

‘COGITO ERGO SUM’ VERSES ‘VOLO ERGO SUM’

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Abstract: For ages philosophers have been exploring various new facts, events, hypothesis, etc. of the world out of sheer curiosity. This research recommends the study of two such philosophers like Rene Descartes and Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī who uncover a number of new concepts and ideas in philosophy. Among them, Descartes’ invention of ‘*Cogito ergo sum*’ and al-Ghazālī’s ‘*Volo ergo sum*’ are the main concern of this study. The article highlights that Descartes’ philosophy requires one’s own thinking, while al-Ghazālī’s dictum determines God is Will and the human being is akin to God in the context of will. The findings employ that ‘*Cogito ergo sum*’ introduces the existence of consciousness or mind that is the only thing we can be certain right now; everything else depends on it, as it is the highest form of certainty. And ‘*Volo ergo sum*’ initiates that it is not thought but will, and as long as will is concerned the soul conceives that it exists in this earth.

Key Words: Consciousness, *Cogito*, God, Soul, Thinking thing, Will, *Volo ergo sum*.

Introduction: The study takes a look at the two famous and separate era’s philosophers’ mainly Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058-1111) who made almost similar outspoken in their respective disciplines as scholars and researchers demand the same. The question of who followed whom between them is a separate matter; our focus, rather, will be on how their discoveries have been acknowledged and how they can be discussed under the same conceptual framework. We will now critically assess the claims made by scholars about these two philosophers, with a view to evaluating how well-founded and analytically productive those assertions truly are.

Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore, I am):

At the outset of *Part IV* of the *Discourse on Method* and in the *First Meditation*, Descartes adopts the method of universal doubt to demonstrate that most of what we commonly take to be knowledge is actually open to under scrutiny. He finds that none of these beliefs provide an absolutely certain and unshakable foundation. Eventually, he arrives at one indubitable truth: although he can doubt everything else, but cannot doubt that he himself exists - at least while he is doubting. This leads to the famous proposition in Latin: *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which Descartes presents as a certain proposition.

We now turn to an analysis of this proposition to assess whether Descartes’ claim of its indubitability holds up. In the *Second Meditation*, he maintains the French equivalent *je Pense, donc je Suis*, its English form is namely, “I think, therefore I am”. Here the word “therefore” indicates that “I am” is a conclusion derived from “I think.”

To understand the necessity of ‘existence’ as a condition for doubt, we consider an example from Descartes’ philosophical dialogue, where the character Eudoxus (often seen as Descartes’ spokesperson) explains this idea to Polyander (the person of untutored common sense). Eudoxus points out that:

Polyander cannot negate that he has such doubts; rather it is a true fact he has the same, but one thing is certain that he cannot doubt his doubting. Furthermore, it is also a true fact that if he is now doubting, therefore he must exist; this makes so clear that he can no longer have any doubts about it.¹

This insight reveals that existence is a prerequisite for the capacity to doubt; therefore, the existence of doubt necessarily implies the existence of a self - a subject who doubts.

Descartes reinforces this argument in *Principles of Philosophy* 1.7: stating that it is contradictory to suppose that something which is thinking does not exist.² Hence, the knowledge “I think, therefore I exist” is not only foundational but also the most certain insight available to anyone engaged in proper philosophical inquiry.

In short, the act of thinking requires a thinker. To assert “I am thinking but do not exist” is self-contradictory, as thought cannot occur without a thinker or subject. The proposition *Cogito, ergo sum* is thus self-validating, because its falsehood cannot be supposed without contradiction. Many philosophers have observed that denying either “I exist” or “I think” is incoherent, since the very act of making the denial affirms the truth of what is denied. Consequently, both existence and thought are presupposed in either their assertion or denial.

Descartes aims to demonstrate that the proposition “I think” implies that “I exist” is necessarily true whenever it is conceived. Therefore, the full statement “I think, therefore I exist” is meant to be indubitable. However, there is a problem with the way Descartes treats this necessity, it is only hypothetical. That is, the truth of the conclusion “I exist” follows necessarily only on the assumption that the antecedent “I think” is true.

In this regard, A. J. Ayer comments: “The sense in which I cannot doubt the statement that I think is exactly that my doubting it entails its truth; and in the same sense I cannot doubt that I exist.”³ The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that one cannot, without absurdity, doubt one’s own existence. But this does not make “I exist” a necessary truth. Rather, it appears to be a contingent fact that I exist.

What is necessarily true is this conditional: if I am capable of any kind of thought - whether it be doubting, believing, or reasoning - then I must exist. Existence is thus a precondition for any cognitive activity. However, this conclusion falls short of Descartes’ intended claim. He seeks to prove that “I exist” is a necessary truth in itself, that is, that the existence of the self as a thinking thing is absolutely necessary. From this point, it seems that the proposition is not indubitable in the strict or absolute sense that Descartes requires.

The question that arises from Descartes’ formulation of the proposition “I think, therefore I exist” concerns the nature of his discovery: is it an intuition or a deduction? Is “I exist” derived as a conclusion from the premise “I think”?

Initially, Descartes presents “I think, therefore I am” as something perceived or recognized through a simple act of intuition - an immediate, self-evident truth that does not result from any process of deduction. However, the structure of the statement itself, particularly the use of the word “therefore,” suggests a deductive inference: “I exist” appears to follow logically from the premise “I think.”

To clarify, Descartes later explains that when one says “I am thinking, therefore I am or I exist,” one does not derive existence from thought through a syllogism. Rather, the truth is recognized immediately through a simple intuition of the self.⁴ In this light, “I think, therefore I am” becomes a foundational principle from which further truths may be deduced, rather than a conclusion that itself results from deduction.

Descartes explicitly criticizes the idea that this is a syllogistic deduction. As, he denounces syllogisms for merely repeating what is already known, and for failing to provide the kind of methodological clarity he seeks. Nevertheless, in *Principles of Philosophy* 1.10, Descartes concedes that some prior knowledge is necessary. For example, in order to affirm “I think, therefore I am,” one must already understand what thought, existence, and certainty mean; and recognize the impossibility that something which thinks might not exist.⁵ These foundational notions i.e. thought, existence and certainty according to Descartes, are so simple that they require no further definition.⁶ Their simplicity suggests that they are grasped through intuition. However, the connection between them, as expressed in the proposition “I think, therefore I am,” suggests a kind of deductive structure as well. This deduction, however, does not conform to formal syllogistic reasoning.

Again a complexity arises in Descartes’ account between his claim that he exists and his claim about what he is. First, he asserts that he is a thinking thing; second, he affirms that he exists. This raises critical questions: from where does the conclusion “I am” or “I exist” derive its force? Is there an implicit premise behind it? Does it follow from a formal logical argument?

To approach this, we must consider Descartes’ own perspective on the *Cogito*. He treats *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) as a reflective insight - something he arrives at in the notion of following the method of doubt to its limits. In the *Meditations*, the initial conclusion is simply “I exist.” If the *Cogito* is to be understood as a formal argument, it would need to comprise at least three distinct propositions: two premises and a conclusion, with a logical connection linking them. The likely form would be:

Whatever thinks, exists. I think. Therefore, I exist.

This would involve a continuous movement of thought from the premises to the conclusion, with each component intuitively grasped. However, Descartes explicitly denies that *Cogito ergo sum* is a syllogism of this sort. He argues instead that when the thought “I think” occurs, the conclusion “I exist” is recognized immediately and self-evidently by a simple intuition.⁷ In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he emphasizes that apart from the awareness of thought itself, the assertion “I exist” is the only positive conclusion reached at that stage. No additional premises are introduced, nor are any needed.

The philosopher like Bernard Williams offers a nuanced view here. He argues that while the truth of the *Cogito* presupposes the truth of “I exist,” it is nonetheless inferential in nature, though not in a syllogistic form.⁸ According to Williams, Descartes viewed the *Cogito* as a kind of inference.

In contrast, Jaakko Hintikka offers a different reading.⁹ He acknowledges that Descartes at times treated the *Cogito* as a logical inference, but such treatment may not have regarded the *Cogito* as an argument in the traditional logical sense. Based on textual analysis, Hintikka proposes a performative interpretation of *Cogito*. That is, the act of thinking itself confirms the truth of the statement “I exist.” On this reading, *Cogito* functions not just as a statement but as a performance, a mental act that demonstrates its own validity. The phrase “*ergo sum*” therefore acquires a performative character, not inferential in the strict logical sense, but existentially self-verifying.¹⁰

However, the title of Descartes’ *Second Meditation* proposes a philosophical inquiry into the nature of human mind. For Descartes, the mind which he also refers to as the soul, represents the entirety of the thinking self.¹¹ Indeed, to avoid ambiguity, he restricts the term mind or soul to mean the principle by which we think. In the *Second Meditation*, the central focus becomes an investigation into the identity and nature of the “I.”¹²

When Descartes asserts “I think,” the “I” refers to a purely immaterial, thinking substance i.e. a mind, intelligence, intellect, or reason.¹³ In the context of “I exist,” this “I” is understood independently of any reference to bodily processes such as digestion, movement, or sensory activity.¹⁴ This is significant because it shifts the basis of self-knowledge from the body to the mind alone.

The process of self-discovery in the *Cogito* can be summarized in four key conclusions, each building upon the last:

- i) An immediate awareness of thought reveals “I exist.”
- ii) This existence is clarified as the existence of a thinking thing.
- iii) This thinking thing is capable of a range of mental acts such as doubting, affirming, denying, understanding, willing, imagining, and so on.
- iv) Intellect is established as an essential and defining faculty of the mind.¹⁵

The *Cogito* inquiry reaches completion only with this final realization. Descartes stresses that sustained reflection is required to overcome deeply ingrained habits of confusing intellectual (mental) activities with corporeal (bodily) ones.¹⁶ The proper task is to distinguish clearly between what belongs to the mind and what pertains to the body. The mind is known through the intellect, which perceives “intellectual things” without relying on images or sense data.

This notion is extended in the *Third Meditation*, where Descartes asserts that not only the mind but also God is apprehended through the pure intellect. In the *Sixth Meditation*, he further claims that the essence of matter, defined as extension, can likewise be known through intellectual insight.

The *Cogito* serves as a foundational method in the broader sense of attaining true knowledge, as stated in the *Synopsis of the Meditations*. The radical method of doubt, culminating in the discovery of the self as a thinking thing, is described as being “of the greatest benefit,” as it enables the mind to distinguish clearly what belongs to itself.¹⁷

At this point, three interpretive frameworks of the *Cogito* emerge such as - foundationalist, systematic, and methodological. The foundationalist view treats the *Cogito* as the first principle from which all other knowledge can be derived. The systematic view regards the *Cogito* as a conclusion implicitly linked to other insights, beginning with the intuitive certainty of one’s own existence and leading to further conclusions. And the methodological view understands the *Cogito* as a model of certainty. It exemplifies the kind of knowledge that can be achieved through proper method, and it helps to establish a general principle of knowing. Once established, this principle can be applied to other areas of metaphysical inquiry.

Indeed, Descartes begins this application early in the *Third Meditation*, where the *Cogito* becomes a stepping stone toward proving the existence of God and validating clear and distinct perceptions i.e. certainty.

Volo Ergo Sum (I Will, Therefore, I Exist):

The intellectual journey of al-Ghazālī, medieval Islamic philosopher, led him to a deep engagement with the path of Sufism, a tradition that existed long before him and emphasized the soul's yearning for direct experience and closeness to God. Through the careful study of major early Sufi thinkers, such as Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, al-Shiblī, and al-Junayd - al-Ghazālī came to recognize that Sufism, at its core, provided the most authentic path to divine knowledge.¹⁸ However, he did not entirely accept all aspects of the Sufi experience, particularly their emphasis on ecstatic states (*wajd*), which he regarded as an unreliable means of attaining truth.

A prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) declares, "He who knows himself, knows his Lord."¹⁹ This statement reflects a central theme in al-Ghazālī's thought that the path to knowing God begins with knowing the self. Drawing on both scripture and rational reflection, he contends that the human soul (*nafs*) is like a polished mirror - when purified, it reflects divine reality. Those endowed with knowledge, purity of life, and sincere devotion recognize this reflective capacity of the soul.

The Qur'ān repeatedly declares both the limitations and the divine origin of the human being. For example, it states, "Man was created weak"²⁰ implying that although humans are imperfect, they do not even know their creator only because of having the less perfect knowledge. Furthermore, the Qur'ānic verse "Allāh breathed into human being of His own spirit"²¹ establishes the soul's transcendent, divine connection. The soul, therefore, is not a material entity; it belongs to the supra-sensible realm, that is, it is beyond the domain of physical sensation and belongs to a higher, spiritual order. Because God is an immaterial unity, knowledge of the immaterial soul becomes an essential means to approach knowledge of the Divine.

In the *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-Anwār*), al-Ghazālī offers two important concepts from the Qur'ān are the Pen (mentioned in Qur'ān 68:1) and the Preserved Tablet (Qur'ān 85:22). The Pen symbolizes the Active Intellect. It moves the outermost sphere of the universe and is sometimes also called the Fire, the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, or the Divine Spirit. The Preserved Tablet, on the other hand, represents the Universal Soul. According to al-Ghazālī, before creating the world, God used the Pen to 'write' a divine plan on the Tablet. This Tablet is like a blueprint that contains all knowledge and the forms of everything that would exist. God then created the world based on this plan. In addition, Al-Ghazālī says that the Tablet is like a mirror; just like the human heart.²² Both reflect divine knowledge. In this sense, the human heart and the Preserved Tablet are two spiritual mirrors facing each other—both receiving and reflecting the truths of existence.

Now in *Iḥyā 'Ulum id-Dīn* (*Revival of the Religious Science*), al-Ghazālī explains the nature of God by asserting that God is, above all, Will - not just intelligence or thought. This idea sets him different from other philosophers like al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), who claimed that God is primarily and essentially Pure Thought or Intellect. These thinkers, following Aristotle, described God as a self-thinking Thought, knowing Himself as the First Intelligence. Al-Ghazālī, however, found this explanation extremely inadequate.

While al-Ghazālī agrees with those philosophers that God is the Ultimate Cause, the Light of Light, Eternal Wisdom, and Creative Truth, he insists on something more: God is first and foremost Will. This Divine Will is the true source of all creation.²³ Thus, he departs significantly from the philosophers, emphasizing Will over Thought.

Again in al-Ghazālī's theological vision, the entire universe i.e. heavens, earth, and everything within them is the direct result of God's will and creative command. Here, he quotes a Qur'ānic verse: "He is the creator of the heavens and the earth when He decrees a matter, He said to it: 'Be' and it is."²⁴

From this verse, al-Ghazālī argues that God brought the universe into being out of nothing, purely through His divine will and command, and continues to govern it through that same will. This view directly contradicts that of most philosophers, who typically claimed that "God wills the world because He thinks of it." But al-Ghazālī reverses this: "God knows the world because He wills it."²⁵

This reversal is critical. For al-Ghazālī, God's will is prior to His knowledge i.e. God chooses to create and sustains the world through His will, and His knowledge follows that volition. The philosophers, on the other hand, held that God's knowledge causes His will, not the other way around. Al-Ghazālī challenges this reasoning. He agrees that God's will is eternal, but argues that this will can bring about an effect at a time chosen by God. The fact that an eternal will produces an effect at a specific moment is not a logical contradiction. Just because a cause exists eternally does not mean its effect must be immediate. It is perfectly coherent, he argues, for an effect to be delayed according to the nature of the cause - especially when that cause is free and intelligent, like God's will.

Though, most classical philosophers believed in the eternity of the world - that it has always existed alongside God. To justify this, they made several arguments involving cause and effect:

- Every effect must have a cause.
- That cause must act through an external force.
- Once a cause is fully present, its effect must occur immediately.²⁶

From these principles, they concluded that the world must be the eternal effect of God's eternal cause, His will or knowledge. They believed it was impossible for an eternal will to bring about a new effect at a specific point in time.

Al-Ghazālī also explains that much of the confusion arises because philosophers tried to understand God's will by comparing it to human will. But this is a usual mistake. Just as God's knowledge is unlike human knowledge, God's will also operates everything in a completely unique and transcendent way. It is free, undetermined, and not subject to any external force. Thus, when we say that God willed the universe into existence at a particular moment, we are not making an illogical claim. Rather, we are affirming that God's eternal will has power over time itself, and that His will can choose not only what to create, but also when to create it.

In this context, he introduces the phrase (Tanzih) *Volo ergo sum* (I will, therefore I exist) to highlight that God is essentially Will, and that the human being, created in God's image, shares this quality. For al-Ghazālī, this concept is at the heart of his mystical psychology and theory of knowledge.

According to him, the soul of the human is unique among all creatures - not defined primarily by thought, but by will, which is the power that shaped both soul and body with intentional purpose. He refers to a well-known tradition: God created Adam in His own form, signifying a deep spiritual connection between the human soul and the Divine Spirit. This connection is not merely metaphorical - it points to the soul's infinite potential, which can be realized through the exercise of will. Human beings are not passive recipients of knowledge or fate; rather, they actively shape their spiritual destiny through the choices they make.

Al-Ghazālī explains that humans are filled with limitless spiritual potential, and by exercising their will, they gradually uncover these inner possibilities. Through this process, they draw closer to God's Will and understanding. He supports this with a verse from the Qur'ān: "O soul at rest! Return to your Lord, satisfied with Him, giving satisfaction unto Him. Then enter among His servants and enter His Paradise."²⁷

He describes two realms of existence: The World of Command (*Ālam al-Amr*) - immaterial, beyond form or measurement and the World of Creation (*Ālam al-Khalq*) - physical, with shape and quantity.²⁸ Al-Ghazālī places the human soul in the World of Command, since it was brought into existence by the command of God. He quotes here the Qur'ānic verse: "Say: the spirit is from the command of my Lord."²⁹ This spiritual command governs and sustains the created world. The soul, as a spiritual unity, animates the body and directs its actions. Ultimately, the human soul reaches its highest purpose through a spiritual journey, unfolding its hidden capacities and discovering its deepest longing - reunion with God.³⁰ Just as we cannot see the soul, we cannot see God with our physical senses. Yet, the will confirms to the human soul its own existence.

In his Persian work *The Alchemy of Happiness* (*Kīmiyā-yi Sa'ādat*), al-Ghazālī maintains that the soul has special qualities that resemble those of God. He explains this using a metaphor:

No one can understand a king but a king; consequently God has made everyone as a king in miniature, that is to say, over a kingdom which is an infinitely reduced copy of His own.³¹

So God made every person a "miniature king," ruling over a small kingdom - his own body and inner world. In this kingdom: The soul is like God's throne, the heart is like the archangel, the brain is the divine chair, and the mind's memory is like the divine tablet of destiny. He emphasizes that the soul is invisible, indivisible, and without location - just like God's essence. And just as God rules the universe, the soul rules the body. So in this way, the human soul reflects God in its essence, actions, and qualities.

Thus, when the soul attains perfection, it becomes capable of understanding all realities. It takes on the form of all beings and becomes united with them in knowledge. In this state, the human becomes a true representative (*khalifa*) of God on Earth. As a result, true knowledge, knowing things as they truly are, is achieved when the soul reflects the Divine Will and fulfills its spiritual destiny.

Conclusion: With this discussion, we may now come to a conclusion that while Descartes' notion '*Cogito ergo sum*' prescribes the existence of indubitable self whose main element is thought, al-Ghazālī's dictum *Volo ergo sum* holds the thesis of God's will which is the cause of creation. In recent time, many scholars and researchers claim that Descartes may have been influenced by al-Ghazālī. Through the ongoing research, we also find that al-Ghazālī some four hundred years before Descartes used this axiom to determine the essence of God is Will, and this divine will is reflected in the human soul, making human beings uniquely related to the Divine. For al-Ghazālī, the soul's true identity is rooted not in cognition or rational thought alone, but in its capacity to will, to choose, to strive. Finally, we may assert that although their conclusions differ, the methodological approach they adopt is largely aligned – at least within the bounds of this particular context.

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