

HOW WE KNOW THE HORSE IS REAL

Our Ontological Debt to Descartes

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Imagine a field in the countryside. Let's put a horse in the field.

Now let's say you drive by the field and see the horse. As you drive by, a question enters your mind: "How do I know the horse is real?" You begin to ponder this. "Is it possible that the horse is a mirage, a trick of sunlight on my retinas? Is the horse a delusion due to my medications? Is the horse an illusion perpetrated upon my mind by some equestrian demon? Or worse, is it an imaginary horse in an imaginary world all created by my own mind?"¹

I know it's hard for people with good common sense to put up with such questions. We say, "Of course the horse is real! You wouldn't be driving if you were on those kinds of medications, and a horse in a country field is a perfectly common and rational thing." But philosophy teaches us that we shouldn't take such things for granted. If we're concerned about the ultimate issues of life at all, then we must think through some of the most fundamental questions, like "How do I know something is real?" If we're going to live a thoughtful life, we can't let our common sense just put a real horse in the field and leave it at that. It really is a valuable exercise to ask if the horse is real. However, that question leads to the question of whether anything at all is real!

This is where the French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes (pronounced *dayKART*) helps us. We all know at least the last half of his famous saying, *Dubito ergo cogito, cogito ergo sum*: "I doubt therefore I think, I think therefore I am." Descartes endeavored to doubt everything he could possibly doubt, in order to find a foundation of certainty. Descartes was a great doubter; he could have doubted the reality of our horse in the field with half of his skepticism tied behind his back. But Descartes found that the one thing he could not possibly doubt was his own existence, because *somebody had to exist to do the doubting!* And this is indeed a foundation of certainty from which to explore the reality of the rest of one's world. We are indebted to Descartes for this proof of our own existence, *I think, therefore I am*,

¹ Have you ever heard of solipsism? Solipsism is a theory that the self is the only thing that really exists and the illusion of the outside world is only self-perpetrated effects upon the self's own mind.

because it allows us to verify the reality of the rest of our world.

Here's how it works: If anything at all exists, it had a cause or is self-existent. Philosophers and good scientists say, *ex nihilo nihil fit*, "out of nothing, nothing comes." So if anything exists, it has always been, i.e. *it did not "come,"* or it did come and had to come *out of something*, i.e., something caused it. Thanks to Descartes, we know that something does exist, namely *me*. Therefore, *I* have always been or had to have a cause. That presents me with three options:

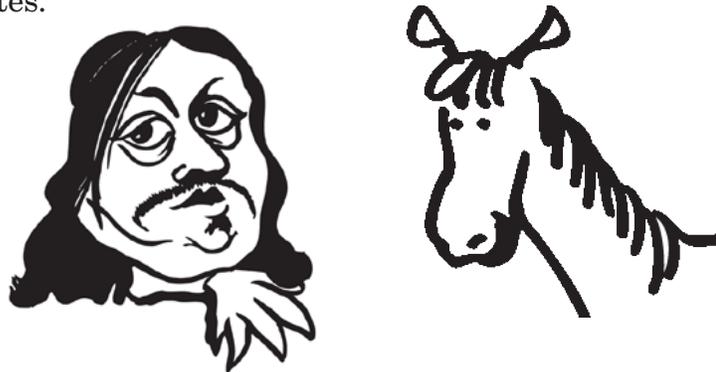
1. I've always existed, i.e., I'm self-existent.
2. I caused or "created" myself.
3. I, or at least my first ancestor, was created by a self-existent entity.

Option 1 is ruled out by my sense of finiteness and my experience of aging. If I'd always existed, I'd have a much longer memory and my body would be crumbling to dust. The second option is logically impossible. I can't have created myself because that would require that I existed before I existed. That leaves only option 3: I, or at least my first ancestor, was created by a self-existent entity.²

So, Descartes' foundation of certainty, *I think therefore I am*, has led us directly to the realm of theology. **I know I exist, and I know I was brought into existence by the creative work of a self-existent entity.**

What can we deduce about this Creator entity? Well, besides the fact that it is self-existent and apparently eternal, it must be super-intelligent. I know I exist and I'm quite intelligent compared to the reasonably smart horse in the field, so whoever created me must be super intelligent, and by implication of that intelligence must also have personality. Furthermore, for this Creator to go to the trouble of creating me implies purposefulness; this personal Creator must be doing things *on purpose*. And two more things: if this Creator is personal, purposeful and super intelligent, it's reasonable to conclude that this same Creator made everything else in the universe and made the universe *rationally intelligible*.

If the universe is rationally intelligible, then we can have assurance that when we do drive by a field and do see a horse in it, the horse in the field is indeed real. But philosophically speaking, we owe this assurance to Descartes and his foundation of certainty, *I think therefore I am*. The bottom line is that we cannot reasonably put the horse before Descartes.



² Cf. R. C. Sproul's discussion of the cosmological argument on p. 126 of *The Consequences of Ideas*.