

Summer Holiday Tasks

Below you will find two articles;
'I think, therefore!' (Philosophy)
'The Ring of Gyges' (Ethics)

- For each article, summarise 3 key points in less than 5 sentences each.
- For each article tell us what you found most interesting and why.

62. I think, therefore?

My name is René. I remember reading once that if there is one thing I can always be certain of, it's that as long as I'm thinking, I exist. If I, David, am thinking right now, I must exist in order for the thinking to go on. That's right, isn't it? I may be dreaming or I may be mad, or maybe I don't live in Taunton at all, but as long as I'm thinking I know that Lucy (that's me) exists. I find this comforting. My life in Munich can be very stressful, and knowing that I can be certain of the existence of my self provides some security. Walking down the Champs-Élysées every morning, I often find myself wondering if the real world exists. Do I really live in Charlottesville, as I think? Friends say to me, 'Madeleine, you will drive yourself mad with your speculations!' • But I don't think I'm nuts. I've found certainty in an uncertain world. *Cogito ergo sum*. I, Nigel, think, therefore I am indeed Cedric.

Sources: *Discourse on Method* by René Descartes (1637), *Schriften und Briefe* by G. C. Lichtenberg (Carl Hanser Verlag, 1971)



Is this monologue coherent? In one sense it clearly is not. The speaker keeps changing his or her name, and makes conflicting claims about where s/he lives. Superficially it's a mess.

However, in one important sense it is completely coherent. More specifically, it is entirely consistent with the truth of 'I think, therefore I am'. René Descartes, who first wrote that, took it to establish the existence of an immaterial soul or self. But

critics have argued that in doing so he claimed more than his argument had proved. Our bizarre monologue shows why.

The key point is that the certainty you get from 'I think, therefore I am' comes only in the moment of its thinking. It is indeed true that in order for there to be a thought, there must indeed be a thinker to have it. But that momentary certainty does not demonstrate that the same thinker exists over time, or is the same one who had a thought a few minutes ago. Indeed, it is consistent with the thinker popping into existence only for the time it takes to have the thought.

This is how to make sense of the monologue. These are not the words of a single, continuous self, but a series of thoughts by a sequence of selves, all of whom take turns to occupy the position of the speaker. We do not need to think of this in occult terms. Think rather of someone with an acute multiple personality disorder. The different personae take it turns, in rapid succession, to control the voice function. At the time each of them says 'I think, therefore I am' what they say is absolutely true. It is just that it is no sooner said than the 'I', whose existence was so incontrovertible, disappears. Perhaps we could even have the situation portrayed by the last sentence, in which a second 'I' completes the thought of the first.

Given that most of us do not have multiple personalities, what is the significance of this for us? The point of the monologue is to show that Descartes's famous words demonstrate a great deal less than we often take them to. The fact that we think may show that we exist, but it does not tell us anything about what kind of thing we are, or whether we continue to exist as the same person over time. The certainty we get from *cogito ergo sum* comes at a high price: complete uncertainty once we step outside the moment in which the thought occurs.

75. The ring of Gyges

Herbert slipped the ring of Gyges on to his finger and was immediately startled by what he saw: nothing. He had become invisible.

For the first few hours, he wandered around testing his new invisibility. Once, he accidentally coughed and found that in the ears of the world, he was silent too. But he had physical bulk, and would leave an impression on a soft cushion or create an unexplained obstacle for those seeking to walk through him.

Once he became used to what it was like to live invisibly, Herbert started to think about what he could do next. To his shame, the ideas that popped into his head first were not entirely savoury. He could, for instance, loiter in the women's showers or changing rooms. He could quite easily steal. He could also trip up the obnoxious suits who shouted into their mobile phones.

mobile phones.

But he wanted to resist such base temptations and so tried to think of what good deeds he could do. The opportunities here, however, were less obvious. And for how long could he resist the temptation to take advantage of his invisibility in less edifying ways? All it would take would be one moment of weakness and there he'd be: peeking at naked women or stealing money. Did he have the strength to resist?

Source: Book two of The Republic by Plato (360 BCE)

It is tempting to see the ring of Gyges as a test of moral fibre: how you would act under the cloak of invisibility reveals your true moral nature. But how fair is it to judge someone by how they would act when confronted by more temptation than most people could resist? If we are honest, imagining ourselves with the ring may reveal that we are disappointingly corruptible, but that is not the same as saying we are actually corrupt.

Some insight into our current moral condition may be provided by considering how we would act with the ring at our disposal for a limited period. It is one thing to confess that, given time, we might give in to the allure of clandestine voyeurism; it is quite another to think that the first thing we'd do is head off down to the nearest gym's changing rooms. Someone who would follow that path is separated from actual peeping Toms only by fear or lack of opportunity.

The ring thus helps us to distinguish the difference between things we genuinely believe are wrong and those that only convention, reputation or timidity stop us from doing. It strips down our personal morality to its essence, removing the veneer of values we only pretend to hold. What we are left with might be distressingly thin. We probably wouldn't engage in random murder, but one or two loathed enemies might not be safe. Many feminists would argue that far too many men would use the opportunity to rape. We may not turn into career thieves, but property rights might suddenly look less inviolable.