

# What is the Cartesian Circle? Can Descartes be successfully defended against the charge of circular reasoning?

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Descartes has been accused of reasoning in a circle since the publication of the *Meditations*.<sup>1</sup> The Circle is easy to point out: it seems that Descartes employs clear and distinct perceptions to demonstrate God's existence and benevolence, and the latter, in turn, validates the use of clear and distinct perceptions. But is Descartes really guilty of fallacious argument, or can we break the arc somehow?—this is a key epistemological question that may have profound implications on the Cartesian rationalist programme.

The charge was first forcibly raised by the theologian Antoine Arnauld in the *Fourth Objections*:

I have one more difficulty. How does he avoid committing the fallacy of a vicious circle when he says that we are certain that what is perceived clearly and distinctly is true only because God exists? But we can be certain that God exists only because we perceive it clearly and distinctly. Therefore before we are certain that God exists we have to be certain that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true.

Descartes responds to Arnauld with what has standardly been interpreted as the *memory reply*: “For we are certain, initially, that God exists because we consider the reasons that prove it. Subsequently, however, it is enough that we remember something clearly in order to be certain that it is true. That would not be enough unless we knew that God exists and that he does not deceive.” On this interpretation, God does not validate clear and distinct perceptions; He merely guarantees that our recollections of clear and distinct perceptions are recollections of perceptions that were *truly* clear and distinct. At face value, this seems convincing enough, and it evades the charge of naïve circularity. But immediately it invites some doubt, especially about the last premise: how could I know that God exists unless I remember my having demonstrated it? And if it is a recollection, it necessitates something further in order to irrefutably stamp it with certainty, to wit knowledge of the existence of a benevolent God! So do I have to keep in mind the argument for God in order to claim knowledge of anything?

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<sup>1</sup>Or arguably before, since the *Objections*, in which appears the first charge of circularity, were published in the *Meditations*.

A similar question in the *Second Objections* is answered in the same vein.<sup>2</sup> The memory interpretation is sustained by Descartes's replies and his comments elsewhere:

When I said that we are unable to have knowledge that is certain unless we first know that God exists, [...] I was speaking only about knowledge of those conclusions that we can remember when we no longer consider the premises from which we deduced them.<sup>3</sup>

This is an apparent reference to the following passage,

Although my nature is such that, as long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly, I am unable not to believe that it is true, my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mind's eye always on the same thing in order to perceive it clearly, and the memory of an earlier judgement often returns when I am no longer considering the reasons why I made that judgement. Thus other reasons could occur to me, if I were ignorant of God, which would easily make me change my mind and in that way I would never have true and certain knowledge about anything but merely unstable and changeable opinions.<sup>4</sup>

which is seemingly corroborated by the *Principles*, i. 13:

But it cannot think about them all the time; therefore, when at a later time it remembers some conclusion without reference to the way in which it can be demonstrated and it is conscious of the fact that it does not yet know if it may have been created in such a way that it is mistaken even with respect to things which seem most evident, it seems reasonable to doubt such conclusions and believe that it cannot have knowledge which is certain before it discovers the author of its origin.

Descartes seems sure, whatever the status of the memory interpretation, that *at the time* of clear and distinct perception, he cannot have any doubt about his judgements. It is only later that God's role as a guarantor comes into being. However, what that role exactly consists of is ambiguous, and the memory interpretation is not, in the end, backed up by textual analysis, an observation that I'll return to presently. The preceding excerpts have a curious undercurrent: it is unclear to what extent Descartes is stretching his analysis to cover objectivity, or merely confining it to the first personal, the psychological. If only the existence of a benevolent God could make it such that Descartes cannot be mistaken about his clear and distinct judgements, it is one thing; it is an altogether different thing if Descartes is just talking about psychological reassurance. The two may of course be closely linked and not necessarily exclusive—I will return to this point later, but it suffices to say that the former seems to exclude atheist knowledge, while the latter is more lenient and does not inevitably invoke an absolute conception of knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup>Though the objectors do not go as far as Arnauld in accusing Descartes of circularity.

<sup>3</sup>From the *Second Objections*.

<sup>4</sup>From the *Fifth Meditations*.

That the texts do not sustain the memory interpretation is contended by several commentators. Indeed, a strong case can be made to the effect that Descartes is not seeking to *validate* memory, but rather to validate clear and distinct judgements in memory; that is to say, it is not a question of ascertaining whether recollections of clear and distinct perceptions were really so perceived, as in the memory reply, but whether clear and distinct perceptions made at another time will invariably translate into certainty. The passages quoted above and the other relevant parts of the *Fifth Meditation* support this view at least as well as the memory interpretation, and it may also explain why Descartes often gave the impression of retreating to the position that the seventeenth-century objectors accused him of.<sup>5</sup> Once again the Circle rears its head.

In this light, contemporary philosopher Harry Frankfurt takes the ambiguity I alluded to earlier and develops it into an interesting thesis.<sup>6</sup> Descartes, says Frankfurt, is not concerned with the truth *qua* objective truth, but rather with demonstrating the internal consistency of rational thought—the *Meditations* are therefore a defense of reason, a defense relativised to the scepticism of the day. In the end Descartes's arguments succumb to circularity, according to Frankfurt, because a defense of reason could only possibly take the form of reasoned argument. A justification of rationality in this context is not straightforward, but I do not believe it has to, or even can, rest on entirely introspective, epistemological foundations. That we are in this world, that is to say that the world is as it is—the contingent makeup of human society and history, as well as the way in which the natural order of the universe strikes our senses<sup>7</sup>—must play a considerable role in our acceptance of rationality. Derek Parfit, in his book *Reasons and Persons*, raises the possibility that it might be more rational to act irrational in some unforeseen circumstances;<sup>8</sup> similarly, our rational principles seem to be closely connected with our circumstances, our perception of an ordering force, a cosmic *nous* or *logos*. Abiding to reason may be an act of faith unintelligible from without reason, a self-serving circular principle that justifies its own existence just as M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands* self-referentially draw each other in the act of drawing each other. But that does not mean that the circle of rationality is vicious and is to be repudiated; it does not rule out a cause, and although the epistemic 'View from Nowhere', as Nagel would put it, is impossible because all that we could come up with upon reflection will be reasons born of the domain of rationality, we could nonetheless use our imagination to consider some intriguing counterfactuals: if the baffling phenomena of quantum physics were to be visible in the everyday macroscopic arena that we inhabit, would we possess the same basic notions of identity and spatiotemporal location, for instance?

Nonetheless, it is my belief that this defense could have been successful, at least against some types of scepticism, had it proceeded as follows: if an argument attacks our notions of validity, then the arguer is going to evaluate any sort of defense with

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<sup>5</sup>This is most evident at the end of the *Fifth Meditation*, where he worryingly claims "Thus I see clearly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends only on the knowledge of the true God in such a way that, before I knew him, I was incapable of knowing anything else perfectly."

<sup>6</sup>See [3].

<sup>7</sup>Without necessarily assuming a realist stance.

<sup>8</sup>Though the sense of 'rational' is ethical here, rather than epistemic.

respect to some framework. That framework, irrespective of its epistemic constitution, has to invoke rational principles itself—notions of validity, truth, justification. Then an attack of rationality could only sensibly take place from within rationality itself, and it seems that a circle in this sense is vacuous and insignificant.<sup>9</sup> This answer to the charge of circularity, then, would be somewhat similar to the Kantian transcendental argument: all reflection and argumentation cannot help but be fundamentally rational, so as long as rationality does not strangle itself by being incoherent or inconsistent, the charge of circularity is easily brushed aside.

Descartes offers some clues as to the correct interpretation. In particular, the theologians of the *Second Objections* bring up the pertinent problem of atheist knowledge, to which he replies

I do not deny that an atheist can be ‘clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles’. But this [knowledge] (*cognitionem*) of his is not true knowledge (*scientia*), I maintain, because no [knowledge] that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called ‘knowledge’; and this applies to our atheist, because—as I have shown well enough—he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived about things that seem to him very evident. This ground for doubt may not occur to him, but it can crop up if he thinks about it or someone else raises the point. So he will never be free of this doubt—and thus won’t have true knowledge—until he accepts that God exists.<sup>10</sup>

It is evident, from this passage, that Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of knowledge, *cognitionem* and *scientia*, that neatly map to the subjective and objective domains respectively as I claimed was implicit in the previous excerpts. The first is not proper knowledge, because as Descartes explains, it can be rendered doubtful. Thus, for clear and distinct perceptions to necessarily correspond to truth, Descartes requires a benevolent God. On their own, clear and distinct perceptions could only lead to an experience of certainty that immediately fades away as soon as one forgets the motivating reasons. Atheists can achieve this kind of surrogate knowledge—but they have no right to claim *scientia*.

An obvious question that crops up is this: if Descartes has true knowledge, *scientia*, of the existence of a benevolent God, then that God objectively exists; He is not a mere proposition consistent with the rest of Descartes’s rationalisation. Thus, whatever they may believe, God exists for the atheists as well. Now, is this enough to ensure that atheists can obtain *scientia*? Apparently not—the *existence* of a benevolent God does not suffice for true knowledge. It is *knowledge* of the existence of a benevolent God that translates *cognitionem* into *scientia*. With this in mind, it is unclear how useful a distinction between *cognitionem* and *scientia* is. To a degree, all knowledge will have a subjective element,<sup>11</sup> and Descartes, by requiring that thinkers have knowledge of God, rather than simply that God exists, seems to give greater weight

<sup>9</sup>Of course, this does not rule out a persistently irrational attack, one devoid of any guiding principles, but we should not have to worry about that. We have to make some minimal assumptions that render possible a fruitful advance.

<sup>10</sup>Text adapted from Jonathan Bennett’s online translation of the *Objections and Replies*, [1].

<sup>11</sup>Though that may perhaps be contested by some participants in the internalist-externalist debate.

to what one knows, or believes to know, than to what is objectively 'out there'. This may have motivated Frankfurt's interpretation.

It does seem, from my point of view, that some passages indicate a latent phenomenalism—or at least an antirealist identification of truth with best evidence—underlying Descartes's assumptions, even though he contradicts this elsewhere. The grounds for this is Descartes's insistence on psychological certainty, as attested by the quoted passages, and especially the following illuminating response to the objection that he may be mistaken about what is clear and distinct:

Once we think that something is perceived correctly by us, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. If this conviction is so strong that we could never have any reason to doubt what we are convinced of in this way, then there is nothing further to inquire about; we have everything that we could reasonably hope for. [...] We are assuming a conviction that is so firm that it cannot be changed in any way, and such a conviction is evidently the same thing as the most perfect certainty.<sup>12</sup>

How this ties in with the requirement of knowledge of God remains to be elaborated, but this knowledge may be considered one less reason for Descartes to doubt that he is not deceived. *Then*, if he has absolutely no other doubt to undermine his certainty of some proposition or other, that certainty translates into truth. On this view the charge of circularity can be discarded for reasons that are not too dissimilar to those germane to Frankfurt's interpretation. We can best illustrate by example: my everyday claim that there is coffee in my cup can be defeated by someone's objection that it is only a liquid that looks similar to coffee, if it is true. Even hypothetically, the objection is enough to inject doubt into my claim, and if I have no other justification I may very well abandon my claim to knowledge. Assuming that I do have other justifying beliefs, say that I tasted the coffee, nobody will sensibly subject me to further questioning. A court of law may demand evidence of my general mental health, if it is suspect, but there is one assumption that is never put to trial, the assumption that logic and rationality are fruitful in getting at the truth. Yet that assumption underlies *all* of our endeavours, even if we do not question it. In this case for instance, even if I have seen the coffee in the cup, tasted it, made sure I was awake and not dreaming, and otherwise eliminated the possibility of similar forms of deception, my claim of knowledge has no force if rationality has been rendered doubtful. For all I know, I could still be wrong; I have no means by which to make sense of the world. Yet nobody accuses me of assuming the validity of reason in my everyday observations.

I agree with Frankfurt in so far as he pictures Descartes attempting to demonstrate the coherence of rationality, but go one step further by saying that Descartes also attributes objective truth to what has been demonstrated certain by thought. That God exists and is no deceiver is a proposition that Descartes requires in order to attain that certainty, from which he deduces how the world is, independent of his view. There is no circularity here because it is not God *per se* that takes certainty to truth, but Descartes's assumption that truth does not transcend the best evidence. God's non-existence or malignance is only the final systematic stumbling block.

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<sup>12</sup>From the *Second Objections*.

The account given by Williams is that although Descartes *is* concerned with truth in the objective sense, what he is trying to establish is an acceptance rule by which to govern his beliefs. Permanently intuiting God's proof is unnecessary, if not entirely impossible, and Descartes may have recognised this,<sup>13</sup> but validating memory through memory anyway seems to fling us back into the maw of the Circle. Ergo, it is not memory that Descartes defends, but an acceptance rule by which he could make reasonable progress at the cost of the least error. This rule, claims Williams, takes the form "accept that which was at any time clearly and distinctly perceived", a rule that is justified by the existence and benevolence of God. Does Descartes have to *know* that the acceptance rule is valid prior to employing it in the search for truth? Not necessarily. To know that would involve having justification; but how could one justify a criterion of truth without first applying it? Making such an onerous demand would leave Descartes in the unenviable position of a lost tourist who needs a map to get to the map-seller. The project would never have any prospect of getting off the ground.

Another observation may be noted. Were Descartes to give any other criterion of truth, or justification of his choice of criteria, the critics that demanded justification of clear and distinct perceptions would unabashedly demand it of this other criterion or justification, and because of Descartes's self-imposed confinement with respect to what he could legitimately claim to know, the only solution that seems to present itself is a foundational one in which basic beliefs—in this case, Descartes's 'eternal truths' and his truth criteria—are taken to be self-justified. In the narrow space of possible beliefs that Descartes allows himself, he cannot appeal to other justificatory frameworks;<sup>14</sup> nor can he legitimately claim a connection between the acceptance rule and truth—the hyperbolic doubt has hardly left any truths to deal with!

In view of all this, we ought to acquit Descartes of the charge of epistemic circularity: the purely rationalistic project must perforce demand some sensible assumptions about rationality. We can never hope to convince an obdurately irrational person of the virtues of reason, but Descartes is lucky with that respect. All intelligible sceptical counterargument will be couched in rational language to which he can safely reply. Instead, it is the internal consistency that we should manifestly find fault with, and here Williams shines:

The trouble with Descartes's system is not that it is circular; nor that there is an illegitimate relation between the proofs of God and the clear and distinct perceptions; nor that there is a special problem about the proofs of God when they are not intuited. I have argued that in these respects, it is structurally sound. The trouble is that the proofs of God are invalid and do not convince *even when they are supposedly being intuited*.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See the *Fifth Meditation* and the May 1640 letter to Regius.

<sup>14</sup>Such as coherence with the rest of his beliefs.

<sup>15</sup>Emphasis by Williams.

## References

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