

THE IMPERSONAL FORMULATION OF THE COGITO

By KIM DAVIES

ONE line of objection to the Cartesian Cogito has contended that Descartes claims too much in saying 'I am thinking', and that all he is entitled to is an impersonal formulation such as 'thinking is going on'. I wish to counter an argument offered by Bernard Williams against this objection (*Descartes*, Penguin 1978, pp. 95-101).

The difference between Descartes' own and the impersonal formulation is that Descartes' account involves the existence of a thinker, while the impersonal formulation does not. Williams tries to show that the latter is untenable, on the following grounds. Suppose the following are true:

(T₁) It is thought: P (T₂) It is thought: Q

Will it follow that the following is true?

(T₃) It is thought: P and Q.

No, says Williams, 'a distinct thought-content is involved in T₃, and there is nothing in the occurrence of the two thought-events T₁ and T₂ to determine that that thought ever occurred at all. The thoughts T₁ and T₂ could be, as we might hopefully put it, "separate"' (p. 96). But in the possibility of such a separation lurks a difficulty for the impersonal formulation. For 'consider the following combination:

(T₄) It is thought: it is not doubted whether Q

(T₅) It is doubted: Q?

Is the thought reported at T₄ true or false? Unless more is put in, nothing prevents its being straightforwardly made false, by the state of affairs T₅. But granted what has just been said about T₁, T₂ and T₃, it cannot be the case that the thought in T₄ should have to be false just because of T₅: we must want it to be possible that T₅ be as "separate" from T₄ as T₂ can be from T₁' (p.97).

What can we make of the parallel drawn here? If (T₄) and (T₅) are seen as instances of the schemata

It is thought: not P

and

P

then we have no parallel between the two pairs of sentences. However, if we reformulate (T₅) thus:

(T₅*) It is thought: perhaps not Q

which accords with the sense of the Cartesian doubt, then we get the following reformulation of (T₄):

(T₄*) It is thought: it is not thought: perhaps not Q

(T₄*) and (T₅*) are special cases of (T₁) and (T₂), and as a special case of (T₃) we get:

(*) It is thought: perhaps not Q, and it is not thought: perhaps not Q.¹

Now just as the truth of (T₃) does not follow from that of (T₁) and (T₂), we should expect that the truth of (*) does not follow from that of (T₄*) and (T₅*), and this is surely so. Indeed, while (*) may be true, the thought which it reports is necessarily self-defeating, in that whenever it is thought, it is false. But while (T₄*) and (T₅*) are thus 'separate' in the way (T₁) and (T₂) are, this in no way prevents (T₅*), and so (T₅), from falsifying the thought reported at (T₄*), and so (T₄). For (T₅*) is not 'separate' from (T₄*) in another sense, in that it reports precisely that state of affairs held not to obtain by the thought reported at (T₄*). This is not generally true of instances of (T₁) and (T₂), and is just what accounts for (T₅*), and so (T₅), making the thought reported at (T₄*), and so (T₄), false.

In the face of this, obvious enough, point, what sense are we now to make of Williams' insistence that (T₄) and (T₅) be as 'separable' as (T₁) and (T₂)? He goes on: 'T₅ can falsify T₄, we will want to say, only if the doubt-event T₅ is not "separate" from the thought-event T₄, or, one might say, if they both occur in the same thought-world (whatever that might turn out to mean)' (p.97). This is murky, but three points can be made. First: Williams here confuses (T₄) with the thought reported at (T₄). (T₄) can be true while the thought which it reports is false. Thus (T₅) can falsify the thought reported at (T₄) without falsifying (T₄) itself. This can only make it even less clear what Williams' point is, what problem he thinks we must deal with. Second: Williams has given us no good reason for claiming that (T₅) can falsify the thought reported at (T₄) only if (T₄) and (T₅) belong to the same thought-world. If it is doubted whether Q, in whatever thought-world, then the thought reported at (T₄) is false. Of course, *if* we relativise the content of the thought reported at (T₄) to a person, thus:

(T₄R) It is thought: it is not doubted by A whether Q.

then that thought is not straightforwardly made false by (T₅). But that hardly gives us a reason for making the relativisation in the first place. Third: on the impersonal formulation there is no basis for the

¹ I am grateful to Jonathan Lowe for an illuminating discussion in which he suggested these reformulations.

individuation of, and so possible distinction between, thought-worlds. Given this, the thoughts reported at (T₄) and (T₅) cannot be 'separate' in the sense of occupying different thought-worlds, so that no problem about the falsification of the thought reported at (T₄) (or (T₄) itself) can arise from such 'separateness'.

Williams might be expected to accept this last point; but then, it might be objected, what becomes of our earlier acceptance that, on the impersonal formulation, the thoughts reported at (T₁) and (T₂) are 'separate'? Perhaps the idea is this: if the thoughts were not 'separate', in that they occupied the same thought-world, then the truth of (T₃) would follow from that of (T₁) and (T₂). If on the impersonal formulation the thoughts are not 'separate', then this would require us to make the inference to (T₃) from (T₁) and (T₂) which has already been deemed illegitimate, so that the impersonal formulation is incoherent. But this is hopeless. For, accepting the individuation of thought worlds via that of their thinkers which Williams is aiming at, it is notoriously the case that people can fail to draw even the simplest conclusions from their thoughts, and can indeed have thoughts which contradict each other. We cannot, then, get to (T₃) from (T₁) and (T₂) even within the same thought-world. The sense of 'separate', such that the truth of (T₃) does not follow from that of (T₁) and (T₂), has nothing to do with the sense of 'separate' as occupying different thought-worlds: so no incoherence is generated by the thoughts being 'separate' in one sense and not in the other.

Let us make a final attempt: a crucial part of the basis of the Cogito is the claim that, even while I doubt some proposition, Q, about the world, *that* Q is doubted is itself indubitable. It is the kind of *cogitatio* which secures the Cartesian anchor. If no doubt is possible here, then it looks as though (T₄), which reports not merely a doubt whether Q is doubted, but a straight denial of its being doubted, must be ruled out. So if (T₅) is true, the thought which (T₄) reports cannot arise, and so (T₄) cannot be true. But, the argument goes, we can make sense of the impossibility of such a thought arising only if the thoughts reported at (T₄) and (T₅) occupy the thought-world of one thinker; so that impersonal formulation, which rejects the postulation of such a thinker, cannot account for the incompatibility between (T₅) and (T₄), and so cannot account for the indubitability of *cogitationes* on which 'cogito' is founded.

While this reading has the merit of setting the issues more firmly in the context of Williams' discussion of the Cogito, it has nothing to do with (T₁)—(T₃), and is distinct from the question of (T₅) falsifying the thought reported at (T₄). Furthermore, the argument is unsuccessful. For the psychological impossibility that (T₄) be true when (T₅) is, is not the essential point. More important than psychological indubitability

is whether there is any possibility of reasonable doubt of the existence of a *cogitatio* which is itself the object of immediate awareness.

Here the answer, on both formulations, is 'no'; *cogitationes* can be absolutely given as the objects of awareness in which no error is possible concerning their existence. This is all that is required for the impersonal formulation: any problems that arise about this foundational immediacy arise for both formulations alike.

On no interpretation, then, does Williams' decidedly obscure argument succeed in showing the incoherence of the impersonal formulation of the Cogito. It tends, rather, to confirm the impression that once we accept, however grudgingly (p.96), that formulation as meaningful independently of the existence of a thinker, there is no way out of the realm of pure *cogitationes*.

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