

# COGITO?



DESCARTES AND  
THINKING THE WORLD

JOSEPH ALMOG

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Descartes and Thinking the World

*Joseph Almog*

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Dedicated to Serge Lang and Keith Donnellan

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## Preface

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*Cogito* should be the last proposition in one's repertoire to engender a question mark.\* What is this question mark doing then? Is there any question—doubt—uncertainty about my . . . thinking? Is this not, as Descartes likes to say, the “Archimedean point” of my (cognitive) life? My students often complain with impatience that, by wondering in this *Cogito*? vein, I confront them with another one of those invented philosophical problems. What in the world could be the problem about thinking, since we do it all the time, we live by it?

We do do it—thinking—all the time. But we should not be so sure that it is in the world that we do it, at least not the real world of kicking soccer balls and eating ice cream. The elusiveness of thinking has made many philosophies to account for it by making it an act outside and, often, against nature, an act whose direct object—unlike the objects of kicking and eating—is sublimated, an essentially transcendental and otherworldly item such as (depending on one's clan) a concept, an idea, a sense (*sinn*), a proposition, or a thought.

It is a striking characteristic of Descartes that he brings thinking back to—*embeds* it in—nature. For him, thinking—*penser*—is essentially *penser-le-monde*, so well put in French, without a meditative preposition such as “about” or “of,” an unabashedly direct object construction, thinking the world, exactly like kissing the gal, kicking the soccer ball and eating the ice cream. For Descartes, there is only Nature, the one and only. The kissing, the eating, and the thinking all take place in it, and a *place* they all take.

\*This is a personal preface. If you can't stand those (I used to smirk at them), just skip it and go directly to chapter 1.



Descartes makes me, a reader, feel that this is how things *must* stand in the end. But at the outset, he also makes me feel—how *could* something like thinking ever occur *in* nature? This is the problem of the book.

This book is a sequel. Ten years ago, the project driving the earlier *What Am I?* came to all turn on one key *sentence* of Descartes', his response to a ticklish question by the ever-irrepressible Princess Elizabeth (to be found a letter written on 28 June 1643; CSM III). Descartes' response reads, in the original, "Et enfin, c'est en usant seulement de la vie et des conversations ordinaires, et en s'abstenant de méditer et d'étudier aux choses qui exercent l'imagination, qu'on apprend à concevoir l'union de l'âme et du corps." In my own free translation, "Finally, it is by relying on life and ordinary conversations, and by abstaining from meditating and studying things that exercise the imagination, that we learn how to conceive the union of mind and body."

I am still stuck with their exchange.

I still think the key to Descartes' way of placing man in nature lies in this admonition, in his wish to look at what he'd call in French *l'union vecu*—a pregnant phrase, with the verb connoting both "the union as *experienced*" and, more critically, "the union as *lived*." Ten years later, I hope to have a new key to Descartes' idea that coming to grips with (i) the thinking *by* men and (ii) their being essentially *thinking* men, rests on looking at how we live by thinking.

In teaching Descartes, I have accumulated many human debts. I owe specific thanks to Erin Eaker, Stavroula Glezakos, Erin Taylor, Keith Kaiser, Jorah Dannenberg, Sarah Coolidge, outstanding teachers, at UCLA, of Descartes and of the philosophy of mind. Coolidge improved much the final version of the typescript with sobering comments. The deepest debt among my students I owe to Dominik Sklenar, a most creative metaphysician, so creative that current professional philosophy alienated him to the point that he left it.

I struggle below, especially in chapters 5–6, with ideas of both Tyler Burge and John Carriero about the problems of knowledge

and skepticism; both are colleagues from UCLA. I learned much by studying two of Burge's papers, one on Descartes and one on the notion of a priori knowledge, and I urge the reader, in the relevant chapters below, to have the papers before him. Carriero's forthcoming book on the Meditations, as well as co-teaching with him, have been an inspiration.

As will be obvious throughout this book, especially in chapters 2, 3, and 6, I owe a debt to Keith Donnellan for his notion of "having a thing in mind." (Donnellan's notion is a close cousin of Descartes' notion of the "objective reality" of an idea.) Here too, as with Burge, I did not fully appreciate, at the time, the richness of his ideas. It took me some time, and it was reflection on Descartes in the late 1990s, after Keith had retired, that made me see Donnellan's full depth.

Barbara Herman read my work and told me with her characteristic directness what she thought about it.

I have been sustained through the years by the friendship and comments of Lilli Alanen, Andrea Bianchi, David Chalmers, Steve Yablo, Michael Della Rocca, David Kaplan, Paul Hoffman, Sten Lindstrom, Paolo Leonardi, Tom Nagel, Mike Thau, Mohan Matthen, and Howie Wettstein. Special thanks to Moriel Zelikowsky, to Fabien and the Cafe Flore gang.

Of great help were the comments of the generous readers for Oxford University Press and the wise and always kind handling by the editor, Peter Ohlin, without whom...

I dedicate this book to two great teachers. The first is the mathematician Serge Lang, who just passed away this last September, the most natural teacher I ever met. The other is Keith Donnellan, whom I consider *my* teacher on matters of mind and metaphysics.

Acceglio, Valle Maira, Italy, July 2007

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