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## ON *COGITO* PROPOSITIONS

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The meaning and nature of Descartes's '*cogito, ergo sum*' ([3]: 558) has long been discussed by philosophers. In [7], George Nakhnikian gives a highly complex explanation of "the philosophically interesting features of *cogito* propositions" ([7]: 197). I shall summarize his explanation in Section I of this paper; in Section II, I shall point out an error in his analysis and defend my claim; and, in Section III, I shall correct and thereby strengthen Nakhnikian's theory.

### I. THE LOGIC OF *cogito* PROPOSITIONS

The *cogito* propositions are, roughly, Descartes's '*cogito*' and '*sum*'. More precisely, "[a] *cogito* proposition is what a person would assert if he asserted that he himself is thinking..., or if he asserted that he himself exists..." ([7]: 197).<sup>1</sup>

The first part of Nakhnikian's analysis is the thesis that *cogito* propositions have the following three properties:

- (1) "They are incorrigible for the relevant person" ([7]: 199);
- (2) They "cannot by the relevant persons be denied, disbelieved or doubted [or their denials inferred] without pragmatic inconsistency" ([7]: 200);
- (3) They "have associated beliefs that are self-certifying" (cf. [7]: 206).

'Incorrigibility', 'pragmatic inconsistency', and 'self-certifying' are technical terms which will be defined in Section II.

There are other propositions which also satisfy (1)–(3). These are collected, along with the *cogito* propositions, into a set (actually, into families of sets) called  $K_a$ . A second thesis of Nakhnikian's analysis is that "[e]very member of  $K_a$  entails at least one *cogito* proposition" ([7]: 208).

I shall argue in the next section that this is false.

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II. A DISJUNCTIVE  $K_a$ -PROPOSITION

Let  $\varphi$  be any contingent proposition other than a *cogito* proposition, for example, 'San Francisco is in California'. Consider the *cogito* proposition 'I exist', which a person  $a$  would assert if he asserted that he himself exists. I claim that all propositions of the form 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' are in  $K_a$ .

1. *Incorrigibility*

I must first show that 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' is incorrigible for  $a$ . To do this, we shall need some definitions. The following ones will suffice (cf. [7]: 198, [5]: 289, and [6]: 207–08; in what follows, ' $p$ ' names a proposition and ' $S$ ' names a person):<sup>2</sup>

- (DI) It is incorrigible for  $S$  that  $p =_{df}$
- (i)  $\diamond (S \text{ believes attentively that } p)$
  - and (ii)  $\square (S \text{ believes attentively that } p \supset S \text{ knows that } p)$ .
- (DBA)  $S$  believes attentively that  $p =_{df}$
- (i)  $S$  believes occurrently<sup>3</sup> that  $p$ ,
  - and (ii)  $S$  is paying attention to matters that would be his evidence for judging that  $p$  or for judging that not- $p$ ,
  - and (iii) among these matters stands revealed to  $S$  evidence that  $p$  and no evidence that not- $p$ .

Clearly, it is (logically) possible for  $a$  to believe attentively that he himself exists or  $\varphi$ . To show that (DI.ii) is satisfied, assume that  $a$  believes 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' attentively. There are two cases to consider.

First,  $a$ 's evidence for 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' might be evidence for 'I exist', together with  $a$ 's knowledge of propositional logic. Therefore,  $a$  knows 'I exist', and, since  $a$  knows the relevant propositional logic,  $a$  knows 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '.

Second,  $a$ 's evidence for 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' might be evidence for  $\varphi$ , together with the relevant knowledge of propositional logic. Under these conditions, does  $a$ 's attentively believing 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' entail that  $a$  knows it? If it follows from  $a$ 's attentively believing that  $\varphi$  that  $a$  knows that  $\varphi$ , then, since  $a$  knows the relevant propositional logic,  $a$  knows 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '. If it doesn't follow that  $a$  knows that  $\varphi$ , then, in any event, if  $a$  is attentively believing *anything*,  $a$  knows 'I exist', and so  $a$  knows 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '.

The reader may wonder whether if  $a$  believes some proposition attentively, then  $a$  knows 'I exist'. If this inference is invalid, then rather than letting  $\varphi$  be *any* contingent proposition other than a *cogito* proposition, let it be any contingent proposition other than a *cogito* proposition which is incorrigible for  $a$ . I shall return to this possibility in Section II.4.

### 2. *Self-Certifying*

To show that 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' has associated beliefs which are self-certifying, we shall need the following definition ([7]: 199; ' $p$ ' names a contingent proposition and ' $S$ ' a person):

- (DSC)  $S$ 's (occurrent/dispositional) belief that  $p$  is self-certifying = $_{df}$
- (i)  $S$  believes (occurrently/dispositionally) that  $p$ ,
  - and (ii)  $\Box$  ( $S$  believes (occurrently/dispositionally) that  $p \supset p$ ).

Assume, then, that  $a$  believes (occurrently/dispositionally) the proposition 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '. To see that this entails 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ', note that it entails that  $a$  exists. Thus, it entails 'I exist', and hence 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '. Moreover,  $\varphi$  need not be incorrigible for  $a$ .

### 3. *Pragmatic Inconsistency*

This part of my argument requires another definition<sup>4</sup> (cf. [7]: 199; again, ' $p$ ' names a contingent proposition and ' $S$ ' a person):

- (DPI)  $S$  is pragmatically inconsistent with respect to  $p$  = $_{df}$
- (i) (a)  $S$  asserts that  $p$  (=  $S$  denies that not- $p$ ), and  
(b)  $\Box$  ( $S$  asserts that  $p \supset$  not- $p$ ); or
  - (ii) (a)  $S$  believes that  $p$  (=  $S$  disbelieves that not- $p$ ), and  
(b)  $\Box$  ( $S$  believes that  $p \supset$  not- $p$ ); or
  - (iii) (a)  $S$  infers that  $p$ , and  
(b)  $\Box$  ( $S$  infers that  $p \supset$  not- $p$ ); or
  - (iv) (a)  $S$  doubts that  $p$ , and  
(b)  $\Box$  ( $S$  doubts that  $p \supset p$ ).

Suppose that  $a$  denies (or disbelieves) 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '. Then  $a$  asserts (or believes) 'I don't exist and not- $\varphi$ ', and hence  $a$  asserts (or believes) 'I don't exist'. But this entails 'I exist', and so  $a$  is being pragmatically inconsistent. Similarly, if  $a$  infers 'I don't exist and not- $\varphi$ ', then  $a$  infers 'I don't exist'. But this entails 'I exist', and  $a$  is again caught up in pragmatic inconsistency. The case of doubt must be handled slightly differently: If  $a$  doubts

'I exist or  $\varphi$ ', then either  $a$  doubts 'I exist', or  $a$  doubts that  $\varphi$ , or  $a$  doubts propositional logic. In the first case,  $a$  is being pragmatically inconsistent ([7]: 200). The second and third cases entail that  $a$  exists, i.e., 'I exist'. And that entails 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '. So  $a$  is once more being pragmatically inconsistent. Again,  $\varphi$  need not be incorrigible for  $a$ .

#### 4. *Other Consequences*

Sections II.1–3 show that 'I exist or  $\varphi$ '  $\in K_a$ . Similarly, it could be shown that all propositions of the form ' $C_a$  or  $\varphi$ '  $\in K_a$ , where  $C_a$  is a *cogito* proposition.

But 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ', to return to our paradigm, does *not* entail any *cogito* proposition. Rather, it is entailed *by* a *cogito* proposition, viz., 'I exist'. Were 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' to entail a *cogito* proposition, surely it would entail 'I exist'. But it does not even materially imply 'I exist'. For if  $\varphi$  is true and 'I exist' is false, then 'I exist or  $\varphi$   $\supset$  I exist' is false.

One problem arises if  $\varphi$  is incorrigible for  $a$ , as it might have to be for the argument of Section 1 to go through. For it might be the case that ' $\varphi$  is incorrigible for  $a$ ' entails ' $a$  exists'. In that event, 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' would be logically equivalent to 'I exist'. But I am not sure that this entailment holds, for I think it makes sense to speak of propositions being incorrigible for fictional characters, which *don't* exist. (I *do* think, however, that ' $a$  knows incorrigibly that  $p$ ' entails ' $a$  exists'; cf. [7]: 198.)<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Nakhnikian's claim that " $K_a$  is the smallest class of propositions everyone of which entails at least one *cogito* proposition" ([7]: 207) is false. There are two reasons. For one thing, let  $\psi$  be any member of  $K_a$ . Then  $K_a - \{\psi\}$  is 'smaller' than  $K_a$ ; i.e.,  $K_a - \{\psi\} \subset K_a$ . But, worse, if my arguments are correct, then there are propositions in  $K_a$  which entail *neither cogito* proposition.

### III. CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, this does not affect Nakhnikian's claim about  $K_a$  that "[t]he presence in it of *cogito* propositions and their logical relations to the other members of it underlie the philosophically interesting features of *cogito* propositions" ([7]: 207). For we need only alter the final paragraph<sup>6</sup> of [7] to read as follows:

The set  $L$  consisting of *cogito* propositions is the only one that satisfies these three conditions:

- (i)  $L \subset K_a$ ; and
- (ii) if  $p \in K_a$ , then either  $p$  entails one or the other member of  $L$ , or one or the other member of  $L$  entails  $p$ ; and
- (iii) the only members of  $K_a - L$  that are logically equivalent to one or the other corresponding *cogito* proposition are propositions that can be correctly expressed by sentences in which a quantifier or a sentential operator has within its scope at least one sentence that can be used correctly to express one or the other corresponding *cogito* proposition.<sup>7</sup>

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By 'he himself' is meant, I take it, the quasi-indexical 'he\*'; see Castañeda [2].

<sup>2</sup> Other definitions of 'in corrigibility', occurring in recent discussions of mind-body and epistemological problems, may be found in, e.g., Armstrong [1], Parsons [8], Rorty [9], and Lehrer [4].

<sup>3</sup> "A man who is not at a given time thinking of, or entertaining, the proposition that  $p$  cannot then be believing occurrently that  $p$ ..." ([7]: 198).

<sup>4</sup> Nakhnikian only gives sufficient conditions for pragmatic inconsistency, but this does not affect my argument.

<sup>5</sup> We might note here that if  $p$  is incorrigible for  $a$ , and if  $a$  believes that  $p$ , then  $a$ 's belief that  $p$  is self-certifying. But ' $p$  is incorrigible for  $a$ ' does not entail that it is pragmatically inconsistent for  $a$  to deny, disbelieve, doubt, or infer the denial of that  $p$ . Hence, we need not worry that 'I exist or  $\varphi$ ' might entail 'I exist' by virtue of an incorrigible  $\varphi$ 's entailing it.

<sup>6</sup> "In view of these facts we have the following unique property for the set  $L$  consisting of *cogito* propositions. The set  $L$  is the only one that satisfies these two conditions: (i) its members are in  $K_a$ , and (ii) every member of  $K_a$  entails one or the other member of  $L$ , and the only other members of  $K_a$  that are logically equivalent to one or the other corresponding *cogito* proposition are propositions that can be correctly expressed by sentences in which a quantifier or a sentential operator has within its scope at least one sentence that can be used correctly to express one or the other corresponding *cogito* proposition" ([7]: 209).

The clause about logical equivalence is intended to cover such cases as 'I exist or San Francisco is in California, and I exist or San Francisco is not in California', which is logically equivalent to 'I exist'.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to George Nakhnikian and the Editor for their advice on earlier versions of this paper.

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