Descartes' proofs of the existence of God and the dependency of finite substance. I will focus on both arguments from the Third Meditation, that is, the "Argument from Effects," and the "Cosmological Argument," in order to demonstrate both the relation between the infinite and the finite as well as the manner in which the finite was created and is perpetually re-created by its infinite source. In Part Three, I will discuss the significance of the existence of God from the Third Meditation for the temporality of consciousness from the Second Meditation, and show that *alterity fulfills temporality* in that temporal self-consciousness is also necessarily consciousness of the Other. In light of the status of alterity, I will address the question of the freedom of subjectivity and show that the subject retains an epistemological independence within its ontological dependence. Finally, to conclude, I will raise a few questions concerning the relation between temporality and the body, and the possibility of different *orders of time* in Descartes' work. In order to uncover these aspects of Descartes' text, I will follow the development of the *Meditations* itself, and reveal the concepts of temporality and alterity through an exegetical account of the particular Meditations analyzed. The essay will therefore first move *successively* from temporality to alterity, and ultimately conclude with the *simultaneity* of alterity and temporal self-consciousness.