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Professor Hintikka on Descartes' "Cogito"

In his celebrated article "Cogito Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?"¹ Professor Hintikka points out a certain sort of sentence which he calls "self-defeating". The thing about these sentences is that the very act of uttering them demonstrates the falsity of the statements made thereby. In particular, "I do not exist" is one such for, in saying it, the very act of saying it contradicts, so to speak, what you're saying. This is the principle that Descartes had in mind, he thinks, in the famous dictum "Cogito ergo sum." The act of thinking referred to by "cogito" is the attempt to convince yourself that you do not exist. You perceive the self-defeating nature of this attempt. It follows that you do exist. To put it another way, in perceiving that "I do not exist" is self-defeating, you perceive that "I do exist" is self-verifying.

Is "I do not exist" always self-defeating? Can people say things when they don't exist? Recording devices spring to mind. Suppose an eccentric millionaire wished to read out his own will. He could tape-record a message which might well begin with the words "Now that I do not exist ...". One does speak of authors saying things in their books, and of actors saying things in recorded performances. I think one can say that the millionaire truly asserts the proposition "I do not exist." Similarly, "I do exist" is not always self-verifying. Suppose a revolutionary group broadcast a message by some leading man they had kidnapped saying "I am alive and well." It might well be suspected that it was only a recording and the unfortunate man had been killed, and consequently that the assertion "I am alive" was false. However, it may be insisted that, precisely speaking, people only assert things at the moment of speaking (or writing), and at the moment when the millionaire (or the prisoner) actually spoke the words "I do not exist" (or "I am alive"), he did exist so the sentence *was* self-defeating (or self-verifying). This stipulation secures that "I do not exist" will always be self-defeating. It also provides a clue as to *why* it is always self-defeating.

It is generally true (or, given the stipulation, it is always true) that, if someone asserts a proposition, he exists. Therefore, if you know that someone is asserting a proposition, you can conclude that he exists. Since any proposition will do, "I do not exist" will do. The peculiar thing about this case is that what you conclude ("This man exists") contradicts what he said. To put it dramatically, the speaker says "I do not exist." The hearer knows that whatever asserts something exists, and also that the speaker is asserting something, so he concludes that the speaker exists. (The picture of two men conversing in a room is not a good one, for then the hearer can see the speaker as well as hear him asserting something. Picture rather the two men having a telephone conversation.)

Now, to get back to Descartes, Hintikka calls his interpretation "performative" as against an "inferential" one, but it can be seen that the self-defeating nature of "I do not exist", and consequently the performative interpretation, depends on an inference, depends, moreover, on precisely the inference enshrined in the inferential interpretation. Since Descartes denied that the cogito expressed this inference,² Hintikka's interpretation is not likely to be correct. And in fact, applying the above analysis to Descartes' situation shows this.

¹ *The Philosophical Review*, October 1963, Vol. lxxii, p 497

² Reply to Second Objections, and Letter to Clerselier, quoted in Appendix 1 of *Descartes, Philosophical Writings*, edited by Anscombe and Geach.

Descartes, suggests Hintikka, is attempting to convince himself that he does not exist, i.e. we have Descartes the Speaker saying "I do not exist" to Descartes the Hearer. Does Descartes the Hearer know that whatever asserts something exists? If he doesn't, then hearing Descartes the Speaker say something is no guarantee of Descartes the Speaker's existence (i.e. "I do not exist" in this case is *not* self-defeating). If he does, then hearing Descartes the Speaker say anything at all would suffice to convince him that Descartes the Speaker exists. In short, the peculiarities of "I do not exist" are irrelevant to Descartes' case.

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