Descartes's Method for Achieving Knowledge

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Abstract:
Descartes's *cogito* – *I am thinking, therefore I am* – is an intuitive deduction. Contrary to Transparency, certainty of *I am thinking* does not come easily; it's achieved by making introspection perfectly clear through radical doubt. *Scientia* – rational immunity to doubt – comes with the habit of intuiting with perfect clarity that skepticism is false.

(This is the second of two companion entries; the prequel is called, "Descartes's Clarity First Epistemology.")

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This entry is the companion to the previous one, "Descartes's Clarity First Epistemology" (hereafter "the Prequel"). In the Prequel, I explained that Descartes has an epistemological framework I call "Clarity First." Within this framework, clarity is a *primitive* (indefinable) phenomenal quality – namely, the quality whereby what you perceive appears to be true, or is presented to you as true – and clarity is *prior* to other epistemically significant notions. Clarity is definitionally prior to other perceptual qualities; distinctness, notably, is perfect clarity. Clarity is explanatorily prior to cognitive goods. When a perception is perfectly clear (clear and distinct), as only intellection can be, it is (i) rationally indubitable, (ii) psychologically indubitable, (iii) infallible, and (iv) provides an occurrent state of certain knowledge called *cognitio*. Weaker degrees of clarity, available to the senses, imagination, and intellection, provide weaker variants of those four goods.

Descartes therefore embarks on a "quest for clarity" (7:146) and a methodological question becomes pressing: how do we come to perceive things clearly, and indeed with perfect clarity?

1 How to Make Our Ideas Clear

1.1 The *Cogito*: an intuitive deduction

One way to gain clarity of a proposition is through *deduction*, by inferring it from other propositions which are clear to you. When you perform a deduction, Descartes explains, you clearly intuit each premise, you clearly intuit the fact that the conclusion "follows necessarily from" the premise(s), and you thereby gain clarity of the conclusion (10:369). You come to see the truth of the conclusion in light of the argument as a whole.

When inquiring into metaphysics – to discern what exists and what essences or natures existing things have – the first deduction to be performed is "I am thinking, therefore I am". This is known as "the *cogito*", after Descartes's Latin formulation: *cogito, ergo sum* (8A:8). As he explains, I can substitute the generic premise *I am thinking* with any number of specific claims about what I'm thinking, so long as I'm certain of it. While I'm in doubt about my senses, *I am walking* or *I am breathing* will not do, but through introspection I may still be certain of *I think I am walking* or *I think I am breathing*, along with other self-ascriptions of thoughts, such as *I am doubting*, *I seem to see a piece of wax*, and so on (2:37; 7:33, 174; 10:524) – provided that my introspection is clear and distinct. (I'll explain this proviso in §1.2.)

Descartes presents the famous phrasing of the *cogito* in his *Discourse* (1637) and *Principles* (1644), but the *Meditations* (1641) looks different, at first:

> *I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies.* Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: *if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed*. … (7:25†)

Some interpreters insist that the meditator uses no argument at all (Hintikka 1962), or an argument that is substantially different from the *cogito* argument (Frankfurt 197: ch10; Curley 1978: ch4; Broughton 2001: ch7). But she does use the *cogito* argument. It's just that instead of, "I am thinking", what she articulates, in the first sentence above, is the specific thought she's having as she's made herself doubt whether there's an external world. In the last sentence above (the conditional), she could be articulating a second premise, in which case the argument is an instance of modus ponens (Wilson 1978: ch2). Or she could be expressing the entailment from the first (and only) premise to the conclusion that she exists (Alanen 1981; Markie 1988). Either way, she makes the obvious inference that she exists.

When the meditator says she has "convinced" herself that there's no external world, she does not mean she *believes* as much. What she means, rather, is that by deliberately supposing herself to be maximally deceived, she's brought herself to *doubt* whether there's an external world (7:474). Looking back at this moment from *Meditation Four*, the meditator recalls,

> during these past few days *I have been asking whether anything in the world exists*, and I have realized that from the very fact of my raising this question it follows quite evidently that I exist. (7:58†)

The argument is this: I'm doubting ("questioning") the external world, therefore ("it follows that") I exist.

Descartes distinguishes two forms of fully clear perception – intuition and deduction – but they are not mutually exclusive. As he explains in the *Rules,* deduction is differentiated by presenting *an argument*, such that you are "inferring one thing from another" (10:369). Intuition is differentiated by being *synchronic*, presenting its content "all at once" (10:407). Contrary to what many scholars have assumed (Wilson 1978: ch2), a deduction itself can be an intuition, and the *cogito* is a case in point (Markie 1988). The *cogito* is an argument, so it's grasped through deduction. But with a single inference the argument is short enough to be grasped all at once, synchronically, so it's also grasped through intuition. The *cogito* is an *intuitive deduction* (Paul 2023).

With longer arguments involving multiple inferences, however, you typically cannot grasp the whole argument at once, at least not initially, and so you have to hold earlier steps in memory while you turn your attention to later steps one after another, diachronically. In this case, the act of deduction is not an intuition, and Descartes sometimes calls it "enumeration" (*enumeratio*) (10:388) to emphasize that it involves a *number* of inferences transpiring successively rather than a single inference performed all

at once. He grants that such longer deductions, or enumerations, are less certain than intuition to the extent that they involve memory, which is not a form of clear and distinct perception and is "weak and unstable". So he prescribes a remedy: "That is why it is necessary that I run over them again and again in my mind until I can pass from the first to the last so quickly that memory is left with practically no role to play, and I seem to be intuiting the whole thing at once" (10:408-9; see Pasnau 2017: ch5). Through repeated practice, you can learn to grasp a long argument synchronically, turning it into an intuitive deduction.

But how do you gain clarity of the initial premises – the "axioms", "first principles", or "primary notions" – to begin with?

1.2 Distinctness Through Doubt

What you need to do in order to intuit an axiom depends on what the axiom is. Here Descartes draws a distinction between the axioms of mathematics, which are easy to intuit – to perceive with full clarity at a glance – and the axioms of metaphysics, which are difficult to intuit. Whereas "there is no difficulty" in getting people to intuit "the primary notions which are presupposed for the demonstration of geometrical truths," he says,

> *in metaphysics by contrast there is nothing which causes so much effort as making our perception of the primary notions clear and distinct*. Admittedly, they are by their nature as evident as, or even more evident than, the primary notions which the geometers study; but *they conflict with many preconceived opinions derived from the senses* which we have got into the habit of holding from our earliest years, and so only those who really concentrate and meditate and withdraw their minds from corporeal things, so far as is possible, will achieve perfect knowledge of them. (7:157†)

There is "no difficulty" intuiting mathematical axioms like *1+1=2* or *a triangle is bounded by three sides.* For each of these axioms, all you need to do is attend to it carefully and it will become fully clear to you.

Many assume the same thing applies to the premise of the *cogito*: *I am thinking* (or a self-ascription of a specific thought). If this were so, then all you would need to do in order to know with certainty (have *cognitio*) that you are thinking (and what you are thinking) is to direct your attention inward, engaging in introspection. The idea that ordinary introspection provides you with certainty of your own thoughts is what Margaret Wilson has dubbed "the epistemological transparency of thought or mind" (1978: 50) – or simply, "Transparency".

Transparency is widely attributed to Descartes, but it's not his view. Transparency implies that it's easy to know with certainty that I am thinking (and what I'm thinking) –

just look inward. But since *I am thinking* is among "the primary notions in metaphysics", the quote above implies that it's difficult to make our perception of our own thoughts – i.e., introspection – clear and distinct, because introspection is normally confused with sensory opinions. Elsewhere, he puts it this way:

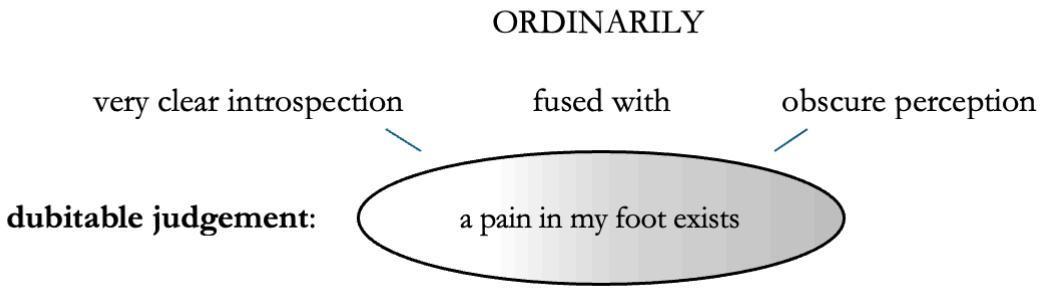
> All our ideas of what belongs to the mind [i.e., thoughts] have up till now [before the *Meditations*] been very confused and mixed up with the ideas of things that can be perceived by the senses [i.e., bodies]. (7:130-1)

Normally, this confusion mars your introspection of your own mind and thoughts, so that even when it comes to "the proposition 'I am thinking, therefore I exist'", he says, "your imagination insistently mixes itself up with your thoughts and *lessens the clarity* of this cognition by trying to clothe it with shapes" (5:136-7*†). Introspection becomes *less clear,* and so it cannot be fully clear, when it is confused with obscure sensory judgements. Descartes illustrates this point when he describes the way pain appears through ordinary introspection, in *Principles* i.46:

> A perception can be clear without being distinct. For example, when someone feels an intense pain, [***c***] the perception he has of this pain is indeed very *clear*, but is not always distinct. For people ordinarily *confuse* this perception with [***o***] an *obscure* judgement they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. (8A:22†)

When you step on a nail, for example, the judgement you ordinarily form is one that fuses two perceptions together. One of them is (***c***) a very clear (introspective) perception of a sensuous quality, pain. The other is (***o***) an obscure (sensory) judgement concerning a "painful spot" in your foot. In Descartes's view, pain is a mode of thought which exists only in your mind. Pain is caused, in this case, by damage to your body but it is not a physical thing that could exist in your body. Nevertheless, "we generally regard [pain] not as being in the mind alone, or in our perception, but as being in the hand or foot or in some other part of our body" (8A:32). Within this ordinary judgment, your perceptions of your pain and your foot are not separated but *confusio* – "fused together" – into an indiscriminate whole. See Figure 9.1:

Figure 9.1



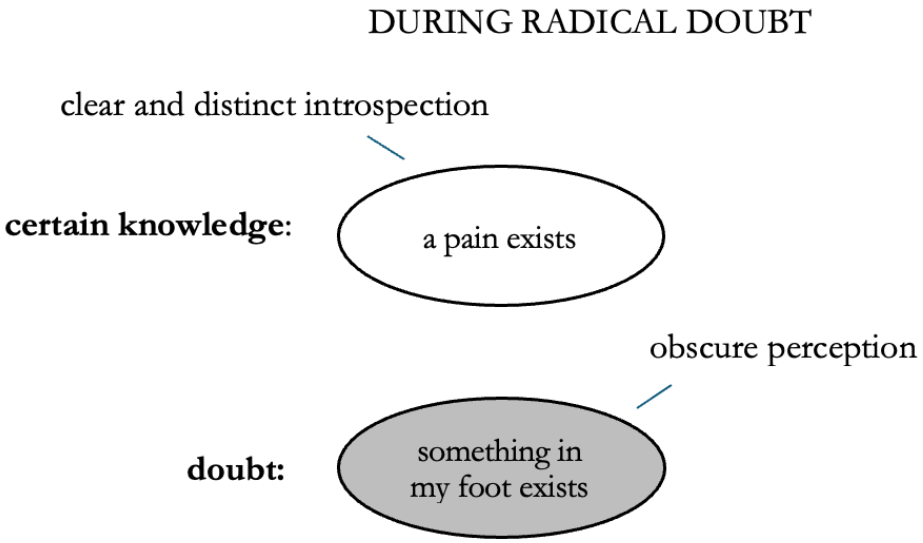
To put the point in language we saw Descartes use earlier (5:136-7), because perceptions of the foot and the pain are "mixed together", the obscurity of one "lessens the clarity" of the other. Thus, although your introspective judgement concerning the pain is very clear, it's not distinct – not entirely clear.

To make introspection distinct you need to "sharply separate it from anything obscure so that it contains within itself only what is clear" (8A:22). The way to do this is through radical doubt. Thus Descartes says that, in metaphysics, "doubt [is] a means of acquiring a *clearer* knowledge of the truth" (4:63). The "method of universal doubt" is "useful to prepare the mind in order to establish the truth" (7:203-5). And he is explicit that, in metaphysics, radical doubt is required for certainty of first principles:

> I know of no other way of making sound judgments about the notions which can be taken for *principles*, except that we must prepare our mind to divest itself of all the views with which it is preoccupied, and to reject as doubtful everything that might be doubtful. (2:435†)

Returning to the example above, what would happen if you were to doubt the existence of all bodies, including your own? When you withdraw assent from your perceptions of your body while you continue to assent to your perception of your pain, you sharply separate the two, rendering them distinct. See Figure 9.2:

Figure 9.2



Notice how this fits Descartes's prescription:

> In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and colour and so on are perceived clearly and distinctly when they are *regarded merely as sensations or thoughts*. (8A:33†)

Through radical doubt, you would come to regard the pain merely as pain while ceasing to regard it as being in the foot, thereby rendering your introspection distinct. In metaphysics, beginning with self-knowledge, the road to distinctness (perfect clarity) is paved with doubt (Paul 2018).

2 *Scientia*

In the Prequel, we saw that, in Descartes's view, a truth is indubitable for you only "so long as" or "during the time" that you perceive it with perfect clarity. During that time, you enjoy *cognitio* – an occurrent, conscious state of certain knowledge – of that truth. But *cognitio* is fleeting. It requires full clarity, which requires focused attention. You can doubt the same truth later, when you no longer perceive it with full clarity but merely remember that you did. Looking back, it can seem possible that a deceiving God made you in such a way that even your fully clear perceptions are fallible (7:25, 69-70). In that moment, things you once knew with certainty now succumb to retrospective doubt (see Della Rocca 2005).

The highest epistemic achievement – *scientia* – is not a fleeting mental event but rather an enduring mental habit or disposition, and since it's an eminently good habit, it's a

virtue (Parvizian 2020). *Scientia* is characterized by stability, whereby you are rationally (and hence psychologically) immune to wavering from certainty into retrospective doubt. The only way to rationally fend off retrospective doubt is to know with certainty that, contrary to the skeptical supposition, clear and distinct perceptions are infallible (i.e., the Truth Rule). And the only way to acquire certain knowledge of the Truth Rule is by deducing it from God's perfection (recall Prequel §2.3). Thus, when Descartes says that atheists can have certain knowledge (*cognitio*) of various truths so long as they perceive them clearly, he also insists that atheists cannot have *scientia*:

> The fact that an atheist can 'clearly know [*clare cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles [hereafter "the Triangle Theorem"]' is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this *cognitio* is not true *scientia*, since no act of *cognitio* that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called *scientia*. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists. (7:141*)

Scientia is marked by stability, by rational immunity from doubt. How is it achieved? One famous objection to Descartes, "the Cartesian Circle," alleges that in his pursuit of *scientia* he reasons in a vicious circle with the following two arcs:

- Descartes uses the claim that God exists as a premise is in his argument for the Truth Rule.
- Descartes uses the Truth Rule as a premise in his argument that God exists.

Putting these together, the Truth Rule would be a premise in the argument for the Truth Rule. Descartes takes the first arc, as we saw in the Prequel (§2.3). But as specialists unanimously recognize, he does not take the second. At no point does he use the Truth Rule as a premise when he deduces the existence of God (in *Meditation Three*) and deduces the Truth Rule (in *Meditation Four*).

A deeper challenge is that merely deducing the Truth Rule does not secure the rational stability of *scientia*. To see why not, let's illustrate the problem of instability:

- Monday: By carefully attending to a proof, you deduce the Triangle Theorem with perfect clarity, and so – during that time – you have a perfect reason to assent to it, no reason to doubt it.
- Tuesday: When you consider the Triangle Theorem, you remember that you deduced it yesterday, so it seems true, and you have some reason to assent to it. But since you have "turned [your] mind's eye away from the proof," it is no longer perfectly clear to me that the theorem is true, so you longer have a perfect reason

to assent to it. Further, it appears to me that God could be a deceiver who made even my clearest perceptions false – and so now you have reason to doubt what you once perceived with perfect clarity, including the theorem, retrospectively (AT 7:69-70).

If you merely remember that you perceived the theorem with perfect clarity, you can have reason to doubt it. If you redo the proof to perceive the theorem with perfect clarity again, you will once again have a perfect reason to assent and thus rationally recover from retrospective doubt. But recovery is not immunity. If you had *scientia,* you wouldn't need to recover in the first place.

- Wednesday: By carefully attending to Descartes's proof in *Meditation Four,* you deduce the Truth Rule with perfect clarity, and so – during that time – you have a perfect reason to assent to it, no reason to doubt it.

- Thursday: When you consider the Truth Rule, you remember that you deduced it yesterday, so it seems true, and you have some reason to assent to it. But since you have "turned my mind's eye away from the proof," it is no longer perfectly clear to me that the Truth Rule true, so you longer have a perfect reason to assent to it. Further, it appears to me that God could be a deceiver who made even my clearest perceptions false – and so now you have reason to doubt what you once perceived with perfect clarity, including the Truth Rule, retrospectively (AT 7:69-70).

You could deduce the Truth Rule again to recover from doubt, but again this wavering between certainty and doubt shows that you still don't have *scientia*.

How, then, can *scientia* be achieved? The answer cannot be that you fixate on the arguments from *Meditations Two* through *Four* to continually sustain your deduction of the Truth Rule. Attention is too fickle and that's no way to live.

Instead, the way to achieve *scientia* is to cultivate a *disposition to intuit* the Truth Rule whenever the skeptical question arises. You do this in two stages. First, instead of having to *deduce* God's existence from your own existence through the causal arguments of *Meditation Three*, you come to *intuit* God's existence directly, without needing to deduce it. This happens in *Meditation Five*. By reflecting on the very essence or nature of God, the meditator comes to intuit that it's impossible for God not to exist, just as she can intuit that it's impossible for there to be a mountain without a valley (or a convex curve without a concave curve). The relevant passage (7:64-70) is often called Descartes's "ontological argument," but, as Nolan (2005) explains, it isn't an argument so much as a spelling out of something the meditator comes to see intuitively. Recapping this passage later, Descartes says that if people reflect properly on the nature of God,

> this alone, without a train of reasoning [*discursu*], will make them realize that God exists; and this will eventually be just as self-evident [*per se notum*] to them as the fact that the number two is even or that three is odd, and so on. (7:163-4).

People normally fail to intuit God's existence, but that is only because their idea of God is confused with various preconceived opinions (e.g., that God's essence is distinct from God's existence). After the preparatory work of the preceding four meditations, Descartes thinks, the meditator is finally in a position to overcome those confusions such that she can intuit God's existence directly.

The second stage is to rehearse the argument from God's goodness to the Truth Rule until you can grasp it all at once, synchronically, by intuition. This part is relatively easy to do since the argument is short: Since perfectly clear perceptions are indubitable, God would be a deceiver if God allowed them to be fallible; but God can't be a deceiver, so those perceptions must be *in*fallible (the Truth Rule). (Recall §2.3 of the Prequel.)

Putting the two stages together: God's goodness becomes an axiom from which you can immediately infer the Truth Rule all at once. In other words, you develop the disposition to intuit what I call the Divine Guarantee: *God is good, therefore my perfectly clear perceptions must be true*. The Divine Guarantee thus becomes like the *cogito* for you (Newman and Nelson 1999). Since it's an argument, your fully clear perception of it is a deduction. But since you now grasp the argument all at once, it is also an intuition. It's an *intuitive deduction.*

Moreover, the only reason you previously had for retrospective doubt was the apparent possibility that God could be a deceiver, such that even your clearest perceptions could be false. The Divine Guarantee is precisely the contrary of that skeptical proposition. So, once you develop the habit, the virtue, of intuiting the Divine Guarantee, you immediately refute the skeptical proposition, with rational certainty, whenever the question arises. Thus you become rationally (and hence psychologically) immune to retrospective doubt, enjoying the stability of *scientia*. What finally extinguishes the lingering reason for doubt is not the Divine Guarantee itself but the perfect clarity with which you now invariably perceive it. In this final elaboration of Descartes's Clarity First framework, then, the ultimate aim of inquiry, *scientia,* is explained by clarity.

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For Descartes's works, I refer (by volume and page number) to the Adam and Tannery (AT) edition of the original, and generally quote from the standard translation (CSM[K]), which includes AT references in the margins. (†) = I have added italics or boldface. (*) = I have altered the translation or provided my own.

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