# Clear and Distinct Perception in Descartes's Philosophy

by

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To the memory of my grandfather, Dr. Sanford Byers

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### THE JOURNEY FROM DOUBT TO CERTAINTY

Descartes's Meditations on First Philosophy[1] is, among other things, an attempt to discover the first principles of knowledge on which all of the sciences depend. It is a quest for unshakable certainty, a search for the first and most certain truths that will be the foundation for all other knowledge. The Meditations are presented in the first person, from the point of view of a meditator contemplating what he can know with certainty.[2] Descartes's meditator explains this quest in the following way:

> Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. (CSM II: 12; AT VII: 17)

One thing that is unique about Descartes's search for knowledge is that he begins it by using the method of doubt. He seeks knowledge by first doubting everything that can possibly be doubted. He will readmit only propositions that can survive the toughest reasons for doubt. He sweeps the foundations out from under everything that he ever believed, and then begins again, building a new foundation with only those propositions that are so completely certain that they can survive all doubt. It is a fascinating and

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[1] Throughout this work I will be focusing primarily on Descartes's later writings, the Meditations on First Philosophy and the Principles of Philosophy, which I take to present Descartes's mature and considered views. The Meditations has a narrative structure which I find provides the most insight into Descartes's epistemological project. The Principles offer Descartes's most detailed account of clear and distinct perception, including the only definitions of "clear" and "distinct" (Principles I, 45, CSM I: 207; AT VIII A: 21-22). I refer to other of Descartes's writings as they seem relevant.

[2] The order of discovery that the meditator follows is probably not a historically accurate account of the development of Descartes's own thought. Thus, it is sometimes appropriate to distinguish the voice of the meditator from the voice of the author.

ambitious project. Whether the project is too ambitious to be realized is the larger question that motivates my investigation into clear and distinct perception in Descartes.

Descartes's answer to the doubts he raises, and the foundation of his theory of knowledge, is the principle that whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true. In order to introduce this principle and the role that clear and distinct perception plays for Descartes, I will begin by considering the journey from doubt to certainty that we travel as we read Descartes's Meditations.

## REASONS FOR DOUBT

Descartes's Method of Doubt requires us to doubt everything or almost everything that we ever believed. By offering the broadest, toughest reasons for doubt the meditator places himself in a position to be able to say, "If any belief of mine survives *this*, then there is no other reason for doubting it." By facing the ultimate reasons for doubting, he forges a path to certainty.[3]

Descartes's most well known reasons for doubting are the Dream Argument and the Deceiving God / Evil Demon Argument[4]. According to the Dream Argument, for all I know, I could be dreaming right now (CSM II: 13; AT VII: 19). Even though it seems like I am awake, I can remember having mistakenly believed I was awake in the past and then woken up to realize that I was deceived. Furthermore, it seems like there is no test I can perform or mark I can look for to prove that I am awake, because any

[3] Janet Broughton points out more specifically that the scope and the structure of Descartes's skeptical scenarios make it likely that if they can be defeated it will be only by establishing some fundamental propositions about the mind and its relation to the world (DMD 80-81).

[4] The evil demon is also known as "the evil genius", "the malicious demon", and other titles due to differences in translation. I group the Deceiving God Argument and the Evil Demon Argument together here because I consider them to be essentially the same. Descartes introduces the evil demon as an alternative to thinking of God as a deceiver, but the evil demon scenario fills the same role as a deceiving God scenario.

such test or mark could be dreamed as well.[5] If I am dreaming right now, then I do not know many of the things that I thought I knew, such as that I am sitting in a chair with a piece of paper in front of me.

According to the Deceiving God/Evil Demon Argument, for all I know, God is a deceiver and has created me so that I "go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter if that is imaginable" (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 21), or, for all I know, there could be a powerful and evil demon who at every moment tries his utmost to deceive me (CSM II: 15; AT VII: 22-23). Such a powerful demon could deceive me about everything I think I see and hear around me. It could be the case that the world is nothing like I perceive it. It could be the case that there is no world at all. I might even be wrong about the very simplest truths like that 2+3=5. An important complement to this argument is aimed at atheists who have trouble convincing themselves of the possibility of a deceiving God: "According to their supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time" (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 21). In other

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[5] There are some alternative interpretations of how Descartes' Dream Argument really goes. Walsh understands the Dream Argument as suggesting that we may be dreaming all of the time (61). Margaret Wilson suggests that the doubt Descartes has does not reside in whether we can know if we are awake or asleep, but rather in whether we can consider our experiences veridical, given that we have been deceived about them in our dreams (27). On this interpretation, she understands the distinguishing characteristic that Descartes finally finds between dreams and wakefulness in the Sixth Meditation, to be a basis for believing in the veracity of our sensible experiences, not a test for being awake. She understands the argument as presenting, not the question of whether we can distinguish between dreaming and waking states, but rather, the question whether, since we are deceived when we dream, we have the right to think that we are not deceived when we are awake.

words, if we have not been created by God, then it is even more likely that we are made so imperfectly as to be in error about even the simplest matters.

For many it is natural to object here that it seems very unlikely that there should be an evil demon trying his utmost to deceive us, and since this scenario is so unlikely, it is not a very good reason for doubting. As natural as this objection may be, however, it is not clearly a valid objection. After all, what makes it so unlikely that there should be an evil demon deceiving us? Is there any evidence to the contrary? Unfortunately, anything that we might cite as evidence against an evil demon, could, for all we know, simply be an illusion created by this evil demon to keep us from knowing the truth. Similarly, any evidence we point to that there is a world that causes our perceptions could equally be counted as evidence that there is an evil demon who causes our perceptions. In other words, there seems to be no way to rule out the evil demon scenario as a genuine possibility.

Even if I think either of these two scenarios unlikely, they are nevertheless possible, and as long as they are possible I cannot be absolutely certain about my former beliefs. As I have said, the Meditations is a search for absolute certainty. Descartes held that "If only probabilities served as the basis for views, then one would never discover the truth, because one could not distinguish truth from falsehood any longer" (Popkin 176). We often feel content to go through our lives believing what is only probable, but what is only probable may still be false, and if we build the sciences on these foundations we may be building nothing but further falsehoods. Thus, in the Meditations Descartes instructs us to withhold our assent from propositions about which there is even the slightest reason for doubt (CSM II: 14-15; AT VII: 21-22).

Nevertheless, Descartes acknowledges how difficult it is to doubt our old opinions, and so, to help himself get out of the habit of assenting to his old opinions, he resolves to consider them not merely doubtful, but actually false. "My habitual opinions keep coming back," he complains,

> and despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom…. In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly. (Meditations CSM II: 15; AT VII: 22)

As an aid to his project of doubting, Descartes then imagines false all of the former opinions that are rendered doubtful by skeptical scenarios. Descartes is the first to agree that it takes an extra concerted effort to keep in mind the dubitability of our former opinions. It is nevertheless important to do so in order to discover first principles of knowledge which will be certain and indubitable.

At the end of the First Meditation, after the reasons for doubt have been presented, the meditator is left doubting all of his former beliefs. Everything that we are aware of through our senses could be a dream or a deception. Everything that we have ever been told or have read might be all part of a dream. A deceiving God may have made us so that we err when we think about the simplest matters or do the easiest math problems (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 21). The evil demon may have deceived us so thoroughly that despite what we believe, there are no physical objects around us at all, no colors, no shapes, no people, no substances, and no world (CSM II: 15; AT VII: 22-23).

ESCAPING DOUBT: THE *COGITO*

In the Second Meditation Descartes examines whether there is anything at all about which he can be certain, and the first thing he finds that he can know with certainty is that he exists, at least so long as he is thinking:

> But 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 <or thought anything at all> then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (CSM II: 16-17)

Descartes then goes on to explore what he can know about this "I" that exists. Although he concludes that he exists, he does not want to mistakenly attribute to himself anything that is doubtful. He considers all of the features that he previously attributed to himself, and considers whether each one might be doubted to belong to him. In light of the evil demon scenario, he sees that all might fail to belong to him, except one: thought. Descartes declares that he is a thinking thing (CSM II: 17-18; AT VII: 25-27).

Descartes goes on from here to conclude that he can truly attribute to himself all of his forms of thinking: doubting, imagining, desiring, and even, in a restricted sense, sensing (CSM II: 19; AT VII: 28-29). Even if the things that he doubts, imagines, desires, and senses do not really exist, nevertheless, it cannot be false that he is doubting, imagining, desiring, or sensing: "For even if, as I have supposed, none of the objects of imagination are real," he says, "the power of imagination is something which really exists and is part of my thinking" (CSM II: 19; AT VII: 29)), and, "...I am now

seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking" (ibid.). Descartes has established with certainty that he exists, that he thinks in various ways, and that things seem to him a certain way.

Descartes has drawn a line between the inner and the outer world. The inner world consists of his own mind and his own thoughts; the outer world consists of his body, the physical world, other minds, and everything else. Descartes notices that we each have a special access to our own thoughts. The fact of our having ideas, when we think, and the content of these ideas cannot be doubted. Everything outside the mind, however, can be doubted. We suppose that our ideas tell us about the world around us, but what we are immediately aware of is just our own ideas. For all we know, the content of these ideas is just an illusion and there is nothing in the outer world which corresponds to it. In fact, for all we know, we do not have sense organs or bodies at all. We have sense ideas of our own bodies, but these too may be nothing more than illusions. All that we can know for certain at this point in the Meditations is that we think and have ideas and through these ideas things appear to us as they do.[6] Norman Kemp Smith describes the meditator's position quite eloquently:

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[6] Although I will not be addressing this contemporary approach to the subject, it is worth taking note of the grounds on which John McDowell criticizes the coherence of a Cartesian inner world. McDowell questions whether we can make sense of ideas having any content in what he calls the "fully Cartesian picture", that is, the picture that allows for knowledge of an inner world independent of any knowledge of the outer world. It is, "quite unclear," he says, "that the fully Cartesian picture is entitled to characterize its inner facts in content-involving terms –in terms of its seeming to one that things are thus and so– at all" (152). If the character of our ideas is supposed to be knowable independently of the character of the external world, McDowell argues that there is a serious question about whether we are entitled to describe our ideas as seeming like ideas of the external world.

> We know our ideas face to face, and they are as we perceive them to be. It is only when we go out beyond them, and assert the existence of something outside corresponding to them, that we can fall into error. The inner self-transparency of thought which sees itself, and can see nothing save as reflected in itself, is the sole indubitable certainty, the one form of existence directly known to us. (Studies 48-49)

The problem after the Second Meditation is how to get from the inner world of the mind to everything else outside of the mind. Descartes sets up a problem of correspondence in the first two meditations. We have immediate perception only of our own ideas. It seems to follow then, that in order to know whether our ideas are true, we must establish a correspondence between our ideas and the world that supposedly exists outside of the mind. How can we use our knowledge of ourselves and our own mental states to make a bridge to knowledge about the world outside of the mind?

## THE CLARITY & DISTINCTNESS RULE

In the Third Meditation Descartes uses his discovery that he is a thinking thing to derive a rule about what can be known with certainty:

> I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something that I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (CSM II 24; AT VII: 35)

I will call this rule, "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true," the "Clarity and Distinctness Rule", or the "C&D Rule", for short.

Descartes's certainty, as a result of this argument, that his clear and distinct perceptions are true, is what enables him to discover many other truths that go beyond his own states of mind. In Chapter Four I will argue that what is going on in this

passage is that Descartes is using his first item of knowledge, that he is a thinking thing, as the premise of a kind of transcendental argument whose conclusion will be a criterion of truth. By examining the way in which he is able to know that he is a thinking thing, Descartes discovers and gives a name to the features which are sufficient for admitting a proposition as certain knowledge.

GOD

Descartes uses his C&D Rule to show that we can clearly and distinctly perceive that God exists and is not a deceiver. He can establish God's existence and nature with certainty so long as he clearly and distinctly perceives the truth of all of the premises in the proof and clearly and distinctly perceives that God's existence follows from those premises. In the Third Meditation Descartes offers what is known as his Cosmological Argument for the existence of God (CSM II: 28ff; AT VII: 40ff). The argument goes like this:

1. I have an idea of a being with infinite reality (God).
2. Causal Principle: The cause of an idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality.
3. Therefore, the cause of my idea of God is a being with infinite formal reality.
4. Therefore, a being with infinite reality (God) exists.

The Causal Principle in premise two expresses the idea that everything must have a cause sufficient to its effect, even ideas. Descartes is not arguing that an idea must be caused by whatever thing it represents, but he is arguing that an idea must be caused by a really existing thing which has a level of reality (formal reality) equivalent to the level

of reality represented by the idea (objective reality).[7] Descartes then goes on to argue that, given we have in us this idea of an infinite being, we too must be created by God. This means that we have not been created by an evil demon nor by fate, chance, or a random chain of events.

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes offers what is known as his Ontological Argument for the existence of God. The argument goes like this:

1. Everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to a thing really does belong to it.
2. I clearly and distinctly perceive that existence belongs to a supremely perfect being (God).
3. Therefore, existence does belong to a supremely perfect being.
4. Therefore, God exists.

Here, the C&D Rule makes an explicit appearance in the first premise. Just as a triangle has certain essential properties that we can clearly and distinctly perceive must belong to it, such as that its angles are equal to two right angles, so too God has certain essential properties that we can clearly and distinctly perceive must belong to him. Since, according to Descartes, the idea of God is the idea of a supremely perfect being, we can clearly and distinctly perceive that it belongs to God's essence to have every perfection. Descartes supposes that existence is a perfection, and so, necessarily, God must exist.

Descartes argues in the Third and Fourth Meditations that God cannot be a deceiver because the will to deceive is a defect, or weakness (CSM II: 35, 37; AT VII: 52,

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[7] The terms "formal reality" and "objective reality" will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four.

53). An infinite and perfect being does not have any defects, so God must not be a deceiver. Since we know that God exists, that we are created by God, and that God is not a deceiver, we can be sure that we have not been made in such a way that we are systematically prone to error. Thus, we are able to rule out Descartes's most powerful skeptical scenario.

At the end of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes seems to say that proving that God exists and is not a deceiver is what allows him to draw the conclusion that all of his clear and distinct perceptions are true. He says, "Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true" (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70), and then in the next paragraph,

> Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge of countless matters both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning the whole of that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics. (CSM II: 49; AT VII: 71)

Thus, while Descartes apparently relies on his knowledge of the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions to show that God exists, he also appears to say that knowledge of God's existence is necessary for him to know that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. This apparent bit of circular reasoning is the famous problem of the Cartesian Circle. In Chapter Five I take up this problem, and argue that although Descartes thinks the status of our clear and distinct perceptions is enhanced after it has been

proven that God exists and is not a deceiver, nevertheless the certainty of clear and distinct perceptions does not depend on knowledge of God.

## THE SOURCE OF HUMAN ERROR

Once Descartes has shown that we are not created in such a way that we are systematically prone to error, he needs to offer an explanation of the undeniable fact that we do in fact make errors all of the time. He offers this explanation in the Fourth Meditation, with a kind of theodicy of error. He argues first, that human beings are not caused to go wrong by God, and second, that error is quite preventable. Descartes tells us that the source of human error is that, "the scope of the will is wider than that of the intellect; but instead of restricting it within the same limits, I extend its use to matters which I do not understand" (CSM II: 40; AT VII: 58). In other words, we go wrong because we choose to assent to propositions that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Since we are finite creatures, there will always be many things we do not understand. If we limit ourselves, however, to assenting to only those propositions that we clearly and distinctly perceive, we can avoid error. Descartes offers an account of error that is compatible with the claim that our rational faculties are reliable and capable of finding certain knowledge.

## KNOWLEDGE OF THE MIND-BODY DISTINCTION AND THE EXTERNAL WORLD

In the Sixth Meditation Descartes relies on the C&D Rule combined with his knowledge of God's existence and non-deceptive nature to extend our certain knowledge even further, to a limited knowledge of ourselves as embodied human beings and a limited knowledge of the external world. Descartes argues that the mind and the

body are distinct (although united) substances, thus establishing the possibility that the mind should continue to exist without the body after death (CSM II: 54; AT VII: 77-78). Descartes argues that we can clearly and distinctly understand that the body can exist without the mind and that the mind can exist without the body. Since God can do anything that we can clearly and distinctly understand, it is possible for mind and body to be separated, at least by God. For Descartes, the fact that mind and body could exist separately, even if they are not separated, makes them distinct substances.

Descartes again relies on his proof that God exists and is not a deceiver in the Sixth Meditation in order to show that material objects exist and are the cause of our ideas of them (CSM II: 55; AT VII: 79-80). Descartes argues that God has given him a great propensity to believe that his sense perceptions are caused by corporeal things but no faculty for determining whether corporeal things really are the cause of his sense perceptions. If those sense perceptions were caused by something other than corporeal things, then God would be deceiving him by giving him this propensity to believe that corporeal things were the source of his ideas. Since God is not a deceiver, corporeal things must really exist and be the cause of sense perceptions.

With this argument, Descartes finally answers the doubts about the existence of the external world which are left over from the sweeping doubt of the First Meditation. Even though Descartes regains knowledge of the world, however, he does not regain everything that he started with. He remains skeptical about the reports of sense perception. Although we can know that bodies exist, Descartes thinks the only things we can know about bodies are those things we clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to bodies, that is, geometrical truths. We can infer that there are differences in the world that correspond to the colors, tastes, smells, and sounds that we perceive through

the senses, but Descartes does not think that we can infer that bodies at all resemble these sensations (CSM II: 56-58; AT VII: 80-83). "For the proper use of the sensory perceptions," Descartes tells us,

> … is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgments about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information. (CSM II: 57-58; AT VII: 83)

Sense perception is never entirely vindicated by Descartes as delivering knowledge of how the world is.

Finally, at the end of the Sixth Meditation, almost as if it were an afterthought, Descartes offers a reply to the Dream Argument of the First Meditation. Descartes decides that he can in fact tell the difference between his dreaming and waking experiences, saying, "For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are" (CSM II: 61; AT VII: 89).[8] For Descartes, this knowledge too depends on the knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver. Descartes says that in cases where we check our perceptions by calling upon the senses, memory, and intellect and find no "conflicting reports", then, because God is not a deceiver, it follows that we are not in error (CSM 62; AT VII: 90). It seems that the knowledge that God is not a deceiver is playing a similar role here to the role that it plays in the proof that corporeal things exist. Because God is not a deceiver we are guaranteed that if we use our

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[8] Descartes's answer seems, to many, to be quite inadequate to the task of assuring us that we are not dreaming. I think Descartes's answer to the Dream Argument, although surprising, is not entirely inadequate. This is, however, a subject for another paper.

faculties to the best of our abilities and exhaust all of the ways in which we might correct our perceptions, then we can be assured that we are free from error.

I have given a brief summary of the journey from doubt to certainty that Descartes takes us on in the Meditations. Descartes begins his search for certainty with his unusual Method of Doubt, finding powerful skeptical scenarios that cast doubt on everything he formerly believed. He then casts around for some single item of knowledge which can survive even the most powerful reasons for doubt. His first item of knowledge is the *cogito*, the knowledge that he thinks and therefore exists. He uses this first item of knowledge to derive a rule about which perceptions can be known with certainty. This is the Clarity and Distinctness Rule. Armed with the C&D Rule, Descartes next proves that God exists and is not a deceiver by showing that it follows from clearly and distinctly perceived premises. The knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver then opens the way for knowledge of many other things including the existence of the external world.

Today's readers will find that for the most part Descartes does not succeed in escaping the doubts he raises in the First Meditation. Descartes's arguments for the existence of God and the existence of the physical world are unconvincing. Furthermore, I do not think that later philosophers have succeeded in answering these doubts either, nor have they shown them to be illegitimate. I find Descartes's reasons for doubting to be quite legitimate and compelling. I do, however, think that Descartes is partly successful at answering the doubts he raises. Descartes successfully carves out a group of beliefs about which we can be certain, beliefs whose content he describes as clearly and distinctly perceived. I am more optimistic about the success of Descartes's

Clarity and Distinctness Rule than most readers, and it is the purpose of my dissertation to explain and defend it as far as I can.[9]

## A DEFENSE OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

We can see from this way of characterizing the project of the Meditations that clear and distinct perception has an extremely important role to play. "Clarity and distinctness" is Descartes's criterion of truth, his description of the features that items of certain knowledge have in common. A great deal would seem to rest on what account Descartes can give of the nature of clarity and distinctness, how we can know when perceptions have these features, and what normative value they carry that explains why they are marks of certainty. Readers from Gassendi and Leibniz onward have thought that Descartes needed to give a more rigorous account of clear and distinct perception than he did.[10] In fact, Descartes says quite a bit about clear and distinct perception, but he does not say it all in one place, and does not present his view systematically, in a way that would make it easy for us to understand. For this reason, there are in the critical literature very few analyses of what clarity is and what distinctness is. Nevertheless, I think that Descartes has an account of clear and distinct perception and that I can bring it out by examining the things he does say. In Chapter Two I criticize what I think are

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[9] Although I do think that Descartes successfully identifies a type of perception, clear and distinct perception, as being resistant to doubt, I do not agree with him about which things can in fact be clearly and distinctly perceived. Descartes argues that we can have clear and distinct perceptions of God, and that we can clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of arguments for the existence of God and the physical world. In these cases, I think that Descartes has misidentified what can be clearly and distinctly perceived. Therefore, while Descartes tries to use his clear and distinct perceptions to escape from doubts about God and the physical world, I disagree that these doubts can be escaped. I think that Descartes's success in escaping doubt is a severely limited one.

[10] See Gassendi's Fifth Set Objections (II: 194-195, 221; AT VII: 279, 318), and Leibniz (640).

the two best analyses of clarity and distinctness, by Alan Gewirth and Alan Nelson, and I offer my own detailed analysis of clarity and distinctness.

I believe many doubts about the usefulness of the Clarity and Distinctness Rule arise from the mistaken assumption that in clear and distinct perception, like sense perception, we must be able to establish a correspondence between perception and reality before we can know it to be true. I argue that Descartes has a different metaphysical picture of clear and distinct perception: clear and distinct perception is direct perception. In Descartes's view, by relying on the intellect instead of the senses, we can have direct perception, not only of our own ideas, but also of a mind-independent reality. Because clear and distinct perceptions are direct, problems of correspondence do not arise. Much of Chapter Three is given over to developing this reading, building on recent work by Calvin Normore, Larry Nolan, and Vere Chappell on the ontological status of the eternal truths.

One advantage of my interpretation of clear and distinct perception is that it offers a fresh way of thinking about the problem of the Cartesian Circle. Although the Clarity and Distinctness Rule is introduced before he argues for the existence of God, interpreters almost universally conclude that Descartes does not fully endorse the rule until after he has proven that God exists and is not a deceiver. In Chapter Five, I offer an interpretation Descartes as endorsing this rule from the start. Since clear and distinct perceptions are direct perceptions, they give us direct access to reality, and therefore even a deceiving God could not make false what we clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. This is why I agree with interpreters like John Cottingham who argue that what knowledge of God gives us is not momentary certainty of what we are

clearly and distinctly perceiving, but the stable and lasting certainty that allows us to build up a systematic body of knowledge (Descartes 70-71).

As a whole, I hope that the work in this dissertation will contribute to Descartes scholarship by offering a much needed systematic, detailed analysis and defense of what is a fundamental notion in Descartes's epistemology, clear and distinct perception.

## CHAPTER TWO: AN ANALYSIS OF CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS

In this chapter I examine in detail what I think Descartes means by "clear" and "distinct", what is involved in making a perception clear and distinct, and why clarity and distinctness are norms of perception. We have seen that according to the C&D Rule, whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true. Once we understand more precisely what it is to perceive something clearly and distinctly, we will better understand why Descartes is committed to this rule.

Despite the great number of critical and interpretative commentaries on Descartes's philosophy, very little focuses on the subject of clear and distinct perception. Clear and distinct perception is frequently mentioned but rarely treated in depth. The best treatments of clear and distinct perception are Alan Gewirth's article "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes" and Alan Nelson's "Descartes's Ontology of Thought". Therefore, before I present my own analysis, I will take some time to comment on these two articles and distinguish the points on which I agree and disagree with the authors. I will also argue against a general way of understanding clarity and distinctness as an arbitrary mark of truth, and a particular version of this, understanding clear and distinct perception as subjectively certain. Instead, I suggest that we understand clarity and distinctness as having intrinsic normative value. Then I will argue for this analysis of clear and distinct perception: a perception is clear when we are paying attention to it and are aware of what it essentially contains, and a perception is distinct when it includes nothing that is not essentially or necessarily connected.

GEWIRTH

Alan Gewirth explains clarity and distinctness by distinguishing between the direct content and the interpretive content of an idea. Gewirth introduces this distinction by considering Descartes's treatment of sensations (C&Dness 257-258). Descartes says that when sensations are viewed as representing material things outside the mind, then our ideas of those sensations are obscure and confused. When sensations, however, are viewed as nothing more than sensations, or modes of mind, and are not referred to material objects, then our ideas of those sensations can be clear and distinct.[11] This is a case where the same idea can be either clear and distinct or obscure and confused depending on how we interpret it. In this example, Gewirth calls the sensation itself the direct content of the idea and the interpretation of the sensation as either representing material things or not, as the interpretative content of the idea. In this case, the direct content remains the same while the interpretative content is changed, and as the interpretive content is changed, the perception gets more or less clear and distinct (C&Dness 258-259).

Gewirth then notes that there are other examples where it is the interpretive content that remains constant, and the direct content changes to make the idea more or less clear and distinct (C&Dness 259 ff.). He considers Descartes's contrast between his own conception of God and an infidel's conception of God.[12] What remains the same in the two ideas, according to Gewirth, is the interpretive content, that the idea represents God. What changes is the direct content of the idea, namely the particular conception

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[11] See the Principles of Philosophy I, §§66-70 (CSM I: 216-218; AT VIII A: 32-35).
[12] See the Second Set of Replies (CSM II: 99; AT VII: 138-139) and the Fourth Set of Replies (CSM II: 163; AT VII: 233-234).

of God, say a conception of either a corporeal or an incorporeal being. Both direct contents are interpreted as being ideas of God, but one is clear and distinct and the other is obscure and confused.

According to Gewirth an idea is clear and distinct only when the direct and interpretive contents of the idea are equal, or when everything that is included in the one is also included in the other, and nothing contradicting the one contradicts the other. Whichever content is held constant, the other content must include the formal nature, or leading property, which constitutes its nature and essence and nothing contradictory to that essence (C&Dness 261). "The direct contents of these ideas are seen… to represent the essence, or at least part of the essence, of the objects which they are interpreted as representing, so that the direct and interpretive contents are equal to one another" (C&Dness 270). The idea equating the direct and interpretive contents constitutes an "essential definition" (C&Dness 272). The essential definition can then be used to test the clarity and distinctness of other ideas, ideas that are interpreted to represent the same object.

I agree with Gewirth's insight that clarity and distinctness for Descartes is in large part a function of how we interpret our ideas. I acknowledge that for some examples, such as sensations, it may be useful to distinguish an interpretive aspect from a more direct aspect of the idea. As we try to apply the distinction to more examples, however, I think the distinction becomes at best cumbersome, or at worst untenable. If I consider the clear and distinct perception that as long as I think, I exist, for instance, it is not obvious which part is the direct content and which part is the interpretative content or whether any such distinction can be made. The same is true for the clear and distinct perception that 2+3=5.

Throughout his examples, Gewirth seems to understand the interpretive content as a way of verbalizing what is represented in the direct content. Consider the conception of God. The interpretive content of the idea of God is supposed to be just "God" (C&Dness 260). The direct contents that might be interpreted as representing God are, on the one hand, 'good, incorporeal, and infinite perfection' and on the other hand, 'vindictive, corporeal, and infinite perfection' (C&Dness 259-260, 272-273). The same interpretation is applied to ideas with different direct contents, yielding in the one case a clear and distinct idea and in the other an obscure and confused idea. The problem that I see is that the interpretive content of the idea is nothing more than the application of a label to the idea, and this leads to a dilemma. Either the label is empty, in which case there will be no criterion for its correct or incorrect application, or the label has a content attached to it, in which case it is the same sort of thing as direct content.

Gewirth has a little more to say about how we determine that the idolater's conception of God is obscure and confused. Gewirth describes Descartes's method so that before we evaluate the idolater's idea of God, we first formulate an essential definition of 'God' by recognizing that the direct content 'infinite perfection' and the interpretive content "God" are necessarily connected. After we have formulated this essential definition we can use it to show that the interpretive content, 'God' does not apply to the idolater's conception of God insofar as the direct content of that conception includes the properties 'vindictive' and 'corporeal', which are incompatible with perfection. By obtaining an essential definition of 'God', 'God' is no longer an empty label, and we have criteria for the application of the interpretive content, 'God' (C&Dness 270-273).

Once we have an essential definition for the interpretive content, 'God,' Gewirth thinks that definition becomes necessarily connected with the interpretive content (C&Dness 271). Perhaps Gewirth means by this that the essential definition becomes part of the interpretive content. So that if we interpret a direct content as representing God, we are thereby interpreting it as representing an infinitely perfect being, but now the distinction between the interpretive content and the direct content of the idea is an arbitrary one. Why should we say of the idolater's idea of God that 'infinite perfection' belongs to the interpretive content while 'vindictive' and 'corporeal' belong to the direct content? Why not the other way around? Why not say that the direct content of his idea of God is of an infinitely perfect being and he interprets it as representing a vindictive and corporeal being? I agree with Gewirth that the contents must be made equivalent in some sense before the idea can be clear and distinct, but no useful distinction between direct and interpretive contents seems applicable here and in many other cases.

Gewirth may not mean to imply that the essential definition 'infinitely perfect being' belongs to the interpretive content of the idolater's idea of God. He may be thinking that both 'infinitely perfect being' and 'vindictive, corporeal being' are direct contents and they are linked by the interpretive content 'God'. If 'infinitely perfect being' is divorced from the interpretive content, however, then the interpretive content once again becomes an empty label. What grounds could there be for saying that the label is necessarily connected to the one direct content and not to the other?

Perhaps Gewirth could grant that the connection between an interpretive content and a direct content is somewhat arbitrary. It is a stipulation that a certain term will pick out a certain direct content. We determine what the essential definition

of 'God' is by examining the contents of the idea with the interpretive content 'God' and then subjecting it to a reductive process. The idolater could theoretically perform this process and arrive at the essential definition, 'vindictive, corporeal being'. What makes the idolater's conception of God obscure and confused is the fact that the direct content contains elements that contradict one another. It is because the direct content of the idolater's conception of God includes perfection in addition to vindictiveness and corporeality that the conception is an obscure and confused one. If the idolater's conception were self-consistent, it might be clear and distinct, although he would be understanding something different by the term "God" than Descartes understands.

The problem with this account is that the interpretive content is doing no real work. This account does explain how we decide whether an interpretive content applies or not, but the interpretive content is still nothing more than a label. Gewirth describes clear and distinct ideas as ideas where there is a certain kind of equality or matching between interpretive and direct contents. On the above account, however, it is two direct contents, i.e. vindictiveness and perfection, that must be made to match if the idea is to be clear and distinct.

I wonder if the temptation to distinguish a direct and an interpretive content comes from thinking about ideas as images or at least as like images. I said before that Gewirth seems to understand the interpretive content as a way of verbalizing what is represented in the direct content. If the direct content were thought of as an image, then it would have content and at the same time be inherently non-verbal, and the interpretive content would be distinguished from it by being verbal. This model would be a good way of explaining how to make our sensations clear and distinct, because

sensations, like images, seem to have a basic non-verbal content.[13] For Descartes, however, it is generally intellectual perceptions, not sense perceptions, that can be made clear and distinct. When we think about ideas that are not sensations or images, it is difficult to find any basis for a distinction between direct and interpretive content.

I conclude therefore, that the attempt to explicate Gewirth's account of interpretive and direct content leads to a dilemma. Either the direct and the interpretive content are not importantly different, or the interpretive content is an empty label and not playing any important role in making the idea clear and distinct. Nevertheless, I think Gewirth gets a great many things right in his account of clear and distinct perception. I think Gewirth is right that when we evaluate the clarity and distinctness of our perceptions, there is some element of the perception which is held constant, or basic, or made into the core of the idea. He is right that making our ideas clear and distinct involves a reductive process. As I strip away the inessential elements and make my idea more clear and distinct, I must decide whether each element is necessarily connected to the core element. If I do not choose something to hold constant, then when I find contradictory elements, I will not have a basis for deciding which to throw away and which to keep.

I think the more relevant distinction than the one between direct and interpretive contents is the distinction between the part of the idea that is being held basic, that is, as the constant core of the idea, and the part of the idea that is being

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[13] This division between a direct content and how we verbally interpret it is reminiscent of the Stoic kataleptic impression. Michael Frede claims that, for the Stoics, when we see an object clearly, it is represented in such detail that it could not be exhausted by any number of propositions, indeed there may be more detail than we can conceptualize. He calls the propositions that describe the impression, the propositional content, and distinguishes that from the representational concept, which is the way the proposition is thought, generally an image. (67 ff.).

considered as necessarily connected or able to be stripped away. These are the parts of the idea that must be shown to match in some sense. It does not matter which is the interpretation and which is the thing being interpreted, nor does it matter whether those terms apply at all. I will return below in my own analysis to the notion of finding a core element of an idea that is basic and will identify it. Ultimately, I do not think that it matters which element is treated as basic, as long as every other element attributed to the idea is necessarily connected with that basic element.

I also agree with Gewirth that clarity and distinctness should be analyzed in terms of essential characteristics.[14] Gewirth says, "the minimum requirement for an idea to be clear, then, is that whichever content be taken as basic, the other include what… constitutes its nature and essence…. Similarly, the minimum requirement for an idea to be distinct is that nothing contradictory to the essence of its object be included in it" (C&Dness 261). Notice that in this description of clarity and distinctness, there is no need for distinguishing which part is the interpretive content and which is the direct content. Either kind of content may include the essential characteristic of the other. What becomes relevant is which part is held constant and which part is not.

Despite the fact that he does not rely on the difference between direct and interpretive content in the above definitions of the minimum requirements of clarity and distinctness, Gewirth goes on to explain an idea's becoming more clear and distinct in terms of direct and interpretive content, saying, "…while it is still interpreted to be representative of the same object its direct content comes to include additional attributes necessarily connected with the interpretive content" (C&Dness 264).

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[14] I argue below that an idea is clear when we are aware of what it essentially contains and it is distinct when we attribute to it nothing that is not essentially contained in it or necessarily connected to it.

Gewirth thinks that when an idea is made more clear and distinct, the interpretive content remains constant while new properties are added to the direct content. For Gewirth, it is the fact that the interpretive content remains un-augmented that keeps the idea from becoming an idea of something else when the new properties are added. Gewirth is addressing the passage of the Fifth Set of Replies where Descartes says,

> An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else…. But once the idea of the true God has been conceived, although we may detect additional perfections in him which we had not yet noticed, this does not mean that we have augmented the idea of God; we have simply made it more distinct and explicit, since, so long as we suppose that our original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections. (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371)

While I think it is correct to say that when one idea is made more clear and distinct, it is interpreted as representing the same object, I think Gewirth has the order of explanation wrong. The idea does not continue to represent the same object because of its interpretive content, but rather, we interpret it as continuing to represent the same object because it does represent the same object. Furthermore, if we are true to the text, we will not characterize an idea's becoming more clear and distinct as an increase in the content of the idea (direct or otherwise), but rather as a discovery of features that were in the idea all along. I think the account I give below of what goes on when we make our ideas more clear and distinct does justice to the quoted passage.

Thus, while I think that Gewirth's analysis of clarity and distinctness is quite useful in that it draws our attention to the way Descartes's evaluates clarity and distinctness by looking at the essential content of an idea and stripping away any elements of an idea which are in conflict with that essential content, I find the distinction he emphasizes between direct/interpretive content to be confusing and

ultimately unhelpful. It is a distinction which can only be non-arbitrarily drawn when we consider imagistic ideas like sensations, in which Descartes finds very little which is clear and distinct.

NELSON

Alan Nelson makes an important contribution to understanding clarity and distinctness in Descartes by thinking about obscurity and confusion quite literally and using this literal understanding of obscure and confused ideas to understand their opposites, clarity and distinctness. According to Nelson, a confused idea is literally "*con-fused*"; two or more ideas joined together (167).

Alan Nelson points out that the term "obscure," in Latin, *"obscurus"* connotes covering, such as when one thing is obscured by another (DOT 169). Nelson concludes that an obscure idea is one where some component or components of the idea cover up and keep us from perceiving another component or components (DOT169). That is, obscurity results because one of the elements in a confused idea obscures the other element, or part of the other element.

I find that there is indeed some evidence that Descartes sees obscurity as occurring when one idea covers, blocks, or somehow interferes with another. For instance, Descartes frequently warns us against the prejudice of preconceived opinions.[15] Our preconceived opinions get in the way of clear and distinct perception. In the Second

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[15] See Meditations (CSM II: 5, 9, 12, 15, 47, 77, 97, 104, 111-112, 116, 264, 270-271, 296-297, 299-300, 313, 324, 352-353; AT VII: 4, 12, 17-18, 22-23, 69, 107, 135, 146, 157-159, 164, 385, 438 ff., 445, 465, 481, 518; AT IX A: 203 ff.).

Set of Replies, Descartes speaks of someone's preconceived opinions as, "eclipsing his natural light" (CSM II: 97; AT VII: 135).

Nelson tells us that, "An idea is confused if it is a composite incorrectly regarded as a unity" (DOT 168). Nelson explains obscurity as dependent on confusion, and concludes that we can make an obscure perception into a clear perception by distinguishing the individual components from one another. I think this is an extremely useful way of thinking about clear and distinct perception, and makes sense when applied to Descartes's examples of clear and distinct perception. Below I will offer a similar account of distinctness as a rather literal distinguishing, or separating, of our ideas. Nelson, however, does not give a general account of how we know which ideas make up a unity and which ideas do not. His account of clear and distinct perception does not show how it can be extended to new cases.

Nelson stops just a little short of saying how we know when an idea is a proper unity, and therefore clear and distinct. He does point out that, according to Descartes, we must recognize the innate, simple components of our ideas. He characterizes Descartes's method in the Principles, however, as one of providing a "catalog" of these simple components of our thought (DOT 171). Nelson says, "So Descartes's plan is to categorize the innate ideas and what we can truly judge about them" (ibid.). Indeed, Descartes does provide something like a catalog of the objects of perception in the Principles. Descartes's method cannot be just to provide a catalog of properly simple ideas for others to memorize. Descartes expects the reader to learn by example how to think clearly for himself. In light of that fact, Nelson's account leaves something more to be said in a full account of Descartes's understanding of clear and distinct perception.

Nelson apparently does not think that a criterion for clear and distinct perception needs to be provided on the basis of the intrinsic characteristics of clarity and distinctness. He thinks that the role of the will can do this job. Nelson says that a clear and distinct idea is one from which we cannot withhold assent. Nelson tells us,

> These considerations confound the traditional complaint that Descartes provides no 'criterion' of clarity and distinctness. If one is presently able, perhaps with the aid of extravagant skeptical hypotheses, to refrain from assenting to an idea, then … one can be sure that the idea is not presently clear and distinct. Equivalently, it must be to some degree confused and obscure. (DOT 164)

While I disagree with Nelson's interpretation that assent to clear and distinct perceptions is strictly compulsory, I do agree that when we clearly and distinctly perceive a truth, we are always inclined to assent to it.[16] Indeed, I agree that we can use this feature of clear and distinct perception as a criterion for deciding when an idea is clear and distinct. This sort of criterion of clear and distinct perception, however, can only tell us whether our ideas are already clear and distinct. What it cannot do is tell us how to make our ideas clear and distinct. Nor can it tell us why some perceptions are clear and distinct and why others are not. For that we need an understanding of the intrinsic characteristics of clarity and distinctness, and an account of Descartes's method for making ideas clear and distinct. I will try to provide this account of clarity and distinctness in my own analysis. Thus, I think Nelson's analysis of clear and distinct perception provides a very helpful way of thinking about clarity and distinctness, I do

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[16] In the Fourth Meditation Descartes tells us that the will is both free and "perfect of its kind" (CSM II: 40; AT VII: 58). He says of his perception that he exists, "I could not but judge that something which I understood so clearly was true; but this was not because I was compelled so to judge by any external force, but because a great light in the intellect was followed by a great inclination in the will, and thus the spontaneity and freedom of my belief was all the greater in proportion to my lack of indifference" (CSM II: 41; AT VII: 58-59). Critics are divided over how to interpret this passage. I read Descartes as saying that although he is not indifferent about matters which he clearly and distinctly perceives, his affirmation of what he clearly and distinctly perceives to be true is nevertheless an act of free will and not compelled.

not think it goes far enough. I intend to offer a fuller account of the intrinsic character of clarity and distinctness as well as an explanation of why these characteristics of ideas do make perceptions certain and compel us to give our voluntary assent.

## ACT VERSUS CONTENT

I would like to acknowledge a certain looseness or ambiguity that occurs in Descartes's works as well as in my dissertation. Throughout this work I frequently use the term "perception", which is ambiguous between the act of perceiving and the content of the perception. In using the phrase "clear and distinct perception" I am purposely preserving the ambiguity of whether it is the content of an idea that is clear and distinct or the way that we perceive it that is clear and distinct.

I preserve this ambiguity because Descartes speaks both of an idea's being clear and distinct, and of our perceiving an idea clearly and distinctly. I think it is important to recognize that Descartes thinks that most ideas will not be clear and distinct by themselves, but that we have to make them clear and distinct by thinking about them properly. Clarity and distinctness comes from the dual contribution of the content of the idea and the manner of thinking about it. Descartes at times will emphasize the one aspect, and at times the other.

When Descartes is emphasizing the role of the idea's content, he tells us that some ideas are so simple that we cannot help but perceive them clearly and distinctly whenever we consider them (Replies, CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145-146). On the other hand, when Descartes is emphasizing the role that we, the subjects, play in making an idea clear and distinct, he says it may be possible for those people who do not think in

the right way to never have a clear and distinct idea in their whole lives.[17] Putting aside the question of whether there are some ideas that must always be clear and distinct or others that are never clear and distinct, it is evident that generally speaking, for Descartes clarity and distinctness is a combination of what is contained in the idea and how we think about it.

A prime example of the dual contributions of the content of an idea and how we think about it, is the case of sense perception. When Descartes is focused on the importance of the content of the idea he says that the ideas of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that we can never discover their nature (CSM II: 30; AT VII: 43-44), and he speaks of sensations as inherently confused, saying, "for these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body. On the other hand, in Principles I, §68 when Descartes is focusing on the role that we play in making our ideas clear and distinct, he says,

> 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 clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. But when they are judged to be real things existing outside our mind, there is no way of understanding what sort of things they are. (CSM I: 217; AT VIII A: 33)

Descartes sees sensations as inherently likely to be deceptive due to their content, which may provide subject matter for error (CSM II: 164; AT VII:234). Nevertheless, a clear and distinct conception of sensation is possible, so long as we think about it in the right way.

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[17] See Principles I, §73 (CSM I: 220; AT VIII A: 37), Replies (CSM II: 321; AT VII: 476-477), and Conversation with Burman (CSMK III: 332-333; AT V: 146).

PROPOSITIONS OR THINGS?

Descartes switches between speaking of clear and distinct perceptions as perceptions of things (e.g. ideas or concepts or essences) and perceptions of propositions (perceptions that such and such is the case). For instance, in the Third Meditation Descartes says that his idea of God is utterly clear and distinct and that it is the truest and most clear and distinct of his ideas (CSM II: 31-32; AT VII: 46). In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes speaks again of the idea of God, but here it is the propositions about God that he describes as clear and distinct. He says, "…[T]he mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it…. Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me…. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature" (CSM II: 45; AT VII: 65). I believe the reason that Descartes switches between talk of clear and distinct perceptions of things and clear and distinct perceptions of propositions is that he sees perceptions of things as translatable into perceptions of propositions and vice versa.[18] Take for example my idea of a triangle. If my idea of a triangle includes the properties of having three sides and three angles, then my idea of a triangle might be translated into a perception of the proposition that all three sided figures have three angles.[19] On the other hand, when I

[18] In the letter to Mersenne, July 1641 Descartes tells us that ideas belonging to the intellect can be expressed either as terms or as propositions (CSMK III: 186; AT III: 395).
[19] My idea of a triangle might yield other propositions as well and not everyone recognizes all of the propositions that are true about a triangle. See Fifth Meditation (CSM II: 47; AT VII: 68-69).

perceive the proposition, "I exist", I also have a clear and distinct idea of a thing, namely, myself.

There are some reasons for thinking that one or the other way of considering clear and distinct perception is primary for Descartes. In the Third Meditation, Descartes says that ideas are never strictly speaking, or formally, false, only judgments can be formally false. Ideas can only be considered materially false, that is, as providing material for a false judgment (CSM II: 30; AT VII: 43-44). Now, strictly speaking, clear and distinct perceptions are not judgments, but rather, the basis for judgments.[20] This could be taken as evidence that Descartes's primary way of thinking about clear and distinct perceptions is as things of a non-propositional nature, since judgments are propositional. For instance, strictly speaking, an idea of God cannot be false, but only my judgments about the idea, such as that something corresponding to the idea exists, or that those properties in my idea of God are necessarily connected.

For Descartes, however, I do not think that the distinction between judgments and mere ideas is the same as the distinction between propositional and non-propositional perceptions. Perceptions are not formally true or false just because they have a propositional structure. Even perceptions with a propositional structure, for Descartes, are merely "propositions in waiting"[22] for judgment because, for Descartes, a distinct act of the will is required to affirm or deny an idea before it becomes a judgment (CSM II: 39; AT VII: 56). Furthermore, when Descartes discusses the clear and distinct

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[20] In the Fourth Meditation Descartes says, "Now all that the intellect does is to enable me to perceive the ideas which are subjects for possible judgements; and when regarded strictly in this light, it turns out to contain no error in the proper sense of that term" (CSM II: 39; AT VII: 56).

[22] This expression comes from Janet Broughton.

[22] This expression comes from Janet Broughton.

perception of a thing, such as the perception of God, or a triangle, even though he describes the idea as an idea 'of God' or an idea 'of a triangle', the perception includes some properties of the thing. As a result, the idea may easily be described with a propositional structure merely by asserting of the thing that it bears a certain predicate.

## ARBITRARY MARKS OF TRUTH

One might think it is Descartes's view that God arbitrarily chose clarity and distinctness as marks of true perception, without there being anything intrinsically reliable about clarity and distinctness. We can imagine that every true perception is stamped by God with clarity and distinctness, with the sole purpose that we be able to distinguish them from false perceptions. On this picture the clarity and distinctness of a perception would be something like the words "genuine 24K" stamped on a piece of jewelry. The words themselves are not intrinsic features of any type of metal, the way that color, malleability, or atomic weight are. They are rather arbitrarily correlated with the genuineness of gold, and there is nothing good about their presence on a piece of jewelry beyond the correlation of their presence with the color, malleability, density, or whatever features that actually make something gold.

If this were the correct picture of clarity and distinctness, then, before we could use clarity and distinctness to identify our true perceptions, we would first have to have an independent way of knowing that clarity and distinctness are the features that mark true perception. We would also have to be sure that there is a God and that he is not a deceiver before we would have reason to rely on the marks God gave to indicate true

perception.[23] Just as it would be difficult to prove that the words, "genuine 24K" are perfectly reliable indicators of genuine gold (in fact they are not, since they may printed on fakes), it would be a tall order for Descartes to expect his reader to accept clarity and distinctness as perfectly reliable indicators of true perception if this were his picture of clarity and distinctness. Furthermore, in the case of gold, if we cannot establish that the mark "genuine 24K" is a perfectly reliable indicator of gold, at least we can confirm or disconfirm a correlation between the two because we have independent empirical means of testing for gold. In the case of clear and distinct perception, on the other hand, it is not obvious that we have any independent means at all of testing for the truth of the perception, much less an independent way to establish the perfect correlation that Descartes claims to be the case.

## SUBJECTIVE CERTAINTY

One view that makes clarity and distinctness seem arbitrarily connected to truth is the view that clarity and distinctness are important just because of the relation that they have to our wills, namely that they cause in us a tremendous urge to assent to the clear and distinct proposition and a feeling of what I will call subjective certainty. Although subjective certainty may be correlated with truth, it cannot be what gives clarity and distinctness the right kind of character to be a perfectly reliable mark of truth.

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[23] This would be incompatible with the solution to the Cartesian Circle that I argue for in Chapter Five. According to my interpretation, Descartes avoids the Cartesian Circle problem because he can be certain of his clear and distinct perceptions before he proves that God exists and is not a deceiver. If we read Descartes as holding that we must know that God exists and is not a deceiver before we can know that our clear and distinct perceptions are true, then I think we commit him to circularity.

It is generally agreed about Descartes's doctrine of clear and distinct perception that whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly is certain and indubitable. There is debate, however, in interpreting Descartes, as to whether this certainty is merely subjective, or psychological, or whether it is an objective, or metaphysical, certainty of the content of the perception, that is, whether it amounts to knowledge. On the first interpretation, perceiving something clearly and distinctly will not constitute knowledge, but only a particular state of mind or attitude about the content of the perception, a feeling or conviction of certainty. On the second interpretation, clear and distinct perception amounts to knowledge. When I have a clear and distinct perception, not only do I feel certain about that perception, but I also know that it is true.[24]

Harry Frankfurt in Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen criticizes C. S. Peirce for suggesting that clear and distinct perception, "is a matter of nothing more than how a person feels about a proposition, and that Descartes regards the bare fact of conviction as a reliable guide to truth" (147). Frankfurt insists that clear and distinct perception is not just a feeling that excludes all desire to doubt, and it is not a merely psychological or subjective sort of evidence for truth (DDM147, 152). Rather, he argues that clear and distinct perception is largely a logical matter of recognizing that no coherent grounds for doubting a proposition are conceivable. Having said that, however,

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[24] One way of generating the distinction between what I am calling subjective and objective certainty is just to distinguish between two different grammatical uses of the word 'certain'. At times we say, 'it is certain that *p*', whereas, other times we say, 'I am certain that *p*'. The first use seems to be a statement of the objective status of *p*, whereas the second use seems to be only a statement of one's subjective attitude toward *p*. I think that this difference in usage contributes to the difficulty in interpreting Descartes, but I do not think I have to accept the distinction as being drawn along these lines. While saying, 'I am certain that *p*' does describe one's attitude toward *p*, it may also state that one's attitude is one of knowledge. It may mean that the subject has knowledge of *p*'s truth. Thus, I think that even the second sort of statement is open to both a subjective and an objective interpretation. On the objective interpretation, we are claiming to know that *p*, and it will not be appropriate to ask whether in addition to our being certain of *p*, *p* is also true.

Frankfurt gives an account of clear and distinct perception which distinctly disallows anything more than a subjective certainty.

Frankfurt claims that for Descartes, clearly and distinctly perceiving something, amounts to being certain of it and being unable to doubt it, but does not amount to knowledge that it is true. Frankfurt says that Descartes's intentions are, "not so much to prove that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, as to establish that there are no reasonable grounds for doubting this" (DDM 178-179). This is supposed to explain Descartes's lack of concern about whether God might make false the things that Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives (CSM II: 103-104; AT VII: 145- 146).[25]

Alan Gewirth, in "The Cartesian Circle" holds a view similar to Frankfurt's. Gewirth distinguishes between the methodological and metaphysical moments in Descartes' writing. The methodological moment, according to Gewirth, is concerned with the internal logical and psychological characteristics of ideas, and its norm is clarity and distinctness (CC 371). On the other hand, the metaphysical moment, according to Gewirth, is concerned with the correspondence of ideas with reality, and its norm is truth (CC 372). Gewirth's point is that clarity and distinctness is not concerned with truth, but rather with an internal consistency or coherence. When Descartes is in the methodological moment, the internal characteristics of his clear and distinct ideas have the psychological effect that he is convinced of the truth of his ideas. When Descartes is in the metaphysical moment, on the other hand, he is able to wonder whether his clear and distinct ideas are true (CC 374).

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[25] I think it is not at all clear in the passage Frankfurt is concerned with that Descartes is conceding that God could make false what is clearly and distinctly perceived to be true. Descartes says, "someone may make out (*fingat*) that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convince d of may appear false to God or an angel…"(CSM II: 103-104; AT VII: 145- 146; emphasis added).

I find this interpretation of clarity and distinctness objectionable. First, it seems to describe the state of clear and distinct perception as one which renders the perceiver either unable to consider whether his perception is true, or blind to the possibility of its falsehood. On this interpretation perceiving something clearly and distinctly is like being in an intellectual fog which prevents one from recognizing important reasons for doubt. For both of these authors, the reason that we cannot doubt a proposition that we clearly and distinctly perceive is not that we see the proposition to be true or see that it cannot be false, but rather, the act of clearly and distinctly perceiving somehow puts us in a psychological attitude toward the proposition such that we are compelled to accept it and unable to doubt it, regardless of how many good reasons there may be to doubt it. As a result, according to these authors, it is only when we cease to clearly and distinctly perceive a proposition that we are able to appreciate the grounds for doubting it. It is as though the fog has been lifted, and, no longer under the psychological influences of clarity and distinctness, we are able to see that our clear and distinct perceptions may very well be false. I do not see how this sort of shortsightedness could possibly be what Descartes intended by clear and distinct perception.

I also object to this interpretation on the grounds that it does not allow for a satisfying solution to the Cartesian Circle. In Chapter Five I discuss how these authors try to use the interpretation of clear and distinct perception as subjectively certain to dissolve the Cartesian Circle, and I argue that the attempted solution fails.

One motivation which has been mentioned for the subjective certainty interpretation is the worry that clarity and distinctness are internal qualities of our ideas. They are not qualities which describe the relation between our ideas and reality. For this reason it is thought that no matter how clear and distinct, the possibility still

remains that our ideas do not correspond to reality. The thought that if clarity and distinctness are internal qualities of ideas then they do not imply correspondence to reality betrays a misunderstanding of clear and distinct perception. I do not want to deny that correspondence with reality is the notion of truth that is operating for Descartes. What I want to deny is that there is any gap to be overcome between our clear and distinct perceptions and reality.

My conclusion is that clear and distinct perceptions are not merely subjectively certain, but objectively or metaphysically certain. When we clearly and distinctly perceive something, there is no further question to be answered about whether the perception corresponds to reality. We will indeed find ourselves strongly compelled to assent and will find no reason to doubt what we clearly and distinctly perceive, but not because the clear and distinct perception prevents us from considering or appreciating metaphysical doubts. While we are clearly and distinctly perceiving something we are free to fully consider (and reject) any skeptical hypotheses. We will find ourselves unable to doubt what we clearly and distinctly perceive because we see that it is true and could not possibly be false. I will try to argue for this interpretation of clear and distinct perception in this chapter.

## CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS AS NORMS OF PERCEPTION

I take the arbitrary mark reading, and particularly, the subjective certainty reading, to be the wrong way of understanding clarity and distinctness, and the alternative is to think of clarity and distinctness as having intrinsic normative value. Specifically, instead of being marks that are merely correlated with true perception, clarity and distinctness are constitutive of what makes a perception reliable, like a

certain color and malleability or atomic weight are constitutive of what makes a metal gold.

Clarity and distinctness are features that make perception reliable. I do not, however, want to suggest that clarity and distinctness are features that make a perception true. Descartes does not say that clarity and distinctness cause or constitute the states of affairs that are the contents of those perceptions. My clear and distinct perception that God exists certainly is not what makes it true that God exists. By analogy, a clear window does not cause any particular view to be seen, nevertheless, the clarity of a clear window is the feature that makes it good or reliable for seeing what is outside. Just as clarity is an intrinsically good feature of windows and not arbitrarily correlated with the true perception of the view provided, clarity and distinctness of perception are intrinsically good features of perception that are not arbitrarily correlated to truth. Nevertheless clarity and distinctness do not create truth; they give access to truth.

It seems plain that the terms "clear" and "distinct" are chosen because they are the norms of visual perception. Descartes frequently describes intellectual perception in terms of or by analogy to visual perception.[26] The analogy between visual perception and intellectual perception has its limits, however. For one, vision is largely a physical

[26] For instance, in his very definition of the terms "clear" and "distinct", in the Principles, Descartes explicitly appeals to the reader's understanding of what clear and distinct vision is and why it is desirable. In the Third Meditation Descartes likens ideas to images of things (CSM II: 25, 28; AT VII: 37, AT IX A: 31). In the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 51; AT VII: 72), Descartes tells us, "when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it," as though an idea is something we see in our minds. John Cottingham points out in his book Descartes, that the word "intuition" in classical Latin, ordinarily meant to see, gaze at, or look upon (Cottingham 25). Furthermore, Descartes very frequently uses a metaphor of light, such as, "it is manifest by the natural light," in the Third Meditation (CSM II: 28, 35; AT VII: 40, 52), which makes intellectual perception analogous to visual perception insofar as we see things clearly in the light. In Rule Nine of the Rules for the Direction of the Mind, Descartes says, quite explicitly, "We can best learn how mental intuition is to be employed by comparing it with ordinary vision" (CSM I: 33; AT X: 400).

process and better vision will depend on factors that are not relevant to intellectual perception, such as the proximity of the object, the amount and quality of the light, how the light hits the eye, how the nerves are affected, and so forth.[27]

Moreover, the analogy to visual perception must be limited because, as I will explain in the next chapter, for Descartes visual perception is a form of indirect perception whereas intellectual perception is direct perception. Visual perception does have its own sort of clarity and distinctness, but visual clarity and distinctness will never be sufficient for knowledge. Clear and distinct vision is better than blocked vision or blurry vision. No matter how good the visual perception, however, the question will always remain whether the visual idea represents the world as it really is. It does not help that I see a piece of paper in my hands in the finest detail and with nothing obscuring my view, if I am in fact asleep in bed. For Descartes, when we perceive something visually we are perceiving an idea, and the idea, independently of its visual clarity and distinctness, either does or does not represent the world to some degree. The clarity and distinctness of my vision does not provide sufficient reason for thinking that the visual idea corresponds to something in the world.[28] In order to have reason to believe that the visual idea corresponds to the world, I need something beyond the idea itself; I need to know something about the relationship between my sense ideas and the

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[27] In the Optics, Descartes gives a very detailed account of how vision works and the variables involved. The norms of vision are discussed especially in the Sixth and Seventh Discourses. Due to the limitations of the analogy between visual and intellectual perception however, these discussions are not especially illuminating to the question of what makes clarity and distinctness norms of intellectual perception.

[28] In the Replies Descartes says,

> [W]e do not have the required kind of certainty with regard to matters which we perceive solely by means of the senses, however clear such perception may be. For we have often noted that error can be detected in the senses, as when someone with dropsy feels thirsty or when someone with jaundice sees snow as yellow; for when he sees it as yellow he sees it just as clearly and distinctly as we do when we see it as white. (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145)

world. In intellectual perception, on the other hand, intellectual clarity and distinctness is sufficient for establishing the truth of the perception.

These differences between visual and intellectual perception force us to look beyond the metaphor of vision to understand clear and distinct intellectual perception. Upon reflection it seems strange that Descartes leans so heavily on the metaphor of vision even though he does not think that visual perception is especially clear and distinct compared to intellectual perception. Using the metaphor of vision, however, to describe understanding is not Descartes's own invention, but rather a metaphor that he inherited. In fact, the metaphor is probably inherited from those who thought of vision as direct perception and as the most reliable way of finding out about the world.

I believe that Descartes thought his readers would need only a little reflection to see that clarity and distinctness are the norms of visual perception and by metaphorical extension, all perception. For this reason Descartes did not so much see the need to explain what clarity and distinctness are, although he did try to show through examples how it could be achieved. Considering the fundamental importance clear and distinct perception has for Descartes's philosophy, and considering the general importance that the C&D Rule has to the field of epistemology if it is really a criterion of truth, it is worth while to investigate what exactly Descartes thinks these norms of perception are, as well as how to achieve them.

## DEFINITIONS

There is one place where Descartes actually defines the terms "clear" and "distinct". In the Principles, Part I, section 45, Descartes says:

> I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind - just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to

> the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (I: 207-208; AT VIII A: 22)

These definitions are helpful, but they need to be illuminated by looking at some other texts. After looking at selected texts, I will suggest an analysis of "clear" and "distinct" that better explicate Descartes's methods of determining when an idea is clear and distinct.

Much of the time that Descartes discusses clarity and distinctness, he is not being especially careful about whether he says "clear," "distinct," or "clear and distinct". This makes it difficult to tell the difference between these two characteristics. Indeed, since in the Principles definitions distinctness is said to involve being clear, there may not be a sharp distinction between clarity and distinctness. Nevertheless, Descartes thinks they can come apart, and in the Principles Part I, section 46, Descartes gives an example where they do come apart.[29] He says,

> *The example of pain shows that a perception can be clear without being distinct, but cannot be distinct without being clear.*
> For example, when someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but it is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with 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. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear. (CSM I: 208; AT VIII A 22)

The sensation of pain by itself is perceived clearly but the idea is confused with another idea about the state of the body because we tend to think of the pain or something resembling the pain as existing in the body. This is why the idea of pain is clear but not

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[29] See also Principles I, §47 (CSM I: 208; AT VIII A: 22).

distinct. If however, we distinguish from the sensation of pain any judgments about the state of the body when we experience pain, then the now distinct perception would contain nothing but what is clear. The fact that a perception cannot be distinct without being clear accords with the above definition of a distinct perception as containing only what is clear. I will try to maintain this relationship between clarity and distinctness in the account I offer of clarity and distinctness.

Descartes explains clarity by saying, "I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind." I think it is important that any analysis of clear and distinct perception not ignore the role of the attentive mind. In visual perception, even if we think of vision as passive, it is not sufficient for seeing something clearly that it be in plain view; we also have to look at it and focus our eyes on it. Similarly, in intellectual perception, an idea is clear only if we are focused on it, or give it a large degree of mental attention. In fact, Descartes's writings are littered with suggestions that we would understand something if we would just be more attentive. This is one way that we play an active role in making our ideas clear and distinct.

I think the reason that Descartes says the idea of pain is very clear even when it is not distinct is because pain is the sort of thing that forces itself into our attention, and when we have a pain we cannot help being aware of what the sensation is like. On the other hand, with ideas that are not painful it is easy to fail to pay attention to their content. Descartes makes a connection between attention and pain in the Passions of the Soul, where he says, "The soul can prevent itself from hearing a slight noise or feeling a slight pain by attending very closely to some other thing, but it cannot in the same way prevent itself from hearing thunder or feeling a fire that burns the hand" (CSM I: 345; AT XI: 363-364). If we can fail to feel a slight pain because we are paying

attention to something else, then we will not have a clear perception of that pain. Moreover, if it is possible to fail to take notice of a slight pain because we are not paying attention to it, it is surely much easier to fail to take notice that the angles of a triangle equal two right angles, by paying attention to something other than the idea of a triangle. Thus, clear perceptions will require an attentive mind.

In the Meditations, Descartes intends us to learn by example how to recognize clear and distinct perceptions, so I will proceed to look at the examples he gives there.[30] Several examples in the Meditations tell us that perceiving an object clearly and distinctly involves recognizing its essential properties and stripping away from our conception of the object any property which is not essential, or necessarily connected to it. When we focus on an idea and begin to make it clear and distinct, we hold at least one property constant.[31] For example, when Descartes considers his idea of the piece of wax he decides that all of its sensible properties are non-essential, but there is still something left to the idea. Perhaps the element that Descartes holds constant is the idea of an extended thing. Perhaps, Descartes is holding constant the idea of the wax as

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[30] In the geometrical exposition of the Meditations in the Second Set of Replies, Descartes says,

> …I ask my readers to ponder on all the examples that I went through in my *Meditations*, both of clear and distinct perception, and of obscure and confused perception, and thereby accustom themselves to distinguishing what is clearly known from what is obscure. This is something that it is easier to learn by examples than by rules, and I think that in the *Meditations* I explained, or at least touched on, all the relevant examples. (CSM II: 116; AT VII: 164)

[31] There is a silly story of which I do not know the origin about a man who recognizes an old friend of his sitting on a bench. Let us say the friend's name is "Harry". The man says to his friend something like, "Harry, it's good to see you again! You look so different! You've gotten older. You've lost weight. You've changed your hairstyle. You've changed your hair color. You look taller. Even your face looks different" etc. The man on the bench says, "Hey, buster, I don't know you and my name's not Harry." The first man replies, "What? You've changed your name too?" In the story, the man on the bench seems to be different in every way from the friend, Harry. It is silly that the first man should insist that this is his old friend. There is apparently no basis for maintaining that the man on the bench is the same man as his friend Harry. Presumably, if he is rational, there is some characteristic (such as having played basketball with him at age 17), which, if it were proven did not belong to the man on the bench, would convince him that this was not his friend Harry. Like any other idea, his idea of his friend must have at least one stable element, by which he distinguishes his friend from other people.

whatever is or has the sensible qualities that he perceives.[32] On this second interpretation, Descartes might come to recognize that his idea of the wax is an idea of something essentially extended, without having begun by thinking of the wax that way. Even if Descartes's idea of the wax does not begin as an idea of the essential attribute of the wax (extension), it includes from the beginning an awareness of some essential element that makes it the idea it is, the idea of the wax. Once it is decided which property or element of the idea is to be held constant, then any properties that are not necessarily connected to the constant element, are stripped away, making the idea more distinct. Properties that cannot be stripped away are those that are essential to the idea.

This gives us a procedure for making our ideas clear and distinct, whatever they may be. Theoretically, we can approach each idea free of preconceptions about its essential properties, and see for ourselves which properties can be stripped away and which properties are necessarily connected to the idea. Properties "which I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not," are essential, or belong to the true and immutable nature of the object of my idea (CSM II: 45; AT VII: 64). Properties which can be denied of the thing, "not simply by an abstraction but by a clear and distinct intellectual operation" will not belong to the essence or true and immutable nature of the thing (CSM II: 83-84; AT VII: 117).[33]

Descartes's investigation of his own nature in the Second Meditation (CSM II: 17 ff; AT VII: 25 ff) is a clear example of the process of stripping away from his idea

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[32] This interpretation was suggested to me by Janet Broughton in conversation in 2003. [33] There is a threat of circularity here, which I will address below.

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everything that is not essential to it. He describes the procedure he will follow by saying:

> I will therefore go back and meditate on what I originally believed myself to be . . . . I will then subtract anything capable of being weakened, even minimally, by the arguments now introduced, so that what is left at the end may be exactly and only what is certain and unshakeable. (CSM II: 17; AT VII: 25)

Beginning with his old conception of himself, he applies the skeptical scenarios of the First Meditation to see whether they cast doubt on this conception. He finds that while considering these scenarios, he can conceive of himself without a body, and so he does not include a body in his conception of the 'I' that certainly exists. Descartes finds that the various forms of thinking are the only properties of his self that cannot be called into doubt even by the Dream Argument and the Evil Demon Argument.

Descartes's discussion of the piece of wax is another passage that exemplifies clear and distinct perception (CSM II: 20-22; AT VII: 30-32). When Descartes perceives the wax clearly and distinctly, he takes away in his mind everything that does not necessarily belong to the wax until he has a conception of only what is essential to the wax. In this case, it is not the skeptical scenarios of the First Meditation that are used as aids to the stripping-away process. Descartes conceives of the wax without various properties, by manipulating the wax so as to remove those properties. As the wax changes, he recognizes that the wax is not necessarily hard, soft, cold, warm, sweet smelling, or odorless, and he strips those properties away from his conception of the wax. He says, "Let us concentrate, take away everything which does not belong to the wax, and see what is left: merely something extended, flexible and changeable" (CSM II: 20; AT VII: 30-31). When he has stripped away from his idea of the wax everything that is not essential to it, he is left with a clear and distinct understanding of the wax,

that does not include the properties he detected through his senses. Although Descartes is considering and manipulating a specific piece of wax, he does not end up with a clear and distinct perception about what exists. He makes his conception of the nature of the wax clear and distinct, but he is not yet in a position to establish whether that nature which he clearly and distinctly perceives, exists or is the cause of his sense perceptions of the wax. As Descartes himself emphasizes, by getting clear and distinct about his conception of the wax, he learns far more about his own mind than about corporeal things (CSM II: 22; AT VII: 33).

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes concludes that God exists by examining his clear and distinct perception of God and recognizing that existence is included in and necessarily connected to his idea of God. He says, "But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists" (CSM II: 46; AT VII: 67). Because existence cannot be stripped away from the idea of God, a clear and distinct perception of God's nature proves that he exists.

Another good example of clear and distinct perception occurs in Descartes's argument in the Sixth Meditation for the distinctness of the body and the mind (CSM II: 54; AT: VII: 78). Descartes says, "Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing" (ibid). Descartes forms a clear and distinct idea of himself by taking away from it everything that is not essential to himself. Similarly, his clear and distinct perception of body comes from recognizing that the essential property of body is its extension and that thinking does not belong to the idea of body (ibid.).

In all of these examples, Descartes makes his ideas clear and distinct by a reductive or analytic process. This process involves asking whether each property contained in our idea of a thing could be denied of the thing in question. When we have reduced our idea of a thing to only those properties that are essential to it, the idea is clear and distinct. One way Descartes tests whether a property belongs to a thing's essence, is by raising reasons for doubt such as the skeptical scenarios of the First Meditation. If it can be doubted that a property belongs to a thing, then that property is not essential, and it is stripped from the clear and distinct idea of the thing. Descartes applies this method when he considers his own nature in the Second Meditation. Another way Descartes tests whether a property belongs to a thing's essence is by considering whether that property can be removed or altered and yet the thing still remain. Descartes applies this method in determining the nature of the piece of wax in the Second Meditation.

Another way Descartes checks whether a property belongs to a thing is by asking whether there is a contradiction involved in denying that property (CSM II: 108; AT VII: 152), or, what is the same thing for Descartes, asking whether the thing can be clearly and distinctly understood without that property (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 117-118). For instance, in the First Replies Descartes considers whether a triangle can be understood without the property of having angles summing 180 degrees. He says, "For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation – that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial" (ibid.). Because the property cannot be denied of a triangle without contradiction, it is an essential property of a triangle.

A worry might appear here that process is circular. If we are trying to determine whether the idea of a triangle is clear and distinct by checking whether the idea includes any properties that are not essential, then how can we at the same time judge if the properties are essential by whether the idea of the triangle is clear and distinct? I do not think that the procedure that Descartes is describing is a circular one. The process might be described as one of determining whether the whole idea is clear and distinct by examining whether the component parts are clear and distinct. The property of having angles that sum to 180 degrees is usually just one component of the idea of a triangle. Therefore, we can consider the conception of the triangle both with and without the feature. Descartes points out that we might conceive of a triangle without thinking of that particular feature (by abstraction or by ignorance), but we cannot conceive of a triangle whose angles sum to more or less than 180 degrees. Someone might fail to know or fail to think about the sum of the angles of a triangle, but he cannot deny that property and clearly and distinctly understand what he is denying. He must find either that his idea contains a contradiction or that he does not know whether the triangle can have angles summing more or less than 180 degrees. In the first case, he will recognize that it is an essential property of a triangle that its angles add up to 180 degrees; in the second case he will find his idea to be obscure with respect to the sum of the angles.

All of these passages suggest that clear and distinct perception is the perception of what does and does not belong to the essences of things, and that we perceive what

belongs to the essences of things simply by examining our concepts of them.[34] This suggests that a formulation of definitions of clear and distinct perception in terms of essential properties will capture Descartes's understanding of clear and distinct perception. In light of these texts, I want to propose this analysis of "clear" and "distinct":

A perception is clear when we are paying attention to it and are aware of what it essentially contains. A perception is distinct when it includes nothing that is not essentially or necessarily connected.

I will argue for this analysis in what follows.

## CLARITY

I am claiming that Descartes considers an idea to be clear when we are aware of what it essentially contains. The definition in the Principles says that a clear idea is "present and accessible to the attentive mind". There has to be something in the idea to be present and accessible. In the Meditations Descartes makes his ideas clear and distinct through a process of stripping away any elements that are not essential or not necessarily connected. What is left over, surviving the stripping away process are only essential properties. This makes me think that what it is that is "present and accessible", what we become aware is contained in a clear and distinct perception of a thing, is its essential property or properties. Even if an idea is not an idea of an essence,

[34] See also the Fifth Replies where Descartes says, "An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else" (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371), and the Conversation with Burman, where Descartes says that even ideas of fictitious things like chimeras may have elements that can be clearly and distinctly perceived and those elements are true and immutable natures or essences, that clear and distinct perception of a thing involves perception of which properties are contained in or conjoined to a thing, and whatever is not clearly perceived to be contained in or conjoined to a thing does not belong to the essence of that thing (CSMK III: 343-344; AT V: 160).

it will have a core concept or concepts that make it the idea it is and that must be recognized in order for the idea to be clear.

Even if we recognize only one or two essential properties in an idea, Descartes thinks that all of the necessary or essential features of a thing must be contained implicitly in the idea of the thing. This is because the necessary properties that we do not immediately recognize will be implied by the ones that we do recognize.[35] As more properties become apparent, the idea becomes clearer. In Part One, section 11 of the Principles, where Descartes is explaining why the mind is better known than the body, he says, "…and the more attributes we discover in the same thing or substance, the clearer is our knowledge of that substance" (CSM I: 196; AT VIII A: 8).[36] Thus, a clear idea will be an idea in which we recognize some essential property, and the idea will become clearer as we recognize more properties that are necessarily connected to the

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[35] For instance, in the Fifth Set of Replies, Descartes says,

> An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else.… But once the idea of the true God has been conceived, although we may detect additional perfections in him which we had not yet noticed, this does not mean that we have augmented the idea of God; we have simply made it more distinct and explicit, since, so long as we suppose that our original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections. Similarly, the idea of a triangle is not augmented when we notice various properties in the triangle of which we were previously ignorant. (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371)

Also, in the Fifth Meditation, he says,

> [W]henever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being… it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually.… In the same way, it is not necessary for me ever to imagine a triangle; but whenever I do wish to consider a rectilinear figure having just three angles, it is necessary that I attribute to it the properties which license the inference that its three angles equal no more than two right angles, even if I do not notice this at the time. (CSM II: 46-47; AT VII: 67-68)

[36] In the Second Meditation (CSM II: 22; AT VII: 33), however, Descartes says that consideration of the wax makes his knowledge of his own mind more distinct, and in the Fifth Set of Replies, Descartes says that as we detect more of God's perfections our idea of God becomes more "distinct and explicit" (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371). As I said earlier, Descartes is generally sloppy about which of the terms, "clear" or "distinct" he uses, and this is one perfectly good explanation of why Descartes may describe the discovery of more of the necessary properties of an idea sometimes as making it clearer and sometimes as making it more distinct. I think, however, there is another very good explanation and that is as an idea gets clearer it also gets more distinct. I will say more about this below.

first. For instance, we can have a clear idea of a triangle by recognizing that a triangle is a three-sided plane figure. When we discover other necessary features of three-sided figures, Descartes would say that we are discovering what was always contained in the idea of a triangle, and thus we are making our idea of a triangle clearer.

There is an objection to this view (Frankfurt DDM 132-133) that stems from Descartes's claim that an idea is nothing more or less than what we are aware of.[37] It seems to follow that our awareness of every idea must be perfect. If we were not aware of it, it would not even be an idea. If this is the case, how can an idea be more or less clear depending on whether we attend to it and are aware of what it contains?

The answer to this objection is that an idea can be before our minds if we are aware of just one element in it, but there may be many more elements that are implicit in the idea. According to Descartes all of the necessary properties of a thing are implicit in the idea of it. When we focus our attention on an idea we can make more of its elements explicit.

If being clear merely involves awareness of some element or property essentially contained in the idea, then it does seem as though all of our ideas are at least a little clear, simply by virtue of our being aware of all of our ideas. In order to be aware of our ideas, it seems that we must know what they are ideas of, and therefore be minimally aware of what is essentially contained in the idea. If we failed to be aware of any of the essential properties or elements of an idea, then we would fail to be aware of what idea we were having. Descartes's view about the transparency of thought seems to exclude

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[37] See, for instance, the definition of "Idea" in the Arguments in Geometrical Fashion in the Second Set of Replies (CSM II: 113; AT VII: 160-161) and the letter to Mersenne, July 1641 (CSMK III: 185; AT III: 392-393).

the possibility of any thoughts or ideas that we are not aware of. For instance, Descartes gives the following definitions of "thought" and "idea" in the Second Replies: "*Thought.* I use this term to include everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it," and, "*Idea.* I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought" (CSM II: 113; AT VII: 160).[38]

Considering these passages, it may be correct to say that, for Descartes, every idea is at least a little bit clear, but there are some further considerations. One consideration I mentioned earlier is Descartes's recognition that some ideas can command our attention more than others. If I have a great pain in my right foot which captures my attention, my awareness of other ideas or sensations may be so slight as to not merit the label "clear" at all. I may have to consciously shift my attention in order to articulate what my other ideas are about. Thus, it would make sense to say that only ideas that are mentally 'in focus' count as clear and those ideas that are mentally 'out of focus' are obscure.

A second consideration in evaluating whether every idea must be a little bit clear insofar as we are aware of its content, is the odd status of memories and latent innate ideas. Despite Descartes's definitions of "thought" and "idea" as requiring awareness, some ideas, such as memories and innate ideas, can be said in some sense to exist in the mind even when we are not aware of them at all. These ideas, while we are not actually

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[38] Also, in the Fourth Replies, Descartes says, "As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking, thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident" CSM II: 171; AT VII: 246).

thinking of them, are not perceived clearly. They are obscure until we bring them before the mind.

DISTINCTNESS

In Principles I, section 63, Descartes tells us the distinctness of an idea involves literally being distinguished from ideas of other things. He says, "…[a concept's] distinctness simply depends on our carefully distinguishing what we do include in it from everything else" (CSM I: 215; AT VIII A: 31). An idea's distinctness is distinctness from other ideas. This same understanding of distinctness is confirmed in the Meditations. For example, in the Synopsis of the Meditations, Descartes describes the distinct concept of the soul, not as distinct in and of itself, but as distinct from the concept of body.[39] Similarly, in the Sixth Meditation Descartes explains that the confused idea of a chiliagon that he forms in the imagination, since it is the same image as he would form of any figure with very many sides, "is useless for recognizing the properties which distinguish a chiliagon from other polygons" (CSM II: 50; AT VII: 72). In other words, the distinct idea of the chiliagon distinguishes the chiliagon from other figures, whereas the confused idea of the chiliagon does not.

Janet Broughton objects that the examples of the chiliagon and the distinctness of body and soul are not analogous and actually bring out an ambiguity in Descartes's use of "distinct" as applied to perception.[40] When Descartes forms a concept of the soul that is distinct from the concept of body, a metaphysical conclusion follows about the

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[39] "Now the first and most important prerequisite for knowledge of the immortality of the soul is for us to form a concept of the soul which is as clear as possible and is also quite distinct from every concept of body" (CSM II: 9; AT VII: 13).

[40] This objection was raised in conversation, 2002.

objects of those concepts. It follows from the distinctness of our ideas of body and soul that the body and the soul are really distinct substances. Broughton argues, however, that no metaphysical conclusion follows from the distinctness of the idea of the chiliagon. This, she says, is because the sense in which the idea of the chiliagon is distinct is just that the idea is of a very good quality. On the other hand, the sense in which the ideas of the soul and the body are distinct is that the ideas are of two distinct objects.

There may be a certain ambiguity in Descartes's use of the term "distinct" as applied to perception, insofar as it may be used to call attention either to the quality of the idea or the nature of the object of the idea. I think, however, that this is just a difference of emphasis, and that each implies the other. An idea's being internally distinct is a way of being of good quality. An idea will be internally distinct, however, if and only if it is distinguished from other ideas. What makes our ideas of mind and of body internally distinct, or of good quality, is the fact that we have distinguished them from each other. The distinct idea of a chiliagon distinguishes the idea of a chiliagon from the ideas of other polygons, and a metaphysical distinction follows from this fact as well, namely that a chiliagon is a distinct mode of substance from other polygons with greater or fewer sides. There are a couple of reasons that the metaphysical implication of the distinctness of the idea of the chiliagon does not stand out. First, in the case of the chiliagon, the metaphysical conclusion is not so interesting as the conclusion that the mind and body are distinct substances. Second, the point that Descartes is making with the chiliagon example is not a point about the nature of polygons, but rather, a point about the nature of ideas, namely that intellectual ideas are more distinct than images (ideas of imagination).

What I am claiming then, in response to Broughton's objection, is that the distinctness of an idea always carries a metaphysical implication about its object. The relationship between idea and object, however, cannot be so simple as that distinct ideas are ideas of distinct objects. The reason is that there are different ways for objects to be distinct; they may be really distinct, modally distinct, or conceptually (formally, rationally) distinct.[41]

In addition to making an idea clear, the stripping away process makes an idea distinct because the idea may begin as a confusion of several ideas. For instance, if we think of ourselves as one thing that is both thinking and extended, our conception of ourselves is confused.[42] We have both confused, in the ordinary sense, and con-fused, or stuck together, as the root words suggest, the two ideas of mind and body.[43] When we take away from the idea of the self everything that is not essential, we see that the self is an essentially thinking thing, and we thereby distinguish the idea of the self from the idea of the body, an essentially extended thing.[44] The stripping away process is a process of pulling apart, or distinguishing, confused ideas. Insofar as we do not include in an idea some contingent or non-essential property, we distinguish it from the idea of

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[41] See Principles I §62 (CSM I: 214-215; AT VIII A: 30) and a letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646 (CSMK III: 280-281; AT IV: 349-350). In the case of objects that are conceptually distinct, Descartes says that they are distinct only in thought but are not distinct existing outside thought.

[42] See the Sixth Set of Replies (CSM II: 300; AT VII: 445).

[43] Alan Nelson holds this interpretation of confusion as a combining of two ideas (DOT 167).

[44] See the Second Meditation and the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 16-19, 54; AT VII: 24-29, 78). It only follows that the self is essentially a thinking thing if we begin by thinking of ourselves as the subjects of thinking, as Descartes does in the Second Meditation. If we begin by thinking about what is essential to ourselves as bodies, then thinking will not be essential. Descartes considers himself as the subject of thinking because he is considering what is essential to the subject of the *cogito*, the only self he can know to exist at that point in the Meditations. Since, in the end, Descartes acknowledges that the mind and body are joined, the idea of the self as two substances, mind and body joined, cannot be a confused idea. The confused idea of the self will be the idea of the self as one substance with both thinking and extension as essential attributes.

a thing to which that property is essential. If we do include a non-essential property, we have confused our idea with the idea of a thing to which that property is essential.

On this way of thinking about clarity and distinctness, the clearer an idea is the more distinct it will be. An idea becomes more distinct as it becomes clearer because the more properties we are able to attribute to the object of the idea, the more the idea is distinguished from ideas of things with different properties.[45] For instance, an idea of a triangle is clear if and only if we perceive some essential property of it, such as that it is a three-sided plane figure. The idea will become clearer as we discover more properties that follow necessarily from its nature, such as that its angles add up to 180 degrees.[46] The clearer it becomes, the more distinct it becomes, because it is further distinguished from shapes with other properties. When we recognize of the triangle that its angles add up to 180 degrees, not only is our idea of the triangle clearer, but it is also now distinct from our ideas of figures whose angles add up to more or less than 180 degrees. The same principle can explain why in the Fifth Meditation Descartes says that the most clear and distinct of all of his ideas is the idea of God (CSM II: 32; AT VII: 46). Descartes explains that God contains all perfections either formally or eminently (ibid.), and so the idea of God will contain more essential properties than any other idea. The more essential properties we are aware of in an idea, the clearer it is, and the clearer an idea is, the more distinct it is. The idea of God would be a natural candidate for the clearest and most distinct of all, not because it is the simplest, but rather, because it is the most complex.

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[45] See note 36 above.

[46] It seems natural to start with a conception of a triangle as a three-sided or three-angled figure and then after further reflection or study discover that its angles add up to 180 degrees. I am not sure that there is any reason why our understanding of the triangle should not progress in the other direction.

Is distinctness sometimes internal distinctness, or distinctness of the parts of an idea, instead of distinctness from other ideas? There is a passage that might be thought to imply a conception of distinctness as a characteristic purely internal to the idea, as distinctness of inner detail, and not as distinctness from other ideas. In the First Replies where Descartes is discussing the impossibility of grasping God in his entirety, he says,

> When we look at the sea, our vision does not encompass its entirety, nor do we measure out its enormous vastness; but we are still said to 'see' it. In fact if we look from a distance so that our vision almost covers the entire sea at one time, we see it only in a confused manner, just as we have a confused picture of a chiliagon when we take in all its sides at once. But if we fix our gaze on some part of the sea at close quarters, then our view can be clear and distinct, just as our picture of a chiliagon can be, if it is confined to one or two of the sides. In the same way, God cannot be taken in by the human mind, and I admit this, along with all theologians. Moreover, God cannot be distinctly known by those who look from a distance as it were, and try to make their minds encompass his entirety all at once. (CSM II: 81; AT VII: 113-114)

I suspect that when Descartes speaks of distinctness in this passage he means clarity and distinctness. Descartes is saying that our ideas are more clear and distinct when we focus on simpler or smaller parts. The greater visual detail in a portion of an image seen up-close is analogous to the greater number of essential properties discovered in a very clear idea. Greater clarity leads to greater distinctness from other ideas, as discussed above. It seems counterintuitive that we should find more essential properties in a simpler idea, but Descartes's point is that it is easier to make simpler ideas clear and distinct, not that there are more properties in a simpler idea. So, the analogy would be that just as it is easier to make out the details of a smaller portion of a visual image, seen close up, it is easier to make out the essential properties of a simpler idea or of a single aspect of an idea like the idea of God.

While the examples of the sea and the chiliagon go towards characterizing the distinctness of a visual image as the distinctness of the details internal to the image, it seems to me that it is a feature of the clarity of the image that we can see the details at all, and a feature of distinctness that we can distinguish the details from each other. So, that even internal distinctness is distinctness from something. We may want to keep in mind as an interpretation of distinct perception, the conception of distinctness as an internal distinctness of parts of an idea from each other, but there do not seem to be many examples of this conception of distinctness in intellectual rather than visual or imaginative perception. In most of the examples of clear and distinct intellectual ideas that Descartes considers, he seems less concerned with distinguishing the properties contained in the idea from each other, than with distinguishing the whole idea from other ideas. This may be due in part to the tendency to always break down ideas into their simplest parts. In the case of some initially confused ideas, making them distinct involves, not just stripping away non-essential properties, but distinguishing the parts of the ideas as properly belonging to two or more distinct ideas. For instance, the idea of a winged horse is made more distinct by distinguishing the horse from the wings and recognizing that they are two ideas, not one.[47] The confused idea of pain is made more distinct by distinguishing the idea of the sensation from the idea of the corporeal cause of the pain.[48]

What Descartes has to say in the First Replies about true and immutable natures sheds more light on what he thinks goes on when we confuse ideas as well as how to make them distinct:

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[47] See the First Set of Replies (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 117).
[48] See Principles I, §70 (CSM I: 218; AT VIII A: 34).

> When for example, I think of a winged horse or an actually existing lion, or a triangle inscribed in a square, I readily understand that I am also able to think of a horse without wings, or a lion which does not exist, or a triangle apart from a square, and so on; hence these things do not have true and immutable natures. But if I think of a triangle or a square (I will not now include the lion or the horse, since their natures are not transparently clear to us), then whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a triangle – for example that its three angles are equal to two right angles – I can with truth assert of the triangle. And the same applies to the square with respect to whatever I apprehend as being contained in the idea of a square. For even if I can understand what a triangle is if I abstract the fact that its three angles are equal to two right angles, I cannot deny that this property applies to the triangle by a clear and distinct intellectual operation – that is, while at the same time understanding what I mean by my denial. Moreover, if I consider a triangle inscribed in a square, with a view not to attributing to the square properties that belong only to the triangle, or attributing to the triangle properties that belong to the square, but with a view to examining only the properties which arise out of the conjunction of the two, then the nature of this composite will be just as true and immutable as the nature of the triangle alone or the square alone. And hence it will be quite in order to maintain that the square is not less than double the area of the triangle inscribed within it, and to affirm other similar properties that belong to the nature of this composite figure. (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 117-118)

Here Descartes explains that when we form an idea by compounding the natures of two or more things into one, we run the risk of attributing to one thing properties that only belong to the other. We must therefore carefully consider whether our idea is a "fiction of the intellect," that is, put together by us, or whether it is an idea of a "true and immutable nature," that is, of a thing whose properties are necessary.

Although Descartes does not use the term "confused" to describe the fictions of the intellect in this passage, I think we can safely assume that he would consider them confused ideas. The procedure he uses here to make his ideas distinct is like the earlier examples we looked at. He considers whether each property can be denied of the object in question until he pares the idea down to its essential properties. An idea of a thing that includes only its essential properties is an idea of a true and immutable nature. An

idea that includes non-essential properties is a fiction of the intellect, or a confused idea.[49]

Descartes clarifies the difference between fictions of the intellect and true and immutable natures in order to answer an objection to the Ontological Argument. He justifies his assertion that existence belongs to the essence of God, by claiming that the idea of God is not a compound of the concepts of including infinite perfections, and existing (CSM II: 84-85; AT VII: 117-120). If the idea of God were a compound of different natures put together by us, then we would be in danger of attributing to God a property that is not essential to him. This is the mistake made with the compound idea, 'existing lion.' When we consider this compound idea of a lion whose existence is essential, we are making the mistake of attributing necessary existence to a lion, when a lion is a thing whose essence only contains possible existence. This is a confusion. On the other hand, since, according to Descartes, the idea of God is not one that is put together by us, but is an idea of a true and immutable nature, the fact that we understand existence to be inseparable from God, implies that existence belongs to God essentially. By contrast, Descartes describes the ideas of false gods as confused ideas.[50] These ideas attribute to God properties that do not belong to God's nature.[51]

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[49] Perhaps this notion of internal distinctness discussed above would be an appropriate one for perceiving the connections involved in more complex clear and distinct perceptions such as the perception of the triangle inscribed in a square. If that is the case, then a clear and distinct perception of a triangle inscribed in a square distinguishes the parts, triangle and square, while at the same time clearly recognizing the unique nature realized by their combination.

[50] See the Fourth Set of Replies (CSM II: 163; AT VII: 233-234).

[51] In the Fifth Set of Replies, Descartes says,

> An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else. This is how the ideas of Pandora and of all false Gods are formed by those who do not have a correct conception of the true God. (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371)

Broughton objects that the ideas of a winged horse and an existing lion might not be confused, but merely contingent.[52] When we think of a winged horse, she suggests, we are not attributing wings to the essence of a horse; we are just thinking of a possible but fictional creature that has the body of a horse, and wings.

The idea of a winged horse will, I think, on Descartes's view be obscure and confused even if we do not attribute wings to the essence of a horse. One reason is that we do not know what the essence of a horse or any other animal is to begin with, as Descartes points out in this passage – except, presumably, that they are extended things. Another reason the idea of a winged horse will be confused is that we do not have a clear and distinct conception of the connection between the horse and the wings.[53] Because our idea of the connection between the parts of a winged horse or a chimera is obscure in these ways, we do not even know whether there is a possible creature such that wings are connected to the body of a horse. For everything that Descartes says, the possibility is left open that there is such a thing as the true and immutable nature of a horse, and there is also a true and immutable nature of a winged horse. The nature of the winged horse might have its own necessary properties as a mode of extension, just like the nature of a triangle inscribed in a square. In this case, it would be a mistake to ascribe wings to the nature of a horse, but not a mistake to ascribe wings to the nature of a winged horse. The problem is that we do not have any clear and distinct perception of the true and immutable nature of either a horse or a winged horse.

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[52] This objection was raised in conversation.
[53] See the Conversation with Burman (CSMK III: 343-344; AT V: 160-161).

Broughton suggests that the idea by which I think of an existing lion might be a perfectly distinct one, attributing contingent but actual existence to a lion, and I think Descartes would agree that it might be. Putting aside the issue that we do not know what the essence of a lion is, or whether it has a true and immutable nature, there is a sense in which we can have an idea of an existing lion that is not confused. When we consider that the lion we saw in the zoo today is an existing lion, we are probably not attributing necessary existence to the essence of the lion. We are attributing contingent, but actual existence to the lion. Furthermore, from the hypothesis that it exists, it does trivially follow that the lion exists, but that does not mean that it exists necessarily in the sense that God exists necessarily. If we think correctly about the lion in the zoo, we do not think that it belongs to the essence of the lion that it should necessarily exist. If the lion has a true and immutable nature at all, then its nature contains only possible existence. The harmless thought that actually existing lions exist is not the inference that Descartes is attacking in the above reply to Caterus. Descartes is attacking the conception of a necessarily existing lion, which, for Descartes, is a confused, constructed idea whose parts are mutually contradictory.

Broughton asks, whether we cannot, on Descartes's view, clearly and distinctly perceive my fictions of the intellect <u>as</u> fictions of the intellect. Although I do not know of a place where Descartes says so, I suspect that he would allow an extended sense of clear and distinct perception that includes the clear and distinct perception that an idea is a fiction, or that an idea involves a contradiction. By recognizing that our idea is a compound of parts that are not necessarily connected, we are thereby distinguishing the parts of the idea. If, however, our idea conjoins two contradictory elements, then it must be obscure and confused because we cannot clearly perceive their conjunction.

Thus, in the Conversation with Burman, Descartes says, "Even if those ideas are clear when taken apart, they are certainly not clear when joined together. Your idea is thus very obscure, for the conception you have of the combination and unity of the two ideas is not clear but extremely obscure" (Cottingham Conversation 25).

How does my analysis of distinctness compare with the definition given in the Principles? We have seen that according to the definition in the principles, a distinct perception is one that is, "so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear" (CSM I: 207-208; AT VIII A: 22). I want to claim that a distinct perception is sharply separated from other perceptions by the fact that it does not include any elements that are not essentially contained in it, and therefore it does not include properties that are only essential to other ideas. If I am right that a perception is made distinct by extracting anything non-essential or not necessarily connected, then being distinct implies containing only what is clear.

## OUR OWN STATES OF MIND

It makes sense that clear and distinct perceptions of necessary truths will be analyzable in terms of what is essential to and necessarily connected with the idea, since they are necessary truths. There is, however, another category of clear and distinct perceptions that we find in the Meditations, perceptions of our own states of mind, and these are generally not necessary truths. Examples of truths about the perceiver's state of mind are, "I am doubting," "I seem to see a light," and, "I have an idea of God" (CSM II: 19, 45; AT VII: 28-29, 65). It is not a necessary truth that I seem to see a light; it is a very contingent one. It is also not an essential property of me that I seem to see a light. Except for the fact that we are thinking, all of our states of mind are contingent. If I am

to provide a unified account of clear and distinct perception, then I will need to explain the clear and distinct perceptions of our own states of mind in the same terms as other clear and distinct perceptions.

What makes perceptions of our own states of mind clear and distinct is not the recognition of some essential connection between the idea and the perceiver. Rather, what makes them clear and distinct is just the fact that we recognize the essential content of our idea and recognize the fact that we are having the idea. We might say I recognize that what is essential to my idea of the light is the way it seems to me, and not its correspondence to reality. We can also say that the idea of seeing a light, must necessarily, lest it be some other idea, seem like seeing a light, whereas it is not necessary that the idea of seeing a light represent any existing light, nor that it correspond to any corporeal process of seeing. That is, simply by recognizing the content of our ideas and how they seem, we are aware of what is essentially contained in an idea. Descartes says as much in the Fifth Replies when he says, "An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else" (CSM II: 256; AT VII: 371). I want to be careful, however, that I do not exaggerate the role of essence and necessity in perceptions of our own states of mind.

When we clearly and distinctly perceive that we have such and such idea, we do not necessarily extract the non-essential or contingently connected elements. In fact, sometimes knowing our own states of mind will mean knowing that we have ideas which are obscure and confused. For instance, I can clearly and distinctly perceive that I have an idea of pain or cold, even though those ideas are confused ideas. I may clearly and distinctly perceive that I have an idea, the content of which is obscure and confused,

so long as I recognize that I am having the idea. What is clearly and distinctly perceived in this case is not so much the object of the idea, but the fact that I have the idea. Thus in the Third Meditation, when Descartes considers his previously held beliefs about things he apprehended with his senses he says, "But what was it about them that I perceived clearly? Just that the ideas, or thoughts, of such things appeared before my mind" (CSM II: 24; AT VII: 35). What our clear and distinct perceptions of our own states of mind have in common with other clear and distinct perceptions is that they all involve paying attention to and being aware of what is and what is not contained in our own ideas.

## CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT FOLLOWS FROM CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTIONS

A third category of clear and distinct perceptions that we see in the Meditations includes propositions which are neither necessary truths, nor perceptions of our own states of mind, but perceptions of what follows from clear and distinct perceptions of the other categories. Examples of these kinds of clear and distinct perception are the perception that corporeal things exist (CSM II: 55 AT VII: 80), and the perception "I exist" (CSM II: 17; AT VII: 25).

In the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 54-55; AT VII: 77-80) Descartes offers a deductive proof that extended, corporeal things exist and are the cause of our sense perceptions. This proof relies on the premises that I have sense ideas that are as of corporeal things, that I have a strong propensity to believe corporeal things are the cause of those ideas, and that I have no faculty for recognizing the source of these ideas. These premises are all truths about my own state of mind. The proof also relies on the

premise that God is not a deceiver (supposedly, a necessary truth). If my propensity led me astray with no way to correct it, then God would be a deceiver. Since God is not a deceiver, my propensity must be correct. With this argument Descartes infers from clear and distinct premises of both types, a conclusion which by itself is neither a necessary truth nor a truth about one's own state of mind.

Insofar as it is possible to have any clear and distinct perceptions that specific corporeal things exist, it will always have to be a deduction by means of this same argument. Any clear and distinct perception that includes the existence of corporeal things will have to be deduced from the clear and distinct perception of our own mental states of sense perception plus a propensity to believe that the sense perception is caused by a corporeal thing, and the clear and distinct perception that God is not a deceiver. Our awareness of what things exist in the world around us comes from sense perception, which is indirect and not always reliable. Any certain knowledge about the existence of corporeal things needs to be bolstered by an inference about the reliability of sense perception. Descartes spends a good deal of the Sixth Meditation discussing when and to what degree such an inference is warranted. God's non-deceptive nature guarantees that our sense ideas are caused by corporeal things but not that corporeal things exactly resemble our sense perceptions of them.

I mentioned earlier that Descartes's perception of the nature of the wax in the Second Meditation does not include a clear and distinct perception of the existence of the wax. Descartes cannot know in the Second Meditation that his sense perceptions of the wax are caused by something that really exists and has a corporeal nature. All he can know at that stage in the Meditations is that his idea of the wax is an idea of something whose nature is corporeal, or "extended, flexible and changeable" (CSM II:

20; AT VII: 31). He cannot know whether something exists which corresponds to his conception of its nature, nor whether it is the cause of his sense perceptions because he has not yet proven that God exists and is not a deceiver.

Although it would take me away from my topic to properly address the controversial topic of whether the reasoning of the *cogito* is an inference, an intuition, or something else, I would like to suggest where it may fit among these categories of clear and distinct perception. The proposition, "I exist" would belong to the category of what follows from necessary truths (Whatever thinks exists) and truths about our states of mind (I think). The proposition, "So long as I continue to think, I am something,"[54] however, will belong to the category of necessary truths.

I have argued for the following analysis of clear and distinct perception: a perception is clear when we are paying attention to it and are aware of what it essentially contains, and a perception is distinct when it includes nothing that is not essentially or necessarily connected. Notice that according to this analysis clear and distinct perceptions are conceptual truths, or truths about our own ideas. Why does Descartes think truths about our own ideas could ever yield knowledge of reality outside the mind? The answer lies in understanding how Descartes thinks our ideas provide us with direct perceptions of essences and eternal truths. This is the topic of the next chapter.

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[54] See the Second Meditation (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36).

## CHAPTER THREE: CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION AS DIRECT PERCEPTION

In this chapter I aim to explain why Descartes thinks that it is possible to be certain about the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions, given that our clear and distinct perceptions seem to provide us only with knowledge of the contents of our own ideas. I believe that many interpreters see the certainty of clear and distinct perception as problematic because they hold the mistaken assumption that in clear and distinct perception, like sense perception, we must be able to establish a correspondence between perception and reality before we can know a perception to be true. For instance, Alan Gewirth describes the problem with clear and distinct perceptions of mathematics as follows:

> We must recall that [Descartes] upholds a doctrine of representative perception according to which the mind perceives only ideas directly, so that there still remains the question of the relation of the ideas to external reality. It must be emphasized that this doctrine applies also to mathematical concepts and propositions: Descartes holds that these too represent objects outside the mind, so that the question of the truth of mathematical propositions involves the conformity of those propositions to objects purportedly represented by mathematical concepts . . . . The metaphysical doubt about mathematics is concerned with the question whether any mathematical propositions, even the simplest ones which are unquestionably perceived clearly and distinctly, do conform to the 'essences' or 'true nature of things,' since God could have brought about a radical disparity between those essences and the mind's most careful perceptions. (CCR 676, 678)[55]

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[55] Gewirth's distinction between the metaphysical and methodological moments, discussed in Chapter Two, arises from his assumption that clear and distinct perception is only certain if we can establish a correspondence between our clear and distinct perceptions and the world. Gewirth thinks it is possible for our clear and distinct perceptions to be certain in the sense that they are completely internally coherent and yet still not be metaphysically certain because they are not known to correspond to reality.

Other philosophers make this mistake as well. Harry Frankfurt characterizes as the most common view, a view that holds that Descartes's

I will argue that Descartes has a different metaphysical picture of clear and distinct perception: clear and distinct perception is direct perception, not indirect perception. Clear and distinct perception can be direct, I will show, because all of the objects of clear and distinct perception exist in the mind. Clear and distinct perception is the perception of the contents of our own minds. Problems of correspondence therefore do not arise for clear and distinct perception, and this makes it possible to offer a more satisfactory explanation for why Descartes thinks we cannot be wrong about what we clearly and distinctly perceive.

The argument that clear and distinct perception is direct perception provides only part of the reason why clear and distinct perceptions can be certain. I will argue that clear and distinct perceptions are intellectual perceptions and intellectual perceptions are direct perceptions. Although all clear and distinct perceptions will be

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> conception of certainty is built upon some version of the correspondence theory of truth. When he seeks certainty, on this account, he is after beliefs whose correspondence with reality is certain; and when he asks whether what is indubitable is true, his question concerns whether beliefs that cannot be doubted correspond with reality. (DDM 25)

Seeing the difficulty of explaining why clear and distinct perceptions must correspond with reality, Frankfurt discards the common conception for a coherence theory.

Normal Kemp Smith says,

> Doubt is possible only when we ask whether the essences are or are not archetypal, i.e. whether the judgments we read off from direct contemplation of them are or are not *eternally* true, do or do not hold of the *actually* existent. For may it not be that some Being, sufficiently powerful, has arranged that all those essences should be no more reliably representative of the independently real than are our sensory experiences? (New Studies 272)

This last sentence betrays what I think is a common mistake in thinking about essences. Norman Kemp Smith treats essences as though they represent what is real rather than as being what is real. If we don't think of essences as real, then even acknowledging that we perceive essences directly will not help us close the epistemic gap. On Norman Smith's conception, a direct perception of an essence is still an indirect perception of a real thing. As I read Descartes, however, essences are constitutive of the things of which they are essences.

E. J. Ashworth also assumes that a clear and distinct perception can only be known to be true if a correspondence to reality can be established. He says, "Why is it that we ought not to doubt a clear and distinct idea; and how is it that their possession, itself open to question, can justify our claims to know about such matters as the existence of God and the nature of substance? If Descartes appeals simply to the intrinsic nature of the idea, then he can be told that the examination of an idea will tell us only about that idea and nothing further"(105).

direct, not all direct perceptions will be clear and distinct. Direct perceptions which are not clear and distinct are not certain. Thus, the fact that clear and distinct perceptions are direct perceptions is not the whole explanation of why they can give us certain knowledge. The other part of that explanation is given in Chapter Two where it is explained what clarity is and what distinctness is and how we can know when our perceptions are clear and distinct.

## SENSE PERCEPTION AS INDIRECT PERCEPTION

Descartes understands sense perception of the external physical world to work in the following way. First, some physical object external to the body mechanically affects a sense organ of the body in something like the following ways. When we touch something, the object presses on our skin. When we smell something, little particles of matter enter our noses. When we see something, light is reflected off of the object seen and into the eye of the perceiver. When we hear, particles of matter in the air enter the ear and set the eardrum vibrating. When we taste something, particles of the object hit our tongue. The motions of the sense organs are then mechanically transmitted by "animal spirits", or vapors, along the nerves of the body and into the brain. In the brain, the animal spirits are all transmitted to the pineal gland so that they set the pineal gland in motion. The pineal gland is capable of a very large number of distinct motions, so that every different way of having our sense organs affected will result in a unique motion of the pineal gland.

God has designed humans so that their bodies affect their minds (and vice versa) through the pineal gland. Each kind of motion of the pineal gland corresponds to one kind of state of mind, or idea, or thought. Because of God these states of mind are the

appropriate ones for informing us about the external physical world and helping us navigate our way through it. If our eyes are affected by a square object, the motion that results in the pineal gland will correspond to a visual idea of a square; if we touch something sharp, the motion that results in the pineal gland corresponds to the feeling of a sharp pain; and so forth.[56]

When we are in doubt about the nature and existence of God, the existence of the physical world, and the origin of our ideas, then we cannot be certain that we actually acquire our sensations in the manner just described. We can be certain that we have various ideas as of light, heat, shape, etc., but we cannot be certain that they are caused by external physical objects, or that they are caused by motions in the body or brain. We may be dreaming and the things that we seem to perceive may not actually be present. There may be an evil deceiver who makes it so that there is no external world and that we have no bodies. All that we can be certain of, given these doubts, is the content of our ideas.

Whether or not our sense perceptions accurately represent the world, the mind is always aware of some ideas. When our sense perceptions are correct, our ideas accurately represent the physical world. With respect to what are now traditionally called primary qualities, size, shape, and motion, our sense perceptions represent the world as having these qualities, and, according to Descartes, the world does really have

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[56] For Descartes's account of sensation, see the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 59-61; AT VII: 86-88); the Sixth Replies (CSM II: 295; AT VII: 437); Principles IV: §§189-198 (CSM I: 280-284; AT VIII A: 315-323); Treatise on Man (Gaukroger 104-167; AT XI: 129-199); The Passions of the Soul I: §§12-15, 23, 27-29, 32, 35 (CSM I: 332-334, 337-342; AT XI: 336-341, 346, 349-352, 355-356); and Optics discourses 4-6 (Olscamp 87-113; AT VI: 109-147). Today's account of the physiology of sensation is different from Descartes' account. Nevertheless, it is a physical process involving interaction between the physical world and the body. This makes today's account of sensation similar enough to Descartes' that the skeptical issues Descartes raises about sensation should still hold us, and the distinction between direct and indirect perception may still be applied.

these qualities. With respect to what are now called secondary qualities, the situation is more complicated. Although our ideas represent physical objects as red, sweet, cold, etc., the physical world does not actually have these qualities. Nevertheless, Descartes thinks that these sense ideas pick out some real differences in physical objects. The quality in the physical world that we perceive as red will be some manner of extension, such as a particular surface texture or a particular motion of the minute particles which constitute the object.

Because our ideas represent the world to us, we can say that we perceive the world through our ideas, or by means of our ideas. Our ideas mediate our perception of the world, and as a result, our perception of the world is indirect.

An analogy for indirect perception is looking at a portrait. Because we see the portrait, and because the portrait resembles, say, Julius Caesar, we can say that we see Julius Caesar. We only see Julius Caesar indirectly or mediately, however, by means of the portrait. In this analogy, we do not see Julius Caesar directly because we do not see the man himself, we only see a picture that resembles him. According to Descartes, however, all of our perceptions are like portraits of the world. For Descartes, even if Julius Caesar himself were before us, we would not perceive Julius Caesar directly, but indirectly by means of our ideas.[57]

Under good conditions, our portrait-like perceptions correspond to the world, and we can have knowledge of the world through them. When we are dreaming, or in some other manner deceived, they do not correspond to the world, and then they do not

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[57] Descartes uses the Latin *immediatus* (CSM I: 15, 47; AT X: 370, 423; CSM II: 113, 156, 127; AT VII: 160, 181, 222). I will in most cases use the term "direct" instead of "immediate" because of the ambiguity of the word "immediate."

give us knowledge of how the world is. Descartes generates radical skeptical doubt by questioning how we can know whether our ideas correspond to the world.

If all sense perceptions of the external world are indirect, then what do we perceive directly? The answer is the ideas themselves (CSM II: 52, 113, 127; AT VII: 75, 160,181). When we have a sense perception of a tree, for instance, we perceive the tree indirectly, but we perceive the idea itself directly. Continuing our analogy, if our ideas are like portraits of the world, then we perceive the subject (or object)[58] of the portrait (Julius Caesar) indirectly, and the portrait directly.

The fact that we perceive our ideas directly gives ideas a privileged epistemological position over physical objects. It is possible for ideas to fail to represent physical objects or fail to represent them accurately, as when we are dreaming. As a result, we have reason to doubt whether those objects exist, are present, or have the qualities we perceive them to have. We cannot, however, be wrong about how the ideas themselves are. Even if the tree is not really green, if it looks green to us, then at least there is greenness in our idea of the tree. We can be more certain of how our ideas of the tree are than how the tree itself is. To return to our analogy, the portrait of Julius Caesar might not actually resemble Julius Caesar, so, given that possibility, we cannot be entirely sure how Julius Caesar looks. Indeed, it is possible that the portrait represents no real man at all. Nevertheless, we are in a good position to know at least how the portrait looks and that there is a man in the portrait. So, the nature and existence of the portrait is more certain than the nature and existence of what it

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[58] We usually call the person or thing that a portrait represents, or is *of*, the subject. In the terminology that Descartes uses for ideas, the thing represented would be called the object. The term "subject" would be reserved for the person having the idea.

represents, Julius Caesar. Likewise, the nature and existence of our sense ideas are certain to us, but the nature and existence of the physical objects they represent are not.[59]

I think it is uncontroversial that according to Descartes we can be certain how our sense ideas seem to us but there is a problem about whether our sense ideas correspond to physical reality. I think, however, that many readers of Descartes make the mistake of treating all ideas and their objects as having the same relationship as sense ideas and their objects and therefore thinking that all ideas raise the same problem about correspondence.

## SENSE PERCEPTION VERSUS INTELLECTUAL PERCEPTION

On Descartes's view, we have other perceptions besides sense perceptions. For instance, we also have imaginings and intellectual perceptions. It is primarily the ideas

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[59] By the end of the Meditations, after having proven that God exists and is not a deceiver, Descartes concludes that we can rely on our sense perceptions to represent the world to a limited extent: "And from the fact that I perceive by my senses a great variety of colours, sounds, smells and tastes, as well as differences in heat, hardness and the like, I am correct in inferring that the bodies which are the source of these various sensory perceptions possess differences corresponding to them, though perhaps not resembling them" (CSM II: 56; AT VII: 81). We should keep in mind, however, that even this limited bit of confidence in sense perception relies on the clear and distinct intellectual perception that God is not a deceiver. Descartes then advises that sense perception is properly used to determine what is beneficial and what is harmful to the mind-body composite, but not for other knowledge of how the world is, saying,

> My nature, then, in this limited sense, does indeed teach me to avoid what induces a feeling of pain and to seek out what induces feelings of pleasure, and so on. But it does not appear to teach us to draw any conclusions from these sensory perceptions about things located outside us without waiting until the intellect has examined the matter. For knowledge of the truth about such things seems to belong to the mind alone, not to the combination of mind and body. (CSM II: 57; AT VII: 82-83)

In the same passage, Descartes again emphasizes the unreliability of the senses for knowledge of the world, saying,

> For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct. But I misuse them by treating them as reliable touchstones for immediate judgements about the essential nature of the bodies located outside us; yet this is an area where they provide only very obscure information. (CSM II: 57-58; AT VII: 83)

of the intellect that Descartes finds can be made clear and distinct. Descartes expresses the superiority of intellectual perception most plainly in the Second Replies, saying,

> …we do not have the required kind of certainty with regard to matters which we perceive solely by means of the senses, however clear such perception may be. Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else. (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145)

Descartes seems to be saying that sense perceptions, although they may be clear, are not sufficiently distinct to be certain. In Principles I, sections 66-70, however, he says that sensations may be perceived clearly and distinctly if we are very careful in the judgments we make about them. In section 68, Descartes says,

> 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 clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. But when they are judged to be real things existing outside our mind, there is no way of understanding what sort of things they are. (CSM I: 217; AT VIII A: 33)

There is a tension between the claims in these two quoted passages, but it can be resolved. It will help to note that for Descartes, the distinction between sense perceptions and intellectual perceptions is not as sharp as he often makes it seem. In the Sixth Set of Replies, Descartes gives a more detailed analysis of sense perception, dividing it into "three grades of sensory response" (CSM II: 294 ff; AT VII: 436 ff). Here he is explicit that strictly speaking, all judgments belong to the intellect, even though it is natural to describe the habitual judgments based on sense perceptions as sense perceptions themselves.

When we regard pain and color as merely sensations or thoughts, we are engaging the intellect to make a judgment about sense ideas, and, if we are very careful not to include anything else in that judgment, it may be clear and distinct. So, strictly

speaking, we can make our sense ideas clear and distinct, but, also strictly speaking, we do so only with the help of a judgment of the intellect. Furthermore, since the sense ideas proper contain little or nothing that is not confused, they provide us very little material for clear and distinct judgment. In Principles I, section 70, Descartes says, "It is clear, then, that when we say that we perceive colours in objects, this is really just the same as saying that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in us a certain very clear and vivid sensation which we call the sensation of color" (CSM I: 218; AT VIII A: 34). Even though we can make our sense ideas distinct, it would be an exaggeration to say that we can make them very clear and distinct, because there is little in our sense ideas that can be made distinct.

Descartes makes a distinction between perceptions of sensible qualities like size, shape, motion, position, duration, and number, on the one hand, and perceptions of sensible qualities like color, light, pain, hunger, thirst, smell, taste, heat, cold, and sound on the other hand.[60] This first class of qualities is now traditionally called primary qualities and the second class are traditionally called secondary qualities.

The primary qualities are qualities that can also be perceived by the intellect, not as existing in a particular physical object, but in a general way, as possible modes of extended substance and as the subject matter for mathematics.[61] Since the understanding can conceive of these general qualities clearly and distinctly, we know that they exist in the physical substances that we perceive through the senses, and therefore, we know that the sense perceptions of primary qualities may be caused by

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[60] See Principles I, §§ 69, 71 (CSM I: 217-219; AT VIII A: 33-35), and Meditations (CSM II: 30, 55 ff; AT VII: 43-44, 80 ff).
[61] See the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 55 ff; AT VII: 80 ff)

similar qualities in existing physical objects[62]. In the case of secondary qualities, however, Descartes finds that we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of those qualities existing as modes of extension, and therefore, we can only judge about them that they are sensations caused by some unknown quality of a physical substance.[63] Thus, there is much less certainty and more room for error in our sensations of secondary qualities than in our sensations of primary qualities.

While it is frequently the case that our sensations of primary qualities do accurately represent their causes in the physical world, we can only be certain that any particular sense perception accurately represents the world, by means of the intellect, which evaluates all of the possible sources of error. In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes goes so far as to say, "bodies are not strictly speaking perceived by the senses at all, but only by the intellect" (CSM II: 95; AT VII: 132). Thus, even in the best cases of sense perception, it is the intellect that should get the credit for clarity and distinctness.

It is primarily the perceptions of the intellect, including innate ideas, that Descartes describes as clear and distinct. Examples of innate ideas are ideas of numbers, shapes, mathematical truths, principles of logic, and thoughts of God. These ideas do not come from the senses, and, according to Descartes, do not require or rely on sense experience in the way that ideas of the imagination do. Let us take the example of a

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[62] See the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 55-62).

[63] In the Third Meditation Descartes says, "… I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things" (CSM II: 30; AT VII: 43). In the Sixth Meditation Descartes says that for all we know physical objects may not possess qualities resembling our sensations of secondary qualities (ibid.). In the Principles, however, Descartes makes the stronger claim that "we cannot find any intelligible resemblance between" the quality in the object which causes the sensation and the sensation of the secondary quality. See Part I, §70 (CSM I: 218; AT VIII A: 34).

sphere. When we see a specific sphere, for example an orange on a table, we are having sense perceptions. When we close our eyes and think of the way a sphere might appear to our senses, or see it with the "mind's eye" then we are imagining (CSM II: 50-51; AT VII: 72). Imagining is neither sense perception nor intellectual perception.[64] When we form an abstract idea of a sphere, however, one that does not include sense perceptions, we are having an intellectual perception, or understanding. For Descartes, geometrical definitions and axioms of mathematics would be paradigm cases of conceiving something intellectually rather than in the imagination.

According to Descartes, we can formulate an intellectual perception of a sphere without ever having looked at the orange or any other spherical body. We could form this perception simply by thinking of the mathematical definition of a sphere. Because it is a general idea, our intellectual idea of a sphere does not have a specific size or color or location or motion. Furthermore, understanding does not require the existence of any body (CSM II: 21-22, 37, 50-51; AT VII: 31-34, 53, 72-73). It is an activity of the mind alone. While a sense perception or the imagining of a sphere would be an idea of how the sphere looks to the eyes or feels to the touch, an intellectual perception of a sphere includes neither of these.

Do ideas of the intellect represent the world? Yes and no. They tell us things that are true, but they generally do not tell us (nor purport tell us) what exists. They

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[64] Descartes argues in the Sixth Meditation that imagination makes use of both the body and the mind (CSM II: 50-51; AT VII: 71-73). He explains the difference between imagination and understanding (intellectual perception) as follows: "when the mind understands, it in some way turns towards itself and inspects one of the ideas which are within it; but when it imagines, it turns towards the body and looks at something in the body which conforms to an idea understood by the mind or perceived by the senses" (CSM II: 51; AT VII: 73). For further description of the imagination see the definition of "idea" in the Second Replies (CSM II: 113; AT VII: 160-16) and see the Fifth Replies (CSM II: 248, 264; AT VII: 358, 385); Principles IV, §§189, 190 (CSM II: 279-281; AT VIIIA: 315-317); Treatise on Man (CSM I: 106; AT XI: 176-177); and Passions §§19-21, 43 (CSM I: 335-336, 344; AT XI: 361).

are not usually perceptions of particular objects, as indirect sense perceptions are, but rather perceptions of types of objects or general principles.[65] My sense perception of the rubber ball in the street is a perception of one particular object. My intellectual perception of a sphere, on the other hand, is not a perception of a particular sphere, but a perception of a kind of shape that any number of things could have. Intellectual ideas also tell us about math and logic, and math and logic are true of the world. For example, my intellectual idea of a square won't tell me whether any squares exist, but if squares do exist, my intellectual idea of a square can tell me what they are like: that they have four sides, that their angles have ninety degrees, and any other properties that all squares have. In this sense, my intellectual ideas do tell me about the world.

For Descartes, intellectual ideas are not analogous to sense ideas. Our sense ideas of a tree indirectly represent the tree to us, and our ideas are true if and only if they correspond to the world, i.e. the tree is really there and really is the way my idea represents it. Likewise, we might think that our intellectual ideas of a square indirectly represent a square to us and that they are true if and only if there really exists a square and the square really has the properties included in our ideas. Intellectual ideas, however, are different from sense ideas and are not a form of indirect perception. Intellectual ideas are not directly connected with the body and are not caused by

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[65] An exception to this rule is the intellectual idea of God. Since necessary existence and unity belong to God's essence, my intellectual idea of God includes the fact that he exists and that there is only one of him. This idea therefore picks out a unique individual. For a discussion of God's unity, see the Third Meditation (CSM II: 34; AT VII: 50). The idea of the self may also be considered an exception. Necessary existence does not belong to the essence of the self, but, because of our special relationship to our selves, we can have knowledge of our own particular existence without appealing to sense perception. I say that indirect sense perceptions are perceptions of particular objects. There is some reason, however, to think that for Descartes the immediate content of the sense perception is universal, and our sense perceptions pick out particular objects because we judge that our universal idea represents and is caused by a particular object.

changes in the body or the physical world as sense ideas are.[66] According to Descartes, our intellectual idea of a square is not caused by the square in front of us. In this sense, then, intellectual perceptions are not perceptions of the world around us and do not represent our surroundings to us. Despite this disconnectedness, however, intellectual ideas are true of the world; indeed they contain the eternal truths. They represent the world to us by providing us general knowledge of how things are necessarily.

Interpreters of Descartes agree that on Descartes's view, our intellectual perceptions can be true even when their objects do not exist. The perception that a square has four sides, for instance, does not require the existence of a square in order to be true. Despite recognizing this dissimilarity interpreters still tend think about intellectual perceptions as though they were indirect perceptions. They think of intellectual perceptions as indirect perceptions of essences or of truths, and on this picture it would be possible for the idea of a square to fail to represent its object, the true essence of a square. On this picture, a deceiving God could make us go wrong by giving us an innate intellectual idea of a square as a four-sided figure, while at the same time making the essence of a square five-sided. It is this mistake that we must avoid if we are to understand why Descartes thought clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect could be certain.

Since true perceptions must somehow accurately present or represent their objects, in order to explain why a problem of correspondence does not arise for clear and distinct perceptions, I will begin by looking at their objects and how they differ

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[66] Although only sense ideas are the result of the impact of physical objects on the senses, innate intellectual ideas may in turn be triggered by sense ideas. See the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 50-51; AT VII: 72-73); Second Meditation (CSM II: 21-22; AT VII: 32-34); Fifth Replies (CSM II: 248, 262, 264, 265; AT VII: 358, 381-382, 385,387).

from the objects of sense perception. I will argue that the objects of clear and distinct perception are directly perceived.

## THE OBJECTS OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

If we look at the examples of clear and distinct perception that Descartes mentions, they are all eternal truths, truths about the perceiver's state of mind, or some proposition following from these. Examples of truths about the perceiver's state of mind are, "I am doubting," "I seem to see a light," and, "I have an idea of God" (CSM II: 19, 45; AT VII: 28-29, 65). Examples of eternal truths are "The angles of a triangle sum to 180 degrees," "God is perfect," and, "the nature of body is to be extended."[67] An example of a truth that follows from necessary truths and truths about the perceiver's state of mind is, "Corporeal things exist" (CSM II: 55; AT VII: 80).

Let us look at the first category of clear and distinct perceptions, perceptions about one's own state of mind. These are a very special kind of perception because we seem incapable of being wrong about them. Clearly and distinctly perceived truths about the perceiver's state of mind, such as 'I am doubting', or 'I seem to see a light', when considered as beliefs about states of mind, and not as beliefs about the outside world, do not leave any question open about whether the beliefs are true.[68] If I believe I seem to see a light, then it is true that I seem to see a light. I cannot be mistaken in that belief. I can be mistaken about the presence or existence of a light, but I cannot be

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[67] The latter two propositions may not seem obviously true to today's reader, but Descartes considered them necessary truths, probably because he thought of them as analytic, if I may use a vocabulary that post-dates Descartes.

[68] In the Third Meditation Descartes says, "Now as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false; for whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter" (CSM II: 26; AT VII: 37).

mistaken about my own state of mind, how things seem to me. Even the powerful evil demon cannot trick me about the way things seem to me.

Another way of describing what is special about perceptions of one's own state of mind is to say that there is no epistemic gap between our perceiving that we have an idea and our having that idea in reality. We do not need to compare our ideas to the outside world in order to know that our perceptions are correct; we have before our minds everything we could need in order to be sure that the proposition is true (Descartes 68). It is precisely because we do not need to establish a correspondence between our ideas and an external reality that they represent, that we seem to be in a special position to have knowledge about our own states of mind.[69]

By contrast, when we consider sense perceptions, and consider them as perceptions of the world outside the mind, there is an epistemic gap between perception and reality. Take for example the perception that there is a light in front of me. I may seem to see a light, but there may be no light in reality. The light might be an optical illusion, or I might be dreaming, or the idea of the light might be caused by something other than a light. Because I perceive the world outside my mind only indirectly, there is room for me to be deceived about it. That is, it is always logically possible that ideas

[69] Although we seem to be incapable of being wrong about our own states of mind, as I argue in Chapter Two, I think that perceptions of our own states of mind can admit of different degrees of clarity and distinctness.

might fail to correctly represent reality outside my mind. Therefore, sense perception does not ground certain knowledge about the external objects perceived.[70]

From what has been said we can now see the metaphysics behind the certainty of our own states of mind. The objects that we directly perceive when we clearly and distinctly perceive our own mental states are our own ideas. It is because the objects are our own ideas that we can say we perceive them directly. The objects of our sense perceptions are usually things in the outside world. These are not perceived directly but rather indirectly by means of our ideas. When we perceive an object indirectly there is an epistemic gap. In other words, the reliance on an intermediary creates room for error.

A worry one might have about perception of our own mental states is that it requires an idea of an idea. If this were the case, then perceptions of our own states of mind would not be direct perceptions. I think, however, Descartes would say that we do not need a second idea to represent to us the first idea. In the Replies Descartes offers a definition of "idea" where he says, "I understand this term to mean the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought" (CSM II: 113; AT VII: 160). Although this explanation is not entirely clear, I take it to mean that we

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[70] By the end of the Meditations we learn that sense perceptions can to a large extent be trusted to represent the external world thanks to the goodness of God. Our knowledge of God to a certain extent bridges the epistemic gap between perception and reality. For direct perceptions, on the other hand, no such gap exists and no such bridge is necessary. Descartes does claim to need God's guarantee for clear and distinct perceptions, as well, but here God does not guarantee correspondence so much as the proper functioning of our faculty of understanding.

are aware of our own thoughts in virtue of the fact that we are immediately aware of all our ideas, and not because we are mediately aware of our ideas by way of other ideas.[71]

I would like to suggest that perceptions of the second class of clear and distinct perceptions, perceptions of eternal truths, are also direct perceptions and that there is also no epistemic gap between the clear and distinct perception of an eternal truth and the reality. If I can show that eternal truths share this characteristic with truths about our own states of mind, it will help to explain why we can be certain of eternal truths and it will unify the class of clear and distinct perceptions.[72] In the next section I will look at what Descartes says about the ontological status of eternal truths with a view to showing that they exist in our minds and can be directly perceived.

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[71] Supporting although not proving the reading that we do not need an idea of an idea is the Fourth Replies passage where Descartes says, "…there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware…" (CSM II: 171; AT VII: 246), and the Third Meditation and the letter to Clerselier, April 23 1649, where Descartes says that there cannot be an infinite regress in the causal chain of ideas (CSM II: 29; AT VII: 42; CSMK III: 377; AT V: 355). Further support comes from Part I of The Passions of the Soul, section 19. In this section he explains that a perception of one's own volition is identical with the volition itself:

> For it is certain that we cannot will anything without thereby perceiving that we are willing it. And although willing something is an action with respect to our soul, the perception of such willing may said to be a passion in the soul. But because this perception is really one and the same thing as the volition … we do not normally call it a 'passion', but solely an 'action'. (CSM I: 336; AT XI: 343)

If the perception of a volition is not distinct from the volition, the same should be true for perceptions of other kinds of thoughts.

[72] I owe the insight that clear and distinct perceptions are direct perceptions to a comment that John Cottingham makes in his book, Descartes. Cottingham says,

> …Even the basic presupposition that I have a body … could be called into question by the doubts of the First Meditation. But in the case of a very simple proposition such as 'I am thinking' or 'two plus three is five', then there are no such 'extraneous' implications [beyond that of which I am directly aware], doubt about which could lead me to reject or withdraw my assertion. For I am committing myself to nothing beyond what I am directly aware of; I have, right there before my mind, all I could possibly need in order to be sure that the proposition is entirely true. (67-68)

Cottingham unfortunately does not pursue this line of thought any further, but I think it has an important place in a systematic account of clear and distinct perception.

THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

In Descartes's writings, there seem to be two answers to the question of what eternal truths are. The first answer is that eternal truths are essences or truths about essences. The second answer is that eternal truths are "common notions or axioms" (CSM I: 209; AT VIII A: 23-24). I will begin by considering eternal truths as truths about essences, and I will return to discuss common notions.

In the Fifth Set of Replies, Descartes describes eternal truths of geometry as truths about essences, saying of geometrical figures, "…you cannot deny that many truths can be demonstrated of these essences; and since they are always the same, it is right to call them immutable and eternal" (CSM II: 262; AT VII: 381). Also, in a letter to Mersenne, Descartes says,

> You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. (CSMK III: 25; AT I: 151-152 emphasis added)

Here Descartes describes eternal truths as identical with essences. Thus, on Descartes's picture it should be possible to know eternal truths just by thinking about the relevant essences. For example, the eternal truth that the radii of a circle are all equal[73] will be a truth about the essence of a circle, it may even be described as being the essence of a circle, and it can be known by thinking about the essence of a circle.

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[74] Normore does point out that it is a feature of his interpretation that, "an idea is a presentation of the very object represented" (MOB 240). Several authors consider or attribute to Descartes a direct realist account of sense perception but not intellectual perception. These include Brian O'Neil, John Yolton and Paul Hoffman. Hoffman ends up rejecting the interpretation of Descartes as a direct realist. Hoffman holds the paradoxical interpretetation that the very same object exists objectively in the mind and formally in the world and yet, "the object as it exists objectively in the mind is really distinct from that same object as it exists formally in the external world" (179).

Shoshana Smith 4/28/05 9:04 PM

**Deleted:** [73] Descartes mentions this example of an eternal truth in the letter to [Mersenne], 27 May 1630 (CSMK III: 25; AT I: 152).

Understanding eternal truths as essences allows us to say that what we perceive when we perceive eternal truths, is essences, and this opens up a path for a metaphysical description of the perception of eternal truths. The metaphysical description I will argue for is that the essences of things are the things themselves existing objectively in the intellect. I will begin the metaphysical description of the perception of eternal truths in the next section, then return to the second understanding of eternal truths, as common notions, and I will offer an account of how common notions fit into the metaphysical picture of the perception of eternal truths.

## ESSENCES AS THINGS EXISTING OBJECTIVELY

Calvin Normore, Larry Nolan, and Vere Chappell argue that essences or eternal truths are things that have objective being in the intellect. They do not notice, however, or do not emphasize the consequence of this view, that perceptions of essences are direct perceptions.[74] I want to agree with these philosophers that essences exist objectively in the intellect, but I also want to show how this view of essences supports a reading on which human minds have direct access to the eternal truths.

What is objective existence? Descartes uses the expressions "objective reality," "objective being," and sometimes "objective perfection" and "existing objectively" fairly interchangeably, and in the sense of the terms in which they are interchangeable, they

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seem to arise primarily in two contexts that are not always separate.[75] The first context is the discussion of the degree of reality a thing has. A thing is more real or has more being or has a greater degree of perfection the less it depends on other things for its existence.[76] The second context is the discussion of the manner in which a thing is or exists (objectively or formally), or the kind of reality or being a thing has (objective or formal).[77] For my purposes, the second context is the more relevant one.[78]

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[75] For instance, in the Third Mediation, Descartes uses the expressions, *"realitas objectiva"* (AT VII: 41-42, 46), and *"esse objectvum"* (AT VII: 47). In the Principles Part I, §17, he uses the expression, *"perfectionis objectivae"* (AT VIII A: 11), and in the Comments on a Certain Broadsheet, *"perfectiones objectivas"*(AT VIII B: 362). In the First Replies, he uses the expression, *"in intellectu existens… objective"* (AT VII: 102).

[76] According to Descartes, a substance has more reality than a mode, because a mode depends for its existence on the existence of the substance. Take for example the fruit orange. An orange is a (finite) substance that has several properties including the property of being round. Descartes would say that an orange has more reality than roundness because roundness, being a mode, depends for its existence on the existence of the orange. Descartes thinks that all things depend on God (the only infinite substance); consequently, God has more reality than either finite substances or modes.

Descartes sometimes calls the reality of existing things "formal reality" to distinguish it from "objective reality." Objective reality also comes in degrees. An idea has more or less objective reality depending on what kind of thing its object is, or what the idea is an idea of. An idea has the same amount of objective reality as its object would have of formal reality if the object existed formally, or outside the idea. In other words, the degrees of objective reality are parallel to the degrees of formal reality. Thus, the idea of God, which is an idea of an infinite substance has more objective reality than the idea of an orange, which is an idea of a finite substance, and the idea of an orange has more objective reality than the idea of roundness, which is an idea of a mode.

In the Third Meditation Descartes explains objective reality as follows:

> In so far as the ideas are <considered> simply <as> modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion. But in so far as different ideas <are considered as images which> represent different things, it is clear that they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. (CSM II: 27-28; AT VII: 40)

At the same place in the French version, to have greater objective reality is glossed as to " participate by representation in a higher degree of being or perfection" (CSM II: 28 n1; AT IX A: 32). See also Axiom X in the Second Replies (CSM II: 117; AT VII: 165-166).

[77] The term "perfection" seems to be used only in the first context, speaking of the greater or lesser degree of perfection found in an idea. Descartes uses the expression "existing objectively" when he is distinguishing between the different manners of existing, and not when distinguishing degrees of reality. Descartes rarely talks of "existing" objectively, however, because the term "exist" is usually reserved for things existing formally. Usually he speaks of objective "being", using a form of *"esse"*. I will tend to use forms of the word "exist" in this context more than Descartes does, mainly because the term is frequently the more natural one to use in English.

To say that a thing exists formally, or that it has formal being or formal reality, is a way of saying that it exists in the ordinary way that things exist. A thing exists objectively when it exists in someone's mind or idea.[79] Here the term "objective" does not signify an impartial or external perspective, but rather, it refers to the object of an idea. The object of an idea is the content of the idea, or what it is of. Take for example the idea of a lion. Because a lion is the object of the idea, in Descartes's terminology, we can say that a lion exists objectively, in the mind, as opposed to (or in addition to) existing formally in the zoo or in Africa. To say that a lion exists objectively is the same as to say that it is objectively real or that it has objective being. According to Descartes, things can exist objectively in the intellect even if they do not exist formally in the world.

Sometimes, instead of speaking of the object, in this case a lion, as possessing objective reality, Descartes will speak of the idea as possessing objective reality, such as in the Third Meditation (CSM II: 28ff.; AT VII: 40ff.). When we consider the reality of an idea, we can consider it in two ways, with respect to what it is, an idea, or with respect to what it represents, in this case a lion. When we consider the reality of an idea with respect to what it represents, or its object, we are considering the objective reality of the idea. When we consider an idea with respect to what it is, regardless of its

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[78] Vere Chappell notes the difference between these two contexts and concludes that formal/objective reality is different from formal/objective being. He says, "Being belongs to a thing or it doesn't' either something is or it isn't. But reality admits of degrees; everything that is has some of it, and some things have more than others (TI 190). I disagree with Chappell that Descartes makes a distinction between being and reality. Oddly, the very place in the Second Set of Replies that Chappell cites as support of this distinction is a passage where Descartes treats the terms as interchangeable (Axiom VI, CSM II: 117; AT VII: 165). Descartes also uses the terms interchangeably a few pages earlier in his definition of objective reality (CSM II: 113; AT VII: 161).

[79] In the Third Meditation Descartes describes objective reality as, "the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea" (CSM II: 29; AT VII: 41). Descartes talks of objective reailty in this way in the First, Second, and Fourth Replies (CSM II: 74ff., 113, 196; AT VII: 102ff., 161, 233).

content, then we are considering the idea's formal reality. The objective reality of the idea is the reality it has in virtue of the fact that it is an idea of a lion. The formal reality of the idea, by contrast, is the reality that it has just in virtue of its being an idea, or a mode of the mind, regardless of content.[80]

The fact that Descartes switches between speaking of objective reality as belonging to an idea and as belonging to the thing that is the object of an idea, tells us that for Descartes the difference is merely a verbal one. The idea, thought of with respect to its object, and the object, thought of as existing in an idea, are really just the same thing. This is confirmed in the First Set of Replies where Descartes says, "…an idea is the thing which is thought of in so far as it has objective being in the intellect" (CSM II: 74; AT VII: 102). Here Descartes is identifying the idea with the object. Consider again the idea of a lion. An idea considered formally, as a mode of thinking, is certainly not the same thing as a lion considered formally, as a corporeal animal pacing in the zoo. Nevertheless, the idea considered objectively, as a representation of a lion, and the lion considered objectively, as represented in an idea, are the same thing. This

[80] Confusingly, in the Fourth Replies, Descartes uses different terminology to make this same distinction (CSM II: 163; AT VII: 232). There he uses the terms "formal" and "material", and "formal" is used in a way exactly opposite of the way he usually uses it. When we think of an idea as representing something, Descartes says, we are considering it formally. When we think of an idea simply as an operation of the intellect we are considering it materially.

equivalence is one reason why Descartes alternately speaks of objective reality as belonging to objects or to ideas.[81]

Descartes continues in the First Set of Replies, to describe the manner in which the objects of ideas exist. He describes the object of an idea as one thing with two possible manners of existence, formal existence and objective existence. Descartes says:

> 'Objective being in the intellect'… will signify the object's being in the intellect in the way in which its objects normally are there. By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect - not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect. (CSM II: 75, AT VII: 102-103)

According to this passage, the very same sun that is in the sky is also in my idea! The sun and my idea of the sun are numerically identical, and what saves this from being ridiculous is that the sun as it exists in the sky exists formally, while the sun as it exists in my idea exists only objectively. [82] The sun and my idea of the sun (thought of objectively, not formally) are not two things, but one thing, existing in two ways.[83] The sun does not exist in two places at once; rather it exists in two ways at once.

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[81] The other reason why Descartes switches between attributing objective reality to the idea and to the object has to do with the two contexts that I mentioned earlier in which Descartes discusses objective reality. When Descartes is concerned with the degree of perfection contained in an idea (as in the Third Meditation proof of God), he will usually talk about the objective reality presented or contained in an idea. When Descartes is discussing objective reality as a manner of existence (as in the First Replies discussion of whether objective being is an extrinsic denomination) he will talk about the objective reality belonging to a thing. I do not think, however, that the fact that Descartes talks about objective reality differently in these two contexts implies that he means different things by "objective reality" in these two contexts. Descartes simply understands reality, or being, as a concept that admits of qualifications in both manner and degree.

[82] He also makes this identification in the Second Replies where he defines "objective reality of an idea." Descartes says, "By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea…. For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves" (CSM II: 113-114; AT VII: 161).

[83] In reading Descartes as saying that objective being and formal being are two kinds of being that can apply to the same object, I am disagreeing with Lawrence Nolan and Vere Chappell. See Chappell's "Theory of Ideas" (186-188) and "Descartes's Ontology," and Nolan's "Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures" (176).

Is it possible that in this passage about the sun, Descartes is saying nothing more than that when we think of the sun, the thing about which we are thinking is the sun itself, formally existing? In other words, is he just saying that we do not think about our own ideas, or some third object, but rather, we think about objects in the world? I do not think this is Descartes's point. First of all, Descartes is clear that we do think about our own ideas, that is, the immediate objects of perception are always our own ideas. Of course, Descartes does think the mediate object of the idea, what the idea represents, is the sun itself, as it exists formally in the sky. In this passage, however, Descartes is not saying that the immediate object of the idea merely represents the sun itself, he is saying that it is the sun itself. Looking at the text, Descartes does not just say that the idea of the sun is of the sun. Rather, he says that the idea of the sun is the sun: "*idea solis sit sol ipse in intellectu existens*" (AT VII: 102). Moreover, the context that this passage appears in is a discussion of the Third Meditation proof of God's existence. Descartes wants to show that the contents of ideas require a cause, regardless of whether those objects exist formally. He is arguing that the sun has a certain thin kind of existence just in virtue of being the content of an idea, and that even this thin existence requires a sufficient cause.[85] If Descartes were merely saying that the mediate object of the idea is the sun itself, then he would not be showing that the immediate

[85] I owe the description of objective being as a thin kind of existence to Michael Ayers. Ayers, discussing the subject of objective reality, says, "So, by drawing a picture of a horse, even of no horse in particular, it may seem that we have thought the horse into a thin kind of being, existence in a picture" (53).
[85] I owe the description of objective being as a thin kind of existence to Michael Ayers. Ayers, discussing the subject of objective reality, says, "So, by drawing a picture of a horse, even of no horse in particular, it may seem that we have thought the horse into a thin kind of being, existence in a picture" (53).

content of the idea requires a cause, as he clearly intends to be doing.[86] By saying that the immediate content of the idea is the sun itself (existing objectively), he shows that the idea of the sun requires a cause, and the same is true of the idea of God.

Now that we have seen what objective existence is, I will return to the thesis that essences are things existing objectively in the intellect. When Descartes talks about essences, he is mostly silent about what their ontological status is or where they exist. He does, however, explicitly equate essences with things as they exist objectively in the intellect in a letter to an unknown correspondent written in 1645 or 1646.[87] According to the interpretation I am endorsing, clear and distinct perceptions of the eternal truths are direct perceptions of the essences of things, existing objectively in the intellect. When we contemplate essences, we directly perceive things that exist

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[86] See, for context, Caterus's objection (CSM II: 67; AT VII: 92). Also, Descartes finishes the sun passage saying, "Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing" (CSM II: 75; AT VII: 103). Because it is not nothing, it requires a sufficient cause.

[87] Descartes says,

> So, then, I postulate three kinds of distinction: first, real distinction between two substances; and then modal and formal distinctions, which are distinctions of reason *ratiocinatae*. All these three can be called real in contrast to the distinction of reason *ratiocinantis*; and in this sense it can be said that essence is really distinct from existence. Again, if by essence we understand a thing as it is objectively in the intellect, and by existence the same thing in so far as it is outside the intellect, it is manifest that the two are really distinct. (CSMK III: 281; AT IV: 350)

This is a very difficult and condensed passage. Not only does Descartes equate a thing's essence with the thing as it exists objectively in the intellect, he also discusses the fact that essence and existence are only distinguished by reason. Outside our thought, he says, the essence and the existing thing are one and the same. Confusingly, he also says that when essence is considered as a way of being in the intellect, then it is really distinct from a thing considered as existing outside the intellect. This seems to contradict the passage I quote from the First Replies where Descartes says that the sun as it exists formally is the same as (not distinct from) the sun as it exists objectively in the intellect. The full context in the letter, however, shows this statement to be fully compatible with the identity claim in the sun passage. In the letter Descartes is calling the distinction between a thing existing in the intellect and the thing existing outside the intellect a "real distinction" only in contrast to a type of distinction made by "reason *ratiocinantis*" which is a distinction without any basis in reality and one that Descartes does not recognize at all. The distinction between essences as they exist objectively and essences as they exist formally is what Descartes calls a distinction by "reason *ratiocinatae*", or a rational, or conceptual, or formal, distinction. Lawrence Nolan discusses this letter at length in his Descartes's Theory of Essences (41-47). I disagree with the conclusion that he draws, that a rational distinction (reason *ratiocinatae*) is no distinction at all (47) and that essences have no reality outside human minds.

objectively in the mind. Therefore, we do not need to look outside the contents of the mind in order to have knowledge of the natures of things. When we think of a triangle, for instance, the triangle exists objectively in our minds. This means that the triangle's essence exists in our minds, and this means we can perceive its essence directly because its essence is immediately present to the understanding. I believe that for Descartes all of the objects of clear and distinct perception have this feature, existing in the mind, in common and this feature provides a metaphysical explanation of why clear and distinct perceptions are certain and indirect sense perceptions are not.

Does this mean that the triangle's essence and all other essences are ideas? There are at least two uses of the term "essence" in Descartes's writing. In one sense, "essence" is used as the opposite of "existence." Understood in this way, essences are not formally existing things and can only exist in ideas. Since all essences are thought of at least by God, every essence has being as an object in God's mind.[88] If essence is understood in this sense then all essences are ideas considered with respect to their content. In another sense, however, "essence" serves as a neutral term for a thing, not specifying whether it exists. In this second sense, essences are not limited to objective existence, but may also exist formally as particular formally existing things. In this sense we would say that an essence might have objective existence in the mind and formal existence in the world.[89] Thus, used in this broader sense, essences are not just ideas. (I talk loosely of things existing formally in the world, but some things, like

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[88] Nolan and Chappell do not think that essences exist in God's mind. I will discuss their view below.

[89] This ambiguity comes out especially in the letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646 (CSMK III: 280-281; AT IV: 350). In "Descartes's Possibilities," Normore for the most part argues that we should understand essences as things having merely possible existence, but he acknowledges on pages 72-73 that there is reason for thinking that Descartes also identifies the essence of a thing with the thing itself.

ideas, exist formally in the mind. The essence of an idea, existing formally is just an idea, and ideas exist formally in the mind.)

One might object that ideas for Descartes are modes of thinking, and so they cannot be triangles and lions and celestial objects, because those things are not modes of thinking. This apparent contradiction is resolved by remembering that the ontological status of an idea can be understood either formally or objectively. Taken formally, an idea is indeed nothing but a mode of thinking, and is therefore not the essence of a triangle. Considered objectively, or with respect to its content, the ontological status of an idea is the same as the ontological status of its object. My idea of the triangle, for instance, can be understood either formally or objectively. The ontological status of my idea, taken formally, is that it is a mode of my mind, like all ideas. Because a triangle is a mode of extension, and my idea of the triangle is the idea of a mode of extension, however, we can say that the ontological status of my idea, taken objectively, is that it is a mode of extension. Thus, essences are objects of ideas and can be identified with ideas only if we think of ideas objectively, or with respect to their content.

Although, on Descartes's view, the essences of things exist objectively in the intellect, what we grasp when we grasp those essences are not merely the contents of our ideas and not merely subjective truths. The reason is that the essences we grasp are the same essences that will belong to existing things if the essences are instantiated and they are the same essences that exist objectively in God's mind. For instance, when we grasp that triangles are essentially three-sided, we can know this proposition because we directly perceive the essence of a triangle as it exists objectively in our minds. It is not only our own idea of the triangle that must be three-sided, however, because if any triangle exists it has the same essence, and therefore existing triangles must also be

three-sided. Even if triangles do not formally exist, if I am grasping the essence of a triangle, then I am grasping the same essence that God created and that God thinks about from all eternity, so I can know that triangles as God understands them are essentially three-sided. If you think about triangles you will be grasping the essence of a triangle too. This means that you and I are grasping the same essence, and that I can also infer from my idea of a triangle that any triangle you think about clearly and distinctly will be three-sided. When I see that it necessarily belongs to my idea of a triangle that triangles be three-sided, I am not just grasping a subjective truth, I am grasping a proposition which is true for all triangles ever thought of by anyone, true for all triangles that exist, if any do exist formally, and is true for the essences of triangles as God understands them. This is why Descartes can say what he does in the Fifth Meditation,

> …I find within me countless ideas of things which even though they may not exist anywhere outside me still cannot be called nothing; for although in a sense they can be thought of at will, they are not my invention but have their own true and immutable natures. When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on mind. (CSM II: 44-45; AT VII: 64)[90]

Because intellectual perceptions are direct perceptions, by clearly and distinctly perceiving the contents of our own ideas, even if those ideas are of things that do not formally exist, we can have certain knowledge of a mind-independent reality.

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[90] Anthony Kenny reads this passage as an indication that Descartes has a Platonic conception of natures, or essences, as possessing reality which is distinct from human minds, from formally existing things, and from God's mind (CCET697). This view seems to be inconsistent with Descartes's insistence in Principles I, 57-59 that universals have no existence outside a mind (CSM I: 212-213; AT VII: 26-28).

By putting so much weight on the sun passage and the identity of things existing formally and things existing objectively, I am in danger of giving human minds too much access to the world. After all, do we not learn of both the sun's existence and its nature (that it is a big round body) through empirical means? If the sun itself can exist objectively in the intellect, then ideas caused by sense perception, seem to have as much claim as any other idea to being the essences of things existing objectively in the intellect. This makes it seem as though my sense perceptions would also give me direct access to essences.[91] I argued earlier, however, that sense perceptions are unreliable sources of information precisely because they are not direct perceptions. My sense ideas of physical objects are supposed to be caused by them, not be them, and they are supposed to indirectly represent the physical objects existing formally in the world.

Despite the suggestiveness of this quotation, I do not think that Descartes is claiming that our sense perceptions or sensations of the sun are identical with the sun or the essence of the sun. Although we do learn of the sun by means of our senses, the idea of the sun is not entirely a sense idea; it is also partly an intellectual idea. Descartes tells us that intellectual ideas of the essences of things are triggered or called to mind by sense perceptions. Consider Descartes's account in the Fifth Set of Replies, of what happens when we look at a drawing of a triangle:

> [W]hen in our childhood we first happened to see a triangular figure drawn on paper, it cannot have been this figure that showed us how we should conceive of the true triangle studied by geometers, since the true triangle is contained in the figure only in the way in which a statue of Mercury is contained in a rough block of wood. But since the idea of the true triangle was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more

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[91] Such a theory resembles the Aristotelian account of perception that Descartes is trying to avoid. Descartes does not want to say that sense perceptions transmit the form or sensible species of the object to the mind of the observer.

> easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper, when we saw the composite figure we did not apprehend the figure we saw, but rather the true triangle. It is just the same as when we look at a piece of paper on which some lines have been drawn in ink to represent a man's face: the idea that this produces in us is not so much the idea of these lines as the idea of a man. Yet this would certainly not happen unless the human face were already known to us from some other source, and we were more accustomed to think of the face than the lines drawn in ink… (CSM II: 262; AT VII: 382)

When we see in the world an imperfect triangle, our mind is carried from the sense idea of the imperfect triangle to the intellectual idea of a perfect triangle, that is, to the idea of the essence of a triangle. Something similar may be going on when we perceive other objects, such as the sun. When we think of the sun, our sensations or sense images trigger or cause in us an intellectual idea of the sun. This intellectual idea might, for instance, be the idea of a round body. Thus, our idea of the sun includes not only sensations, but an intellectual idea of the sun, which will be or at least include an idea of a true and immutable nature. Since our sense ideas of the sun are not direct perceptions of the sun they cannot be the sun itself. The intellectual idea of the sun, on the other hand, formed on the basis of our sense perceptions, can be the sun itself existing in the intellect.

We must also keep in mind that the intellectual idea of the sun, even if it is the sun itself existing in the intellect, is not proof of the (formal) existence of the sun and does not guarantee the accuracy of our sense perception. Thus, knowledge of the existence of the sun still requires that we establish a correspondence between our sense perception and the world. Only in the case where the sun exists and actually has the properties included in the idea of the sun, can we say that the idea of the sun is identical with the sun in the sky. We judge that the sun exists and has the nature that we understand intellectually only because we judge that the sun caused and corresponds to

the sense perception which triggered the intellectual idea. It is still possible for us to have an intellectual idea of the sun which is a true and immutable nature but not the nature of anything existing in the sky. When we think clearly and distinctly about our idea of the sun, we can have certain knowledge of everything that is essentially contained in that idea, such as the necessary properties of a round body, but actual existence is not contained in the essence of the sun. We must guard against the possibility that the idea was triggered by a sense perception which was not caused by any existing round body. Thus, even though sense perception of the sun triggers an innate idea or ideas which truly represent the sun, we cannot automatically know that our idea is a true representation of the sun.

In order to make this point clearer, I will consider an example of an illusory sense perception. Take the case where we perceive the rectangular tower in the distance as round. Although the tower itself is rectangular, because we are deceived by an illusion, our visual perception of the tower will call to mind the intellectual idea of a cylindrical body. Even though the idea of a cylinder could be called a cylinder itself existing in the intellect, that idea does not tell us whether the cylinder exists in the world. Thus, sense perception does not give us infallible knowledge of its objects. Although sense perception may happen to trigger direct intellectual perception of the essence of its object (in the case of the tower, the essence of a rectangular body), the knowledge of that essence will only provide knowledge of the objects of sense perception if we can already infer that our sense perceptions really represent and correspond to their indirect objects in the world. Thus, when Descartes says that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing objectively in the intellect, he is already taking for granted the existence of the sun and the accuracy of our sense perceptions of the

sun.[92] In the case of the tower, on the other hand, Descartes might not say that the idea of the tower as a cylindrical body is the tower itself existing in the intellect, since what exists in the intellect seems to be a different essence than the one that the tower instantiates.

I conclude that sense perception does trigger in our minds ideas which are essences of things, but that does not mean we should say that sense perception is direct perception or that sense perception gives us direct access to the things in the world. I have offered two reasons for thinking this. First, the innate ideas of the essences of things that are triggered through sense perception are still going to be innate intellectual ideas. The second reason that sense perception cannot be said to give us direct access to things in the world is that the ideas of essences that are triggered by sense perception are not necessarily ideas of the same essences which the perceived object instantiates. The possibility of sense deception leaves open the possibility that the triggered intellectual idea of an essence may not be the essence of the thing that caused the sense perception, or indeed, may not be the essence of any (formally) existing thing at all.

In what sense then, can it be said that the sun itself exists objectively in the intellect? The idea of the sun is not merely a collection of sensations, but it is, either in addition or instead, an intellectual idea of the sun or of the essential properties of the sun. Even if no sun really exists in the sky, that essence, in virtue of being perceived,

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[92] According to Descartes in the Third Meditation, if we are not careful, our senses may still mislead us into judging that the sun is small (CSM II: 27; AT VII: 39). Thus, there is a sense in which Descartes would not describe that sense perception of the sun as accurate. We have seen, however, that Descartes thinks ideas themselves are never formally false. Thus, the mistake would lie, not in the falsity of the idea, but rather in judging on the basis of the idea that the sun is small, which is, strictly speaking, an act of the intellect. See also the Fifth Set of Replies (CSM II: 251; AT VII: 363).

has objective existence in the intellect. If there really does exist in the sky a sun corresponding to the idea of the sun, then the existing sun shares the same essence that exists objectively in the intellect. To say, however, that the sun and the idea of the sun share an essence is to say that the same essence that exists objectively in my mind exists formally in the sky.

What would be the content of the intellectual idea of the essence of the sun? Although the ordinary idea of the sun may in fact be complex, we can try and analyze the idea, stripping away the ideas of sensations and accidental properties and considering what are the essential properties in our idea of the sun. The idea of the essence of the sun should include such essential features as that it is extended and that it has the mathematical properties that necessarily belong to spheres. Descartes would probably say of the idea of the sun, like the idea of a lion, that our idea of its essence qua sun is not a clear and distinct idea (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 117). Therefore, it is hard to say what other features, if any, the idea of the essence of the sun ought to include. For Descartes, the only properties that corporeal bodies ultimately have are modes of extension. Therefore, instead of characterizing the sun as being essentially "fiery," he would probably describe the sun as having a very specific complex shape and/or characteristic motion of its component particles. I do not think it is necessary for our purposes, however, to specify what belongs to the essence of the sun, because the idea does not need to be conceived clearly and distinctly in order to have objective existence in the intellect. It is sufficient for our purposes to say that our idea of the sun's essence is or includes the innate idea of a round body.

Some would argue that, for Descartes, the sun does not have an essence except for the essential property of being extended. They would say that the sun is a mere

aggregate of matter and to attribute to it any specific sun-essence is untrue to Descartes's modern, mechanistic conception of nature. I do not believe, however, that the fact that Descartes reduces all bodies to extension and modes of extension means that different kinds of bodies do not have different essences. This is because different geometrical shapes, such as triangles and squares each have different essences, according to Descartes. Moreover, he says that complex shapes such as a triangle inscribed in a square have their own unique true and immutable nature, distinct from the nature of a triangle or a square (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 118). If a triangle inscribed in a square has its own peculiar essence, then more complex shapes should also have their own essences. In his discussion in the First Set of Replies about the concept of an existing lion, Descartes says that the essence of a lion is not sufficiently clearly understood to be a good example for thinking about true and immutable natures, however he does not say that a lion does not have a true and immutable nature (CSM II: 84; AT VII: 117).[93] Since lions and the sun are reducible to aggregates of matter, then we can think of them as beings with specific, albeit complex shapes and motions. Lions will be different from horses, not in virtue of felinity and equinity, but in virtue of having different characteristic shapes, arrangements, and motions of material parts. In this light, we can see animals, the sun, or any other configuration of matter as having its own essence, or true and immutable nature, in the same way that a triangle inscribed in

[93] Also, in the Conversation with Burman, Descartes suggests that a chimera might have an essence, "Everything in a chimera that can be clearly and distinctly conceived is a true entity. It is not fictitious, since it has a true and immutable essence, and this essence comes from God just as much as the actual essence of other things" (CSMK III: 343; AT V: 160).

a square has its own true and immutable nature, only more complex.[94] Because a lion is such a complex figure compared to a triangle inscribed in a square, we do not have a clear and distinct perception of the essential properties belonging to the lion. Nevertheless, lions, horses, the sun and other corporeal things will have essences, and this leaves open the possibility that humans, when we think about them, can have at least obscure and confused ideas of them.

## HOW ESSENCES ARE UNIVERSAL

On the interpretation that I am arguing for, essences are universal, or common, in the sense that an essence can belong to more than one thing. The same essence can at the same time exist formally in one or more existing things, objectively in one or more created minds, and objectively in God's mind. This is an important element of my interpretation of clear and distinct perception. I am claim that Descartes thinks clear and distinct perception can be certain because it is direct perception of essences. In order for direct perception of essences to constitute knowledge of reality outside our own minds, it must be the case that when we perceive an essence, the essence is the same as, and not just a copy of, the essence existing in the world and/or in God's mind. If things in the world merely resembled the essences existing objectively in the mind, then it would not be the case that the thing itself exists objectively in the mind, and it would not be the case that the thing itself is directly perceived. If the relationship

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[94] I do not know of a place where Descartes addresses the question of whether there are essences of natural species kinds. Nevertheless, the existence such natural kinds seems perfectly compatible with a mechanistic understanding of nature. Even if lion and horse are not natural kinds, every being will have some shape and arrangement of parts which shape, like the triangle inscribed in a square, can have an essence.

between a formally existing thing and its objectively existing essence were one of mere similarity, clear and distinct perception would be no better than sense perception.

There is a difficulty, however, about the view that essences are universal and also identical with particular existing things. In Descartes's Theory of Essences (52), and "Reduction and Nominalism in Descartes's Theory of Attributes" (140 n44) Lawrence Nolan argues that essences, at least when thought of as principal attributes (i.e. thinking and extension) of particular things, are particulars, not universals. Nolan is concerned with passages where Descartes says that there is only a distinction of reason (conceptual, formal distinction) between a substance and its attributes. If attributes were universal, then really distinct substances might share the same attribute. For instance, two bodies might share the essential attribute of extension. If each of two really distinct substances shares the same universal attribute and the universal attribute is only conceptually distinct from the substances, then by a principle of transitivity, the two really distinct substances are not really distinct, but only conceptually distinct. Such an argument seems to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view that essential attributes, at least insofar as they are identical with the existing thing to which they are attributed, are universal. Nolan concludes that we should read Descartes as saying that there is a distinction of reason between each substance and its own particular essential attributes. Body One is only conceptually distinct from its own extension but really distinct from the extension of body Two, and vice versa.

This argument poses a problem for my interpretation that the same essences existing objectively in the mind are numerically identical with their formally existing counterparts. According to Descartes, an existing thing and its essence are always

merely formally, or conceptually, distinct.[95] The problem is that it seems to follow by transitivity that different particular formal instantiations of the same universal essence will be numerically identical. If two really distinct but qualitatively identical substances exist (such as parts of matter), then it appears they would be declared numerically identical in virtue of both being identical with the same essence. For instance, if we think of two existing triangles, for example the sides of two different pyramids (and not two sides of the same pyramid), they should be really distinct from one another. Each could exist without the other. Furthermore, since they are both instantiations of a triangle, they both share the essence of a triangle. If Triangle One is only conceptually distinct from the essence of a triangle and Triangle Two is also only conceptually distinct from the essence of a triangle, it would follow by the transitivity of identity that Triangle One and Triangle Two are only conceptually distinct from each other. Put another way, if the triangles share an essence, and outside of thought each triangle is identical, or not distinct from its essence, then by transitivity, the two triangles must, outside of thought, be identical with one another. Since the triangles are *ex hypothesi* the sides of two really distinct chunks of matter (pyramids), the conclusion that they are also identical with each other outside of thought, is a contradiction.

I do not think this problem can be solved by inferring that Descartes thinks individual things each have their own particular essences and that a thing is identical with its own particular essence but really distinct from other particular essences. It might make sense to talk of one particular thing's extension as distinguished from

[95] This must be true not only because a merely formal distinction between a thing and its attributes implies a formal distinction between a thing and its essential attributes, but also because Descartes considers existence to be an attribute. Thus there will always be a formal distinction between a thing's essence and its existence. See Letter to an unknown correspondent 1645 or 1646 (CSMK III: 279-281; AT IV: 348-350).

another's or as distinguished from extension in general, because an individual thing's extension will have accidental properties not shared by other bodies, such as its relative spatial and temporal location. Distinguishing particular essences from universal essences, however, would conflict with what Descartes tells us about essences. I do not mean to deny that essences, when thought of as existing, are particular things. An existing essence just is a particular existing thing. What I mean to deny is that existing things are particular in essence; that is, I do not think Descartes holds that each existing thing has a unique essence. The reason that I do not think there are particular essences is that an essence or nature is eternal and immutable and therefore includes only essential, immutable, and necessary properties.[96] It is a collection of eternal truths about a thing.[97] A thing's necessary properties, however, are properties that it shares with every other thing of the same kind. Thus, while we can say that this body is not identical with that body, if the bodies share the same necessary or essential properties,

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[96] Consider, for example, the following description of an essence, or nature, from the Fifth Meditation:

> When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. This is clear from the fact that various properties can be demonstrated of the triangle, for example that its three angles equal two right angles, that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like…" (CSM II: 44-45; AT VII: 64)

Another place where Descartes tells us that essences are immutable and eternal is in the Fifth Set of Replies: "…I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of god. Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so" (CSM II: 261; AT VII: 380). In the Comments on a Certain Broadsheet Descartes says,

> We must of course distinguish between on the one hand things which by their very nature are susceptible of change – such as the fact that at present I am writing or not writing as the case may be, or the fact that one person is prudent, another imprudent – and on the other hand things which never change, such as everything which belongs to the essence of something (as philosophers generally acknowledge). It can undoubtedly be said of contingent items that the nature of things leaves open the possibility that they may be either in one state or in a different state. (CSM I: 297; AT VIII B: 347-348)

Again, we see that the essence of a thing picks out its necessary but not its contingent properties, so two individuals that differ only in their contingent properties must have the same essence.

[97] See the Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630 (CSMK III: 25; AT I: 152).

we cannot say that the essence of this body is not identical with the essence of that body. Their essences will be the same.

It would also be difficult to reconcile the view that things have particular essences with Descartes's epistemology. Either the particular essences of things would have to be unknown to us, or we would know about particular existing things by their essential properties. With the exceptions of the self and God, however, Descartes finds our knowledge of existing objects to be very imperfect. We must rely on sense perception for our knowledge of things in the world around us, and our sense perception is only somewhat reliable. If we could have knowledge of particular existing objects by their essences, we could know about particular things in the world clearly and distinctly simply by considering what was contained in those essences.

On Nolan's view, even though the eternal truths and universal essences exist objectively in the intellect (DOT 170-171, 175, 176), because there is no identity between the essences of particular things and the universal essences existing in the intellect, the perception of eternal truths cannot yield certain knowledge about any particular existing things unless we know that God guarantees a correspondence between our ideas of essences and things in the world. If there is not a sense in which existing things share a nature with each other and with the universal natures in our ideas, then it is difficult to see how human knowledge of the eternal truths could ever be knowledge of properties of formally existing things.

I think the problem about the identity of things sharing an essence is best resolved by recognizing that for Descartes, because of the kind of thing an essence is, transitivity of identity does not apply to things sharing an essence. Descartes's notion that the same essence can exist objectively in the mind and exist formally in multiple

individuals in the world, is drawn from his Scholastic background. In this background we find a conception of essences and their relation to existing things where transitivity of identity does not always seem to apply. Several medieval philosophers including, Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Henry of Ghent and John Duns Scotus articulated the view that in themselves essences are neither one nor many, neither particular nor universal.[98] According to these philosophers, essences become universal when they exist in the mind and are regarded as predicable of many things, and they become singular when they exist in the world and constitute a single individual. Essences can become both universal ideas and particular existing things because in themselves, or absolutely, they are neither particular nor universal. This numeric neutrality allows existing things to share a nature while remaining numerically distinct, and it means that the notion of identity that applies to natures may be different from the ordinary notion of identity that applies to existing individuals.

Scotus has a view about natures that addresses just this problem about identity. Wanting to maintain a moderate realism about universals, Scotus insists that even though natures become universal only in the mind, nevertheless, this universality is not created by the mind, but has a basis in existing things. He argues that natures must have a kind of unity, or commonality, because only a real unity between the natures of things could explain our ability to predicate the same nature of different individuals. If

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[98] See Adams (412-414), Noone (102-112, 119), Owens (452-453), Wippel (403), Wolter (11-12, 42, 71-73), Scotus's Ordinatio (II: d. 3, part 1, q. 1), and Aquinas's Summa Theologica (part I, q. 85, a 2, rp. 2). The following text from Aquinas's On Being and Essence was pointed out to me by John Carriero:

> If someone should ask, then, whether a nature understood in this way [absolutely] can be called one or many, we should reply that it is neither, because both are outside the concept of humanity, and it can happen to be both. If plurality belonged to its concept, it could never be one, though it is one when present in Socrates. So, too, if oneness belonged to its concept, the nature of Socrates and of Plato would be identical, and it could not be multiplied in many individuals. (ch. 3 par. 2 p. 46)

different individuals actually had nothing in common, then we would be making a mistake whenever we judged that two things are similar or that there exist two individuals of the same species. Following Avicenna, however, he holds that the natures by themselves, or absolutely, are not a numerical unity, and so Scotus claims that there is a kind of unity between common natures that is a less than numerical unity.

The concept of a less than numerical unity allows Scotus to say that existing individuals can actually have a common nature, without thereby being numerically identical with other individuals that share that nature. Scotus says, "…[I]f the nature of stone were of itself a 'this,' then whatever the nature of stone were in, that nature would be 'this stone.' The consequent is nonsense if we are speaking about a determinate singularity…"(Ordinatio II: d. 3, part 1, q. 1). The thought is that if natures themselves were singular individuals, then all things sharing a common nature would have to be numerically the same individual. Since there can be more than one individual sharing a common nature, that nature must have a kind of unity that is not a numerical unity. Moreover, for Scotus, the very same common nature that is found in individual external things is also found as the object of the intellect.[99] This common nature is not a really distinct entity intermediate between thought and the world, but

[99] Here is how Noone describes the sameness of Scotus's common natures in individual existing things and in the mind:

> …[T]he nature enjoys a unity that is proportional to its entity. What that unity and entity amount to is that the nature has an identity that is real but sufficiently indeterminate to be able to be repeated in a number of supposits in the world, yet sufficiently rich in content to be able to be received into a cognitive faculty without losing its identity as a nature…. In other words, the nature and its identity are what make individual substances in the world be the same in kind and what cause the mind to become aware of that kind when the nature is received in the intellect. (Noone 110)

rather, it is really identical with the existing individual that contracts it.[100] Therefore, according to Scotus, when we perceive the nature of an individual we are also perceiving the individual.[101]

Walter Burley, who holds a more strongly realist position on universals, also contends with difficulties about the identity between things sharing a universal nature. He claims that numerically the same universal could exist in distinct individuals at the same time. Burley does not have qualms about describing universals as existing in individuals, and so does not resort to the alternative term, "common" that Scotus uses to describe the common natures shared by distinct individuals. Where Scotus describes common natures as having a unity less than numerical unity, Burley distinguishes two different senses of numerical identity. He says that universals are numerically one in the wide sense, whereas existing individuals are numerically one in the strict sense. According to Burley, being numerically identical in the wide sense means that the same universal can exist wholly, in distinct actual individuals, without thereby being multiplied.[102]

Scotus and Burley both develop an account of universal natures that avoids the problem that Nolan is worried about and that I suggested might be leveled against my interpretation of Descartes as thinking of essences as both universal and identical with their particular instantiations. Descartes says that a particular thing and its essence are not distinct. He also thinks that many individuals can share the same essence. If I am

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[100] That is, according to Scotus, there is not a real distinction between essence and existence (Wippel 407). There is probably, according to Scotus, either a formal distinction or a modal distinction between them. See O'Brien.

[101] Note, however, that according to Scotus we never do in this life perceive the *haecceitas* of an individual, but only its common nature.

[102] See Karger (34-36) and Adams (423).

right Descartes has a conception of essences that allows different individuals to have a real essence in common and still remain really distinct from one another. Scotus and Burley think of the natures shared by different individuals as having a special kind of unity or identity not subject to the principles of strict numerical identity. I think that Descartes must have a similar conception of essences; that is, he sees essences as the kind of thing that can exist in two distinct individuals at the same time without being multiplied.

I do not mean to claim that Descartes necessarily saw himself as following the views of Scotus or Burley. Descartes never explicitly considers this problem about identity, and so it would be going too far to say that he had a theory that explicitly avoided this problem about identity. I definitely do not mean to claim that Descartes adhered to the other aspects of Scotus's or Burley's theories. What I want to claim is that in Descartes's Scholastic background are views of essences such that the same essence can be instantiated in two distinct individuals. Given the existence of such views, Descartes may have absorbed this conception of essences, perhaps even unreflectively, over the course of his Scholastic education. Because there are precedent conceptions of essences, where essences have a real, extra-mental existence and where the same essence can be identical with distinct existing individuals, it is plausible that Descartes also held such a conception of essences.

In Principles I, §§57-59, Descartes gives an account of universals that seems at odds with my claim that objectively existing essences are universal and also the same essences that exist formally in the world (CSM I: 212-213; AT VIII A: 26-28). In these passages, Descartes tells us that universals, as well as attributes and modes when thought of in abstraction from the created things that they exist in, are simply modes of

thinking. In saying that all universals are simply modes of thinking, he is saying that universals do not exist outside the mind. In section 59, Descartes gives an account of "*The five common universals: genus, species, differentia, property, accident*" (CSM I: 212-213; AT VIII A: 26). According to this account, universals arise when we use the same idea to represent things that resemble each other. This account of universals suggests that universals would not exist at all if human minds did not make use of a single idea to represent multiple things. If essences are universals, then according to these passages, it would seem they are merely a product of the human mind, do not exist in things at all, and have no reality outside the human mind.

What is going on in these passages? According to Descartes, attributes and modes are ontologically dependent on the substances of which they are attributes and modes. Ordinarily, these attributes and modes can exist either formally in the world or objectively in the mind. Sometimes, however, we think about modes or attributes in abstraction from any substance as though they were not dependent on substances. Since they cannot exist formally without being in a substance, attributes and modes can exist in abstraction from substances only as objects of thought. They cannot have formal existence in the world except as belonging to a substance. Similarly, universals, in virtue of their generality, cannot formally exist as such. Instantiations of universals are always particular, therefore the universals themselves can exist only in the mind. In these passages of the Principles, Descartes is warning against the reification of abstract and universal concepts. He is disagreeing with a Platonic notion of universals as having a real existence as substances somewhere both outside of individual things and outside of minds. Descartes is also warning against the reification of abstract concepts such as "time" and "number," which we might be tempted to think of as having formal existence

independent of the existence of substances. We might think, for instance, that time would continue to exist like an empty container even if no minds or bodies existed. Considered as something distinct from the duration of substances, however, time is, according to Descartes not a thing by itself, but an abstract concept. As such, time cannot exist in the world separately from the duration of substances. Since the mind is capable of distinguishing in thought, however, what cannot exist separately in the world, time, as distinguished from duration, can exist in the mind as a mode of thinking.

An indication that Descartes's main point here is to warn against thinking of abstractions as though they were complete substances, rather than to deny the formal existence of those attributes being considered abstractly, occurs a little earlier in section 55. Descartes says,

> We shall also have a very distinct understanding of *duration*, *order*, and *number*, provided we do not mistakenly tack on to them any concept of substance. Instead, we should regard the duration of a thing simply as a mode under which we conceive the thing in so far as it continues to exist. And similarly we should not regard order or number as anything separate from the things which are ordered and numbered, but should think of them simply as modes under which we consider the things in question. (CSM I: 211; AT VIII A: 26)

Descartes is not saying that duration, order, and number exist only in the mind. He is merely saying that when they exist outside the mind they are part of complete substances and do not exist by themselves and incompletely as Platonic universal substances.

When Descartes is discussing universals in sections 58 and 59, he is not discussing the essences of things in the sense I mentioned earlier, as neutral between their formal and their objective modes of being. In the sense of "universal" used in these passages, essences are universal only when thought of as the opposite of individual

formally existing things. When essences exist formally, they are particular because they constitute particular things. Descartes is here thinking of a universal as the opposite of a particular individual. Thus he says, "*Number and all universals are simply modes of thinking*.... number, when it is considered simply in the abstract or in general, and not in any created things, is merely a mode of thinking; and the same applies to all the other *universals*, as we call them" (CSM II: 212; AT VIII A: 27). Created things in this context will be things that God has granted formal existence. In distinguishing universals from created things, Descartes is excluding from the class of universals everything that exists formally. In this quotation, Descartes is not saying that number does not exist in created things, just that if it is considered abstractly as something apart from created things, then it can only have being in a mind.

When in section 59, Descartes discusses the five common universals as applied to the idea of a triangle, it seems like what he is describing is no different from the essence of a triangle. If we drew the conclusion that he was discussing the essence of a triangle, then we would have to infer that he was saying that essences are the sort of thing that never exist formally but are always modes of thinking. When, however, we read in section 59 Descartes's explanation of the five common universals as applied to the idea of a triangle, we should not infer that Descartes is denying extra-mental reality to the essence of a triangle. We must keep in mind that he is still discussing universals, and he does not think that the essences of things can only exist as universals; they can also exist formally as particular individuals.

Essences are the sort of thing that can exist either objectively in the mind or formally in the world. Descartes is thinking of objectively existing essences as

universals or at least that we make use of them as universal ideas. In section 59, Descartes says, " . . . we later make use of it [the idea of a triangle] as a universal idea, so as to represent to our mind all the other figures made up of three lines" (CSM I: 212; AT VIII A: 28). It is not clear whether he means to express any distinction between being a universal idea and being used as a universal idea. To say that objectively existing essences are merely modes of thinking, however, is not a problem. When essences are considered not neutrally with respect to their mode of being, but specifically as having only objective being, then they are by definition the sort of thing that can only exist in the mind. The essence of a triangle is something that formally exists in every formally existing triangle (if there are any), and in that sense it is not merely a mode of thinking. If, however, I think of the essence of a triangle as something inherently general, as that single thing which all triangles have in common, then my idea of the essence of a triangle is an idea of a universal, and I must simply keep in mind that there is no separate, formally existing substance, which is the universal triangle. The essence of a triangle can exist as a universal only objectively, as an idea in human minds or in God's mind. The essence can also exist formally, but it does so, not as a universal, but as a particular.

In the letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646, Descartes offers an explanation of why attributes and universals are modes of thinking that appeals to the notion of a formal, or conceptual, distinction (CSMK III: 280; AT IV: 349). Attributes, Descartes tells us, can be called modes of thinking because they are only conceptually distinct from the substances they belong to. A substance cannot exist without one of its attributes and vice versa. Thus they are distinct only in thought, insofar as we think of

a thing abstractly or incompletely. Understood in this way, we see that the claim that attributes are modes of thinking does not imply that attributes do not exist outside the mind, only that they do not exist outside the mind as things independent from substances. Since in this letter Descartes lumps universals in with attributes, we can infer that universals are modes of thinking for a similar reason. Universals, considered as such, are thought of as distinct from particular individuals, but this distinction is a merely conceptual distinction since, outside of thought, those same universals cannot exist except as particular individuals.

Lawrence Nolan and Vere Chappell read these passages of the Principles about universals in just the way I am arguing against, as though Descartes is saying that essences have no existence outside human minds. On this textual evidence, they argue that universal essences have objective being only in human minds and not in the world nor in God's mind. [103]

In arguing for this interpretation Nolan and Chappell offer an alternative reading of the texts where Descartes claims that the eternal truths are not dependent on human minds. In the Fifth Meditation Descartes says,

> When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or ahs ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind. (CSM II: 45; AT VII: 64)

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[103] See Part II of Chappell's "Descartes's Ontology" (123-127) and Larry Nolan's "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures" and "Descartes' Theory of Universals." Nolan is clear in "Descartes' Theory of Universals" that he does not mean to deny the formal existence of essences considered as particular things or particular essential attributes, he only means to deny the formal existence of essences as universals. To a certain extent, I agree with Nolan on this point. For Descartes, when essences exist formally they exist as particular things. Nolan denies, however, what I want to assert, namely, that there is an identity between objectively existing universal essences and formally existing particular essences (RNDTA 140 n44).

Again, in the Sixth Set of Replies Descartes says, "Hence we should not suppose that eternal truths 'depend on the human intellect or on other existing things'; they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity" (CSM II: 294; AT VII: 436). Nolan and Chappell argue that Descartes is merely saying that the eternal truths are not invented or created by humans, and they claim that Descartes is still allowing that the eternal truths depend for their existence on the existence of human minds (OSCN 181-184). I find this reading to be strained, especially for the passage in the Sixth Replies. It is clear to me that Descartes is not only saying that the eternal truths are created by God and not invented by us, but also that their truth is not dependent on the existence of our minds.

One of the main problems with making eternal truths depend on human ideas is that the eternal truths stop being eternal. If eternal truths depend entirely on human minds, then they could not have been true for all eternity. They would have begun to be true when minds were first created. Both Nolan and Chappell recognize and try to dismiss this issue, but in my opinion their dismissals are not satisfactory.

Nolan tries to claim that the same problem arises for Descartes due to his belief that God created the eternal truths since it is mysterious how anything can be both created and eternal. Then, instead of offering a solution to the mystery, Nolan simply appeals to divine incomprehensibility (OSCN 185). The problem with this answer is that saying eternal truths depend on human minds is a far bigger problem for the claim that they are eternal than saying they are created by God. Descartes answers the problem about God's creation of the eternal truths by saying that they are not created in time, but rather that they are made true from all eternity (Cottingham Conversation 15-16; CSM II: 294; AT VII: 436; CSMK III: 25; AT I: 152-153). Such an answer is not

available however, if eternal truths exist only in human minds. God can make eternal truths true from all eternity because they have objective being in his mind and his mind is eternal. If eternal truths have objective being only in human minds, then they cannot be created before human minds are created. Perhaps God could think about creating the eternal truths from all eternity, but in order for God to think about them they must exist objectively in God's mind, or else they must exist in God's mind in some third way which is neither objective nor formal. Either way, eternal truths are eternal because they have a reality outside human minds. Chappell, recognizing that this answer does not resolve the problem, simply concludes that eternal truths are not strictly and literally eternal (DO 127).

Chappell worries that eternal truths cannot reside in God's mind because the fact that they are created by God implies that they must be distinct from God's mind. I do not think that the fact that essences reside in God's mind prevents us from saying that they are created by God. Since the eternal truths have objective being in the mind, in order to create them God only needs to think of them. I do not think this entails God creating something distinct from himself, so I do not believe my interpretation runs up against this problem.[104]

Although we all agree that for Descartes, essences, or eternal truths, are things existing objectively in the intellect, my interpretation differs from the view put forward by Nolan and Chappell because I am not limiting essences to existence in human minds.

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[104] Rozemond addresses Chappell's objection very nicely as well as the related objection that any ideas in God's mind would be incompatible with God's simplicity by looking at the Scholastic precedent, particularly in Duns Scotus, for saying that things have objective being in God's mind. In placing essences and eternal truths in God's mind, I am also agreeing with Tad Schmaltz. I do not, however, share Schmaltz's view that eternal truths and essences should be reduced to divine decrees or moral entities. Schmaltz does not describe essences as having objective being in God's mind.

Essences and the eternal truths about them are created by God as eternal, true, and immutable. When we think about them they exist in our minds as the objects of our ideas, but they also always exist in God's mind, and would exist objectively in God's mind even if no human minds existed. My interpretation of Descartes's conception of essences is not fully Platonic either, since I do not think that essences have an existence besides either formal existence as particulars or objective existence in a mind.[105]

## THE ONTOLOGICAL STATUS OF COMMON NOTIONS

I mentioned earlier that Descartes sometimes gives another answer to what the eternal truths are, he calls them common notions or axioms. Here I will discuss what Descartes says about common notions and his reasons for claiming that they too can be thought of as existing objectively in the intellect, and as being directly perceived.

In Principles I, §48, Descartes says, "All the objects of our perception may be regarded either as things or affections of things, or as eternal truths" (CSM I: 208, AT VIII A: 22-23). Things are substances, and affections of things are modes and attributes of substances. In section 49, Descartes says a little about what eternal truths are:

> But when we recognize that it is impossible for anything to come from nothing, the proposition *Nothing comes from nothing* is regarded not as a really existing thing, or even as a mode of a thing, but as an eternal truth which resides within our mind. Such truths are termed common notions or axioms. The following are examples of this class: *It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time*; *what is done cannot be undone*; *He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks*; and countless others. (CSM I: 209; AT VIII A: 23-24)

Here Descartes does not reduce eternal truths to things or properties of things, but seems to think they require their own category.

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[105] For a Platonic interpretation see Kenny's "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths" (696-697).

In the Rules, Descartes explains that common notions are, "links which connect other simple natures together, and whose self-evidence is the basis for all the rational inferences that we make" (CSM I: 45; AT X: 419). Here he gives as examples the propositions, "Things that cannot be related in the same way to a third thing are different in some respect; Things that are the same as a third thing are the same as each other" (Rule 12). From the examples Descartes uses in the Principles[106], the Rules, and other texts[107], it appears that Descartes thinks of common notions as first principles, propositions of logic, and the most general self-evident[108] truths, from which other truths will be derived. Normore describes these kinds of eternal truths as "'topic-neutral' maxims" (DP 82 n16).

One point Descartes seems to be making in Principles I, 49, is that common notions can never have formal existence. This is the distinction between things that exist and things that reside in the mind. While the first two categories of objects of perception, mentioned in section 48, are categories of things that can have formal existence (things and affections of things), eternal truths can exist only in the mind. If this interpretation is correct, however, there is still more to be said about common notions. What feature of the eternal truths makes them such that they cannot exist formally?

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[106] "*If you add equals to equals the results will be equal*" (CSM I: 197; AT VIII A: 9), and, "That there is freedom in our will…" (CSM I: 205-206; AT VIII A: 19).

[107] See "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet" (CSM I: 304; AT VIII B: 359), letters (CSMK III: 77, 180, 290, 355; AT I: 77; AT III: 362; AT IV: 444; AT V: 193), Conversation with Burman (Cottingham 3, 17, 34), and the arguments in geometrical fashion in the Second Replies (CSM II: 116-117; AT VII: 164-166). Descartes notes, however, that many of the axioms listed in the arguments in geometrical fashion would have been better introduced as theorems (ibid.).

[108] In the letter "To Mersenne, 29 January 1640" Descartes says that nothing should be taken as a common notion unless it cannot be denied by anybody (CSMK III: 142; AT II: 629). Also, in support of self-evidence see the letter "To Clerselier, June or July 1646" (CSMK III: 290; AT IV: 444).

Descartes might just be making a point about the propositional nature of common notions. In other words, he might be saying that eternal truths are not things or modes of things because they are propositions. While it may be the case that all common notions are propositions, it cannot be the case that all propositions fall into the class of common notions. First, there are many propositions which are about things or modes of things, but the examples Descartes chooses indicate that he is excluding those propositions. If propositions about things and modes of things are being excluded from the class of common notions, then perceptions of those propositions must belong to the classes of perceptions of things and perceptions of modes of things. The second reason that not all propositions can be common notions is that there are many propositions that are neither eternal nor common. If Descartes were just making the point that propositions are not things, he would not describe the category of common notions as eternal truths or as axioms. Descartes confirms that he is not merely making a distinction between things and propositions in the Conversation with Burman. Burman asks specifically about section 48, what category contingent propositions are supposed to fall into. Descartes's reply is, "By 'eternal truths' the author here means what are called common notions, such as 'it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be', and so on. As for contingent truths, these relate to existing things. Contingent truths involve existing things, and vice versa" (Cottingham Conversation 34). Descartes is saying that not all propositions are common notions and that contingent propositions belong in the categories of things or affections of things. Since not all propositions belong in the category of common notions, the distinction between common notions and things or affections of things, cannot be a distinction between things and propositions.

Descartes seems to be saying in sections 48 and 49, that common notions are propositions that are not about things or affections of things. This view of common notions is also supported by Descartes's statement in the Conversation with Burman that common notions, "are not, strictly speaking, ideas of things" (CSMK III: 338; AT V: 153). Clear and distinct knowledge of things and affections of things will be acquired through clear and distinct perceptions of the essences of those things and the eternal truths about them. If common notions are not about things or affections of things, then it would seem that they will not be known by thinking of the essences of those things. [109]

It is puzzling how to fit common notions into Descartes's ontology, but in the Conversation with Burman, Descartes describes common notions as having to be thought of in the abstract (CSMK III: 332-333; AT V: 146), and this suggests a way of understanding what common notions are.[110] Common notions are abstractions. Knowledge of common notions is different from knowledge of things because it is more abstract. Propositions like "Nothing comes from nothing" and "A thing cannot be and not be at the same time" do not express the essential properties of a circle or square or of any material or thinking substance. They express universal truths. Instead of

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[109] Most of Descartes's examples of common notions are universal truths not specifically about minds or bodies or their affections, but there are a couple that do seem like they are propositions about things. One, in Principles I, §49, is, "He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks" (CSM I: 209; AT VIII A: 24). Another, found in the letter to Mersenne, 15 November 1638, is, "if an intelligent nature is independent, it is God" (CSMK III: 129; AT II: 435).

[110] According to the Conversation with Burman, Descartes says,

> As regards the common principles and axioms, for example 'It is impossible that one and the same thing should both be and not be', men who are creatures of the senses, as we all are at a pre-philosophical level, do not think about these or pay attention to them. On the contrary, since they are at present in us from birth with such clarity, and since we experience them within ourselves, we neglect them and think about them only in a confused manner, and never in the abstract, or apart from material things and particular instances. Indeed, if people were to think about these principles in the abstract, no one would have any doubt about them; and if the sceptics had done this, no one would ever have been a sceptic; for they cannot be denied by anyone who carefully focuses attention on them. (CSMK III: 332-333; AT V: 146)

thinking of common notions as perceptions about essences, we should think of them as abstractions from essences. These general truths are true because they are true of every essence, but they are more abstract and universal truths than truths about essences.

It is because they are abstractions that Descartes says that common notions have no existence outside our thought. In the Comments on a Certain Broadsheet Descartes says that common notions are universal (CSM I: 305; AT VIII B: 359). In the Principles, sections 57 through 59, Descartes tells us that universals, and attributes like number and time that are considered apart from created things, are "modes of thinking" because they are thought of abstractly (I: 212-213; AT VIII A: 26-28). Although these abstractions have a basis in reality they are only conceptually distinct from the things that they have been abstracted from (I: 214-215; AT VIII A: 30-31). I think the reason that Descartes says the common notions "have no existence outside our thought" is the same reason that universals and attributes when not considered as in substances, are called modes of thinking, they are abstractions.[111]

One might think that knowledge of universal truths cannot be abstractions from truths about particulars because universal truths are epistemically prior to particular truths. One might think that we must know the universal truths before we can recognize their particular instances. Descartes apparently does not seem to hold this view, however. In the Second Set of Replies and the Appendix to the Fifth Replies, Descartes argues that the proposition "I am thinking, therefore I exist" does not

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[111] In Principles I, §48, Descartes puts substance, duration, order, and number in the class of things rather than in the class of eternal truths, or common notions. Presumably, despite their genrality, Descartes is still thinking of them as attributes of things. Interestingly, in Rule Twelve, Descartes places the common notions in the same class as universal attributes, or the "common" simple natures, "which are ascribed indifferently, now to corporeal things, now to spirits – for instance, existence, unity, duration and the like" (CSM I: 45; AT X: 419). This provides evidence that Descartes viewed common notions in a manner similar to the abstract universals that apply to many essences.

presuppose knowledge of the general truth "Whatever thinks exists" (CSM II: 100, 271; AT VII: 140-141, AT IX A: 205). In the Appendix he says,

> But the most important mistake our critic makes here is the supposition that knowledge of particular propositions must always be deduced from universal ones, following the same order as that of a syllogism in Dialectic…. It is certain that if we are to discover the truth we must always begin with particular notions in order to arrive at general ones later on (though we may also reverse the order an deduce other particular truths once we have discovered general ones). Thus when we teach a child the elements of geometry we will not be able to get him to understand the general proposition, 'When equal quantities are taken from equal amounts the remaining amounts will be equal', or 'The whole is greater than its parts' unless we show him examples in particular cases. (CSM II: 271; AT IX A: 205-206).

The examples of axioms of geometry in this passage are common notions. Descartes plainly argues that the common notions or axioms are not known prior to their particular instances even though they may indeed provide the logical ground for deducing particular instances from the general rule. Thus, I think it is consistent with the texts to interpret Descartes as thinking of common notions as abstractions.

From what has been said, I think we must conclude that common notions are not truths about essences. That is, they are not truths about particular essences such as truths describing the essential properties of a thing which would distinguish it from other things, but rather, they are truths about all essences. So far, I have been considering perceptions of eternal truths as perceptions of essences. Common notions do not obviously deserve this description. Nevertheless, I do not think that this group of eternal truths needs to significantly change how we think about the ontological status of the eternal truths.

Marleen Rozemond explains Descartes's two different accounts of eternal truths by suggesting that in the Principles I sections 48-49, Descartes uses the term "eternal

truth" narrowly, to refer only to a particular type of eternal truth, common notions (28). In this narrower sense, eternal truths are not truths about essences, whereas in other places, Descartes thinks of eternal truths as reducible to essences or truths about essences. This seems like the most plausible way to reconcile Descartes's conflicting definitions of the eternal truths. In different places Descartes is actually considering different kinds of eternal truths. I disagree, however, with the further use that Rozemond makes of this distinction. She sees a significant break in the ontological status of eternal truths along this line. According to Rozemond, the common notions and only the common notions have their existence in human minds. The other eternal truths and essences have their existence only in God's mind.

What kind of existence do common notions have? Like essences, Descartes tells us in Principles I, §49 that common notions exist in the mind and do not exist formally. Therefore, I think it makes sense to talk of them as existing objectively in the intellect, which Descartes tells us in the passage about the sun is "the way in which objects are normally there". Rozemond raises an interesting objection, which I will discuss below, to the idea that common notions have objective being. In any case, with or without objective being, they reside in the mind. If they reside in the mind, then they must be directly perceived just as essences and other ideas are directly perceived. Furthermore, like eternal truths about essences, common notions are eternal truths created by God and therefore known by God, and this implies that they reside in God's mind as well as human minds, although Descartes would probably not want to say that God thinks about them abstractly, the way humans do. I will return to this point below.

Descartes describes common notions as having no "existence outside our thought" (CSM I: 208; AT VIII A: 22). Rozemond and others have interpreted this as

meaning that they exist only in human minds.[112] It is not as obvious to me as it is to some that this phrase excludes God's mind. If I am right that common notions are abstractions from things and affections of things, then it is likely that Descartes's point in saying that the eternal truths have no existence outside our thought, is just that eternal truths have objective existence but no formal existence. Descartes is saying that common notions are not another really distinct kind of thing that can exist, but rather they are only conceptually distinct from things and their affections, and exist separately from those things only in thought. All of this is compatible with, and indeed I think for Descartes presupposes that, God created common notions as eternal truths, and that they exist in God's mind, as well as our own. It is not likely that Descartes means to exclude eternal truths from God's mind. After all, God knows everything, and God created the eternal truths.

One sense in which common notions, universals, and other "modes of thinking" would not be something existing in God's mind is in the sense that they are abstractions. Considering them requires that we selectively focus on one aspect of a thing or things and ignore the rest. For instance, when we consider attributes, Descartes explains that we make a conceptual distinction between substance and attribute. That conceptual distinction arises from the fact that we can think about one thing by means of two different ideas.[113] God, on the other hand, although he understands everything, is simple, and therefore, Descartes tells us, "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously

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[112] See Rozemond and Chappell (DO 113).

[113] In the letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646, Descartes explains that a conceptual distinction occurs when we can conceive of something using two thoughts that are modally distinct, even considered objectively (CSMK III: 280; AT IV: 350).

understands, wills and accomplishes everything" (CSM I: 201; AT VIII A: 14).[114] In other words, God thinks about everything all at once whereas we focus on this or that thing, or this or that aspect of a thing. Nevertheless, even though God never thinks about things abstractly, in thinking about everything adequately[115], he understands and wills that the universal eternal truths be necessarily true of every individual thing from all eternity. Thus God understands common notions, only in a way which is not abstract.

Rozemond argues that common notions are not the right kind of thing to have objective existence, saying, "After all, Descartes characterizes degrees of objective being in terms of the degrees of reality the items would have if they really, or formally existed. But it makes little sense to speak that way about the common notions. Indeed, common notions seem poor candidates for objective reality" (27). Rozemond raises an interesting problem. After all, Descartes thinks that common notions are neither things nor propositions about things, and they cannot formally exist (although they can be true of formally existing things). It is very tempting to say that in order for something to have objective being, it must be a thing. Although Descartes never explicitly says that in order for something to have objective reality it must be capable of existing formally,

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[114] In this same passage Descartes specifies that God only understands/wills/creates things, in order to deny that God wills sin, which is a privation. One might infer from this statement that God also does not understand common notions because those are not things. If, however, common notions are abstractions of what is universally true of all things, then in willing and understanding all things, God *ipso facto* wills the eternal truths that are known by us as common notions. We may also think that this statement is only meant to exclude privations and not to exclude abstractions.

[115] God's knowledge, according to Descartes, is "adequate," which means that God knows all of the properties of a thing. See the Fourth Set of Replies (CSM II: 155; AT VII: 220).

Descartes does talk of objective reality as belonging to things or ideas of things.[116] Nevertheless, common notions cannot be dismissed as ideas of nothing. They are abstract and general ideas, but they are not confused ideas of privations. They are ideas of eternal truths which can be clearly and distinctly perceived.

I think that for Descartes, the ontological status of common notions must be the same as the ontological status of the other universal and abstract ideas which exist only in a mind, namely modes of thinking. Scholars have also found the category of modes of thinking to be a somewhat puzzling category because Descartes includes in that category attributes such as existence and duration and universal modes some of which seem like they ought to be material things or modes of material things.[117] As I discussed earlier, however, Descartes describes attributes and other universals as modes of thinking only because they are thought of in a general or abstract way, a way in which they cannot exist outside the mind. Attributes and universals as such, exist only objectively or in the mind. Similarly, the ontological status of common notions will be that of modes of thinking because they are too general to be the sort of thing that could exist outside the mind. Thus, it might be appropriate to say that ideas of common notions are not only formally modes of mind, as all ideas are, they are objectively modes of mind, not because common notions are unreal figments of human thought, but

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[116] For instance, in the Third Meditation Descartes says, "…the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing" (CSM II: 29; AT VII: 41). Then a little later he says that if ideas represent "non-things," then they do arise from nothing (CSM II: 30; AT VII: 44). If objective reality requires a real cause, then the idea of a non-thing, which arises from nothing, must not have any objective reality. From this passage, however, it is not clear whether Descartes thinks it is possible for an idea to represent a non-thing, nor is it clear that ideas which represent "non-things" would include any ideas other than materially false ones. Presumably, ideas of eternal truths are not materially false.

[117] See Principles I, §§56-58 (CSM II: 211-213; AT VIII A: 26-28) and the letter to an unknown correspondent, 1645 or 1646 (CSMK III: 280; AT IV: 348-349).

because, due to their generality, they must be described as ways of thinking about the external world rather than things or affections of things in the external world.

## CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION OF COMMON NOTIONS

At this point I would like to address how clear and distinct perceptions of common notions can be compatible with the analysis of clear and distinct perception that I offered in Chapter Two. In that chapter I considered clear and distinct perceptions of eternal truths as clear and distinct perceptions of essences and essential properties. If common notions are not truths about essences, then we cannot easily analyze the clarity and distinctness of common notions in terms of essences and essential properties. Nevertheless, I still think we can analyze clear and distinct perceptions of common notions in terms of being aware of what is contained in the component ideas of the proposition and not including elements that are not necessarily connected.

When we make the idea of an essence clear and distinct, we strip away everything that can be denied of that essence and include only the properties that are necessary and cannot be denied. This process is sometimes aided by considering whether an evil demon could make it false that the thing has some property, or by considering whether a contradiction would be involved in denying the property. Making a common notion clear and distinct will similarly involve stripping away any parts that are not necessarily connected. When we consider whether the denial of a proposition could be false or involves a contradiction, we are considering whether the predicate or part of the predicate could be denied of the subject, or we are considering whether the component ideas of the proposition could be conceived apart.

Consider the common notion, "What is done cannot be undone". The denial of the proposition implies a contradiction, that something can both be done and not be done. In other words, there is a necessary connection between the subject, what is done, and the predicate, that it cannot be undone. If we think about the common notion, "Nothing comes from nothing," we recognize a contradiction or impossibility in the conception of something coming from no cause. It is essential to the concept of every thing that it should have a cause. Abstracting from individual essences of things, we also recognize the universal necessary connection between a thing's existing and its coming from something, that is, the universal truth that nothing comes from nothing.[118] Although common notions express very general or abstract propositions rather than propositions about things, we can still make our perceptions of those propositions clear and distinct by being aware of what is contained in them and not including in them anything that is not necessary.

## CONCLUSION

Descartes's discussion of objective reality, especially in the sun passage, shows that for Descartes our ideas are more than just copies or pictures of reality. In an interesting and important way, our ideas are reality. If ideas are reality, we have a very good metaphysical basis for explaining how clear and distinct ideas can unfailingly

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[118] When I speak of clear and distinct perceptions of necessary truths and when I analyze common notions in terms of the necessary connections between the elements of the propositions, I am understanding necessary connection broadly. According to Descartes, not only can we clearly and distinctly perceive what is necessary, but also what is impossible and even what is possible. Not only can we clearly and distinctly perceive that there is a necessary connection between existence and perfection, we can clearly and distinctly perceive that there is a contradiction or impossibility between extension and perfection. We can also clearly and distinctly perceive that there is no contradiction, that is, there is a possible connection between existence and extension. All of these can be clearly and distinctly perceived according to Descartes, and I broadly construe them as all belonging under the category of necessary truths, although they might more properly be called modal truths.

represent the truth about reality. They do not represent reality; they present reality. Recognizing that necessary truths exist objectively in the mind helps unify the class of clear and distinct perceptions as direct perceptions of the contents of our own minds, and this provides us with a metaphysical account of the difference between clear and distinct perception and sense perception. Because clear and distinct perception is direct perception, the problem of correspondence does not arise.

Although I am claiming that all clear and distinct perceptions are direct perceptions, I am not saying that all direct perceptions are clear and distinct. Not everything that is available to be clearly and distinctly perceived is actually clearly and distinctly perceived. For Descartes, a direct perception is not automatically a clear and distinct perception. We must also perceive it in the correct way. In Chapter Two I offered an analysis of what that way is, what clarity is, what distinctness is, and how we make our obscure and confused direct perceptions into clear and distinct direct perceptions. Thus, in this chapter I have given only part of the story about what makes our clear and distinct perceptions certain. I have shown that it is possible for clear and distinct perceptions to be certain, in a way that sense perceptions are not, because clear and distinct perceptions, as direct perceptions, are not susceptible to the doubts about correspondence to reality that arise for indirect perceptions.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE ARGUMENT FOR CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS AS A CRITERION OF TRUTH

### THE ARGUMENT

In the Third Meditation Descartes uses his discovery that he is a thinking thing to derive a rule about what can be known:

> I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something that I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (CSM II: 24; AT VII: 35)

I call this rule that, "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true," the "Clarity and Distinctness Rule", or the "C&D Rule", for short. The argument in the passage quoted above is the main subject of this chapter. With an account in place of why Descartes thinks clear and distinct perception is certain, I am now in a position to defend an interpretation of this passage as not only introducing the Clarity and Distinctness Rule, but also establishing it as a criterion of truth. First I will argue that the argument in this passage is able to avoid the problem of the criterion, and then I will defend the claim that Descartes thinks clear and distinct perceptions can be known to be true at this early stage of the meditations, prior to dissolving the deceiving God skeptical scenario.

Descartes's certainty, as a result of this argument, that his clear and distinct perceptions are true is what enables him to discover truths that go beyond his own states of mind. Descartes finds that he clearly and distinctly perceives simple truths of

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arithmetic and geometry, the nature of body (extension), the nature of God and arguments proving the existence of God, that the mind and body are distinct substances, and when he has established that God exists and is not a deceiver, with some clever arguing, he claims to clearly and distinctly perceive that the physical world must exist and must be the cause of his sense ideas. Descartes's ability to be certain of all of these things depends on the claim that he argues for in this passage, that all of his clear and distinct perceptions are true.[119]

With this short argument deriving the C&D Rule from his first item of knowledge, I believe that Descartes means to be answering an ancient problem about the justification of knowledge, sometimes known as the problem of the criterion. I will briefly consider two basic forms in which the problem of the criterion arises.[120]

One form that the problem takes is framed by a debate between the Academic Skeptics and the Stoics. The Stoics claim that there is a kind of sense perception called a *cataleptic* impression which is an impression of such a kind that it cannot be false. These impressions are the Stoic criterion of truth. The Academic Skeptics claim that for any true impression there is another indistinguishable impression that is false. For instance our perception of the situation in which we genuinely see Socrates in front of us is indistinguishable from our perception of the situation in which we think we see Socrates but actually see his twin. Unless there is a criterion for distinguishing the true impressions from the false impressions, knowledge is not possible. The Stoics insist

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[119] By "certain" I understand Descartes to mean, not merely the subjective or psychological phenomenon of feeling certain, but rather *knowledge*. To say that something is certain means that it is true and we know it. I will use the terms "knowledge" and "certainty" and "certain knowledge" fairly interchangeably.

[120] A few authors who describe Descartes as raising a Pyrrhonian dilemma include Richard Popkin (ch. IX), Edwin Curley (16, 117,118), and Lex Newman and Alan Nelson (CCC 370-371). Many authors describe clarity and distinctness or the Clarity and Distinctness Rule as a criterion of truth.

there is a criterion for distinguishing the true impressions from the false ones, and the Academic Skeptics insist that there is not.[121]

For the Pyrrhonian skeptics the argument generally begins with a case of conflicting appearances. For instance, honey seems sweet to a healthy person but bitter to someone with jaundice (PH I, xiv: 101). If one of the two conflicting appearances is to be believed, a criterion must be adduced for choosing between them. Either the criterion is believed for a reason or it is not. If it is not believed for a reason, then it cannot justify belief. If the criterion is believed for a reason, then that reason is a criterion for the truth of the first criterion, and we can ask about that new criterion whether there is a reason for believing it to be a true criterion, and so on. The Pyrrhonian skeptic forces his dogmatic opponent into an infinite regress, a circular justification, or admitting that he has no reason for his belief.[122]

Descartes raises the problem of the criterion in his First Meditation with several skeptical scenarios, most famously, the suggestion that for all we know we might be dreaming, and the suggestion that for all we know we might be being deceived by an

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[121] See Cicero's *Academica* Book I, xi: 40-42, and Book II, chs. vi-xxxii, esp. vi: 18, ix: 27, xiii: 40 ff., xxv: 80, xxvi: 83, and xxxii: 103 ff; and see Sextus Empiricus's *Adversus Mathematicos* vii, esp. 150-155, 227 ff., 401-405, 408-415, 426-432.

[122] See Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism Book I, chs. XIII, XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, and Book II, Chapters III – VII (esp. 19-20, 49, 72-78).

evil demon or a deceiving God.[123] These skeptical scenarios are intended to cast doubt on most or all of our beliefs at once by giving us reason for doubting the criteria on which our beliefs are based. If we are to be justified in assenting to any of our former beliefs, we will need a new criterion to distinguish, those beliefs to which assent is justified from those beliefs from which we must withhold our assent, and that criterion in turn must be shown to be justified in order to escape universal skepticism. Descartes will have to offer some non-arbitrary, non-circular, and non-regressive justification for thinking that the new criterion will yield knowledge of the truth.

Descartes's strategy for solving the problem of the criterion has two parts. The first is to raise the most radical doubts possible, doubting all of his former beliefs at once, and then to look for some one item of knowledge that survives them and therefore is immune to doubt. The second part of the strategy is to use this first item of knowledge to discover a criterion of truth by identifying and describing the way in

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[123] Descartes's dream argument and evil demon argument are somewhat more like the skeptical problems raised by the Academic Skeptics than like the skeptical problems raised by the Pyrrhonian skeptics because they are cases where true perceptions and illusions are indistinguishable, but I believe they can be thought of as raising a Pyrrhonian problem broadly construed. Although the Pyrrhonian skeptics generally raise this problem by pointing out conflicting appearances, the problem need not necessarily be raised on that basis. In Outlines of Pyrrhonism Sextus tells us that the skeptic may raise the problem by pointing out conflicting thoughts as well as by pointing out conflicting appearances (PH I, XIII: 31-33). Descartes's skeptical scenarios might easily be described as conflicting thoughts about how our experiences may be caused. Also, Sextus offers under the heading "Of the Criterion 'According to Which'" veil of perception arguments against the "presentation" as a criterion of truth (PH II, VI: 49). Here he generates the problem of the criterion not by raising conflicting appearances, but by raising arguments directly undermining the criterion itself. This strategy is quite similar to Descartes's strategy in the First Meditation, of producing arguments to show that the perceptions which we took as criteria of truth do not actually give us information about reality. Since Sextus describes the Pyrrhonian problem of the criterion quite broadly, I think that Descartes can be seen as responding to the problem of the criterion as it is presented by either the Academic or the Pyrrhonian skeptics.

In Descartes's Method of Doubt, Janet Broughton argues that Descartes's reasons for doubt are unlike both the Pyrrhonian skeptic's and the Academic skeptic's reasons for doubt (Broughton 33-41, 68, 78-82). Although I agree with Broughton that there are important and interesting differences between the way that the ancient skeptics raise doubt and the way that Descartes raises doubt, I think the problem of the criterion is broad enough that it makes sense to read Descartes's skeptical arguments as raising the problem of the criterion again so as to solve it, even if he does raise the problem in a slightly different way than was done before.

which he was able to know it. In this way, the indubitable proposition becomes the premise in a kind of transcendental argument for a criterion of truth.[124] That criterion of truth is clarity and distinctness.

Consider the following modification of Descartes's argument:

1. I clearly and distinctly perceive that I am a thinking thing.

2. If whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true (C&D Rule), then clearly and distinctly perceiving that I am a thinking thing is sufficient for my being certain of it.

3. Whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true. (C&D Rule)

Therefore...

4. I am certain that I am a thinking thing.

This is what I am calling a standard argument. In this argument clarity and distinctness is serving as the criterion of truth by which one can know the proposition, "I am a thinking thing." Knowledge that one is a thinking thing is the conclusion of the argument. The problem with the argument as it is formulated is that the premise where the C&D rule is affirmed, premise three, is unsupported. No reason is given for believing that the C&D Rule is true and no reason can be given. If we say that we know it to be true because we clearly and distinctly perceive it, the argument will be circular. If another reason is given, it will present a new criterion for knowing the criterion of truth, and we can ask about it whether we had any reason for believing that new criterion, and so on.

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[124] Margaret Wilson, interestingly, characterizes the corresponding passage in the Discourse (CSM I: 127; AT VI: 33) as an apparent transcendental argument, but does not give the same characterization to the Meditations passage.

The argument that Descartes actually gives is not a standard but what I am calling a transcendental argument. It might be rendered as follows:

1. I am certain that I am a thinking thing.

2. I now notice that the way in which I am certain is by a clear and distinct perception of what is asserted.

3. If I am certain that I am a thinking thing (in this way), then whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true (C&D Rule).

Therefore...

4. Whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true. (C&D Rule)

Why is premise one true? "I am a thinking thing" is certain because it has survived even the toughest reasons for doubt. The proposition, "I am a thinking thing" is offered at the beginning of the Third Meditation as a brief restatement of the knowledge discovered in the Second Meditation, including especially the knowledge, "I exist so long as I am thinking." Descartes describes it as "this first item of knowledge" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 35), which implies that it has the same content as the first item of knowledge that Descartes discovers in the Second Meditation, that he thinks and therefore exists.

Descartes's argument that his existence is indubitable is as follows:

> But 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 <or thought anything at all> then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (CSM II: 16-17; AT VII: 25)



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Descartes finds that his existence is one thing he cannot doubt, even under his most powerful skeptical scenario, that there might be an evil demon or deceiving God deceiving him. I interpret the proposition "I am a thinking thing" as a restatement of Descartes's knowledge that he is thinking and that he exists.[125]

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[125] Ernest Sosa has objected that this argument introducing the C&D Rule in the Third Meditation is not known with the required certainty because the proposition "I am a thinking thing" is not itself a necessary truth (in conversation, 3/28/04.). In the Second Meditation, Descartes argues, "…this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (CSM II: 17; AT VII: 25). Descartes can know with certainty that he exists whenever he is thinking because the conditional proposition, "I exist whenever I am thinking" is a necessary truth. "I am a thinking thing," is a later conclusion Descartes reaches in the same line of argument in the Second Meditation. Standing by itself, "I am a thinking thing" is not a necessary truth because there will be times when the "I" does not exist, and during those times the proposition will be false.

If the argument for the C&D Rule is taken out of context, then this objection is troublesome. "I am a thinking thing" is not as convincing a first principle as, "I exist whenever I am thinking". The proposition, "I am a thinking thing," however, is offered at the beginning of the Third Meditation as a brief restatement of the knowledge discovered in the Second Meditation, including especially the knowledge, "I exist whenever I am thinking." It is described as "this first item of knowledge" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 35), which implies that it has the same content as the first item of knowledge that Descartes discovers in the Second Meditation, that he thinks and therefore exists. In fact, in the Discourse on the Method, Descartes makes this same transcendental argument using the proposition "I am thinking, therefore I exist" as his first item of knowledge. In the Meditations Descartes states his first item of knowledge as "I am a thinking thing" because it includes not only the information that he thinks and that he exists, but it also specifically restricts the existence claim to only a thinking thing, and not, say, a body. If the "I" were supposed to refer to a body, then the proposition would not be certain. Insofar as it specifies what is the "I" that exists, the proposition, "I am a thinking thing," is in that way more precise than the proposition, "I exist whenever I am thinking". This is why I think it is Descartes's way of encapsulating the knowledge, "I now think, and therefore I now exist, and as far as I know at the moment, this 'I' that exists is just a thinking thing," into one proposition. The brevity of the proposition leaves out the specification of when it is true. I think, however, this is supposed to be understood by the reader already. The proposition is offered in the present tense, and will necessarily be true only at the time it is thought or uttered. The fact that the proposition's truth is bound to the time of utterance is clear from what is said already in the Second Meditation: "let him [the deceiver] deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (CSM II: 17; AT VII: 25).

If the proposition "I am a thinking thing" is taken to mean "I am only a thinking thing and not an extended thing," then the case for its certainty is not as good. If, however, we interpret it as the weaker claim that I exist, and I am the subject of thinking, its credentials are more or less the same as the credentials of the *cogito*, or "I think therefore I am."

Premise two is Descartes's description of the way in which he is able to know he is a thinking thing. In the quoted argument, Descartes is able to gather the criterion of truth, clarity and distinctness, from a single item of knowledge simply by asking himself what it is about this proposition that allows him to know it. He reflects on his knowledge that he is a thinking thing and he says, "In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting." This claim is not explicitly argued for, but it follows a discussion in the Second Meditation where he argues that his awareness of his own self is more clear and distinct than his awareness of bodies, like a piece of wax. Thus, we understand that the claim that his first item of knowledge is jut a clear and distinct perception of what is asserted, comes out of a process of reflecting on his own ideas and recognizing that some are clear and distinct and also certain, while others are not so clear and distinct and also not so certain. The term "clear and distinct" is simply a description of that feature which, upon reflection, Descartes notices to distinguish the perceptions which are certain from those which can be doubted.

Descartes has been extremely careful not to assent to any proposition which has the slightest possibility of being false, so if his way of knowing that he is a thinking of thing could possibly be unreliable, then he would not consider the result to be certain

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Another reason that we might think "I am certain that I am a thinking thing" does not escape skepticism is that we understand the term "thing" to mean substance. Hume argues that the inference that there is a self which is a substance and which supports our thoughts is unwarranted, because when we introspect, we are never aware of anything but thoughts, or ideas (Treatise I, §§v, vi, esp. p. 234). I acknowledge that a strong reading of the premise as asserting the existence of a substance is less obviously certain. On Descartes's understanding of substance, however, we may in fact be entitled to draw the conclusion that a substance exists. Descartes thinks that the principal attributes of thinking and extension are each sufficient for the subsistence of a thing and are what constitute substances (Principles I, §§62, 63, CSM I: 214-215; AT VIII A: 30-31). That means that a thinking substance exists just in virtue of the fact that thinking occurs. Thus, if we can know that we think, we know that a thinking substance exists.

knowledge. Nevertheless the result is certain knowledge, and on reflection, Descartes recognizes that it is certain because his way of knowing it is perfectly reliable. This is why the third premise is true. The truth of the C&D Rule is a necessary condition of the certainty of "I am a thinking thing" because knowledge of the proposition, "I am a thinking thing," is simply a very clear and distinct perception that one is a thinking thing. If such a clear and distinct perception could be false, then Descartes would not know that he is a thinking thing. Since he does know he is a thinking thing, then it must be the case that what he perceives very clearly and distinctly is true. Thus, it follows that the C&D Rule is true.

One thing that I think makes this argument like a transcendental argument is that we are initially more certain of the premise, "I am a thinking thing," than we are of the necessary condition for that knowledge (the C&D Rule). Even though the C&D Rule has to be true in order to know the proposition, "I am a thinking thing," it is not necessary that we know the C&D Rule in order to know "I am a thinking thing." Once we realize, however, that there is a claim whose truth is a necessary condition on our knowledge, then, because we do have knowledge, that certainty must be transferred to the condition as well. We do not justify our certainty of the proposition, "I am a thinking thing" by the C&D Rule, and then have to search in vain for a justification of the C&D Rule itself. Instead, we justify our belief in the C&D Rule by our certainty of the proposition, "I am a thinking thing." Descartes avoids the problem of the criterion because his certainty grounds the criterion instead of the criterion grounding his

certainty.[126]

[126] People understand different things by the term "transcendental argument." My primary aim in this chapter is not to establish whether this argument should be called "transcendental," but to call attention to the fact that it has a peculiar structure which allows it to avoid the problem of the criterion. Nevertheless, I would like to explain the reasons why I think it may be apt to describe the argument as transcendental. My understanding of the nature of a transcendental argument, as I have just described it, is based on the account given by Janet Broughton in her unpublished typescript, "Are There Transcendental Arguments in the Meditations?" and in her book Descartes's Method of Doubt (186-196). She does not, however, recognize this passage as a transcendental argument, nor as the type of argument she calls a "dependence argument."

Barry Stroud, in his paper "The Goal of Transcendental Arguments," offers the following description of transcendental arguments:

> So the premisses from which transcendental reflection begins must be psychological statements about our thoughts or beliefs, but they must be—or at least appear to be—weaker than statements that directly and obviously imply that things are a certain way in the world. But the conclusions of that reflection do have to be strong enough to assert or imply that things are a certain way, non-psychologically speaking. (Stroud 161)

If Descartes's argument does not meet these criteria, we might not want to consider it a transcendental argument. There are two questions raised by this description of transcendental arguments: 1) Is the premise a weak enough psychological fact that it does not imply that things are a certain way in the world? and 2) Is the conclusion strong enough to assert or imply that things are a certain way in the world?

The first question raises the possibility that Descartes's argument is not really a transcendental argument for the C&D Rule because the premise is a knowledge claim. Descartes's transcendental argument does not claim that the C&D Rule is a condition on the possibility of thought, but rather that it is a condition on the possibility of knowledge. As Stroud points out, however, many things are conditions on the possibility of knowledge, including the truth of the known proposition. According to Stroud if the premise is a knowledge claim then it will obviously imply something about what the world is like.

Despite this worry, I do not think that the fact that Descartes's argument rests on a knowledge claim precludes it from being considered a transcendental argument. Consider, by contrast, an argument that Stroud says is not a transcendental argument (161):

> Mary knows that it is raining in Cleveland.
> If Mary knows that it is raining in Cleveland, it is raining in Cleveland
> Therefore…
> It is raining in Cleveland.

There are a couple of reasons why this kind of argument is not a transcendental argument. First, the conclusion of a transcendental argument is supposed to be "a veiled or hidden necessary condition of the truth of the premisses" (161), but it is quite obvious that it is a necessary condition of Mary's knowing it is raining in Cleveland that it be raining in Cleveland. Second, the premise of a transcendental argument is, according to Stroud, supposed to be something that a skeptic would agree to (162). A skeptic, however, would not agree to the premise, "Mary knows that it is raining in Cleveland," because he will deny that anyone can know that it is raining.

That it is Descartes's strategy to derive from a first certain item of knowledge a criterion that will help us discover other knowledge is strongly supported by the text of the Meditations as well as by comments that Descartes makes about his method. The C&D Rule must be justified by Descartes's certainty that he is a thinking thing, rather than the other way around, because Descartes argues for the certainty that he is a thinking thing, before he argues for the C&D Rule. Furthermore, Descartes describes this method of using the certain knowledge of his own existence as a first principle; in a letter to Clerselier in 1646, he describes his method as, "…to look for a being whose

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Descartes's argument, although it does begin with a knowledge claim, does not have either of these features that ordinarily make knowledge claims unsuitable as premises of transcendental arguments. Firstly, what we infer from this premise is not just the truth of the thing known. In other words, there is something obviously implied about the world in this claim, namely that I exist in it, but since this implied fact about the world is not the conclusion of the argument nor does it immediately imply the conclusion, the conclusion of the argument is still a hidden consequence of the premise. The C&D Rule is not an obvious implication of "I am certain that I exist." Secondly, the premise, although it is a knowledge claim, is a claim that the skeptic is forced to admit. Thus, the fact that the premise is a knowledge claim does not mean that it illicitly imports truths about the world into an argument whose premises are supposed to be innocuous psychological premises.

The Second question raised by Stroud's conception of a transcendental argument is whether the conclusion is a fact about the world or implies a fact about the world. The conclusion of Descartes's argument is the C&D Rule. We may want to say that the C&D Rule is largely a fact about the mind, but it is also a fact about the relationship between the mind and the world. It tells us how knowledge is possible and that a specific class of our perceptions are true. Considered by itself it does not tell us very much, if anything, about how the world is, but when combined with particular clear and distinct perceptions, it implies a number of truths about the world that would not be known without it. Although the C&D Rule is partly a psychological claim, I think that it meets Stroud's requirement of being a strong enough claim to imply a fact about the world.

Which facts are implied by the C&D Rule depends on what we think can be clearly and distinctly perceived. Descartes thinks that we can clearly and distinctly perceive the existence of God and the existence of the corporeal world. So, for Descartes, this transcendental argument really does imply significant knowledge about the world. Even if we disagree with Descartes on these points, however, I think we can still agree that there are certain a priori truths that are known clearly and distinctly, such as that a square has four sides or that two and three make five. These a priori truths are truths that go beyond the mind. They are not just truths about how we think; they are truths about reality. Moreover, they are not only abstract truths but also truths about the world. They imply that any squares that exist in the world will have four sides. They imply that if I have two oranges and then I add three more, I will have five oranges. These a priori truths are facts that are uncertain for Descartes prior to his transcendental argument. Whether two and three make five, was cast into doubt by Descartes's evil demon scenario. Therefore, if we extend the transcendental argument to the conclusion that two and three make five, we have given it a conclusion that is itself a fact about the world. Even if it turns out that no material things exist, on Descartes's picture at least, truths about shapes and numbers are still perceptions of truths which are eternal, immutable, and not dependent on human minds. Therefore, clear and distinct perceptions are perceptions of a mind-independent reality.

existence is known to us better than that of any other, so that it can serve as a *principle* for discovering them" (CSMK III: 290; AT IV: 444). Descartes goes on to say:

> …the first principle is *that our soul exists*, because there is nothing whose existence is better known to us.
>
> I will also add that one should not require the first principle to be such that all other propositions can be reduced to it and proved by it. It is enough if it is useful for the discovery of many, and if there is no other proposition on which it depends, and none which is easier to discover…it is very useful indeed to convince oneself first of *the existence of God*, and then of the existence of all creatures, *through the consideration of one's own existence*. (CSMK III: 290; AT IV: 444-445)

The order of proof Descartes describes in the letter matches his procedure in the Meditations. In the letter, Descartes is clear that he chooses knowledge of one's own existence as a first principle because it is better known than, and knowledge of it is not dependent on, any other proposition. Similarly, in the Second Meditation Descartes introduces the *cogito* passage saying, "Archimedes used to demand just one firm and immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable" (CSM II: 16; AT VII: 24). Descartes introduces knowledge of his own existence as that Archimedean point. If Descartes thought that the C&D Rule had to be known before anything else could be known, then his first item of knowledge could not be his own existence. Instead, Descartes makes knowledge of the criterion of truth follow from knowledge of his own existence rather than the other way around. Notice that if Descartes thought that the C&D Rule could not be known until we have knowledge that God exists, knowledge of his own existence would not seem to be functioning as an Archimedean point because it does not have a role in the proof of God. My interpretation explains how knowledge of one's own existence plays that role.

One might worry that the argument as I have described it is viciously circular.



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If the first item of knowledge is known on the basis of clear and distinct perception, and the reliability of clear and distinct perception is established on the grounds that it leads to that same first item of knowledge, then the justification for the C&D Rule seems to be viciously circular.

Descartes's argument for the C&D Rule, is not, however, viciously circular. Although Descartes describes the first item of knowledge as simply a clear and distinct perception of what he is asserting, Descartes does not believe he is a thinking thing on the grounds that all of his clear and distinct perceptions are true. The knowledge that he is a thinking thing is established on the grounds that it is not possible to judge that we are thinking and be wrong, and on the grounds that it is not possible to think without existing. Descartes can and does establish that he is a thinking thing with certainty before he becomes aware of the C&D Rule. That means that, even though his perception is clear and distinct, and even though the C&D Rule must be true, Descartes does not need to know that the C&D Rule is true in order to know that he is a thinking thing. Thus, the C&D Rule does not ground knowledge of "I am a thinking thing," and the argument is not circular. Descartes's argument is successful in escaping the problem of the criterion where similarly structured arguments would not be, because the knowledge claim, "I am a thinking thing," has already been established with certainty prior to the introduction of the criterion, the C&D Rule.[127]

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[127] It was suggested to me that an analogy to logical inference rules may be helpful here (Randall Amano in conversation 10/21/04). Descartes's knowledge that he is a thinking thing depends on the truth of the C&D Rule but not the knowledge of it. Logical inference rules are analogous to clarity and distinctness insofar as we take it that we can know things by logical inference even before we are aware of the inference rule itself. For example, suppose I want to know whether my car needs an oil change, and I remember that there is a "change oil" light that comes on whenever my car needs an oil change. I check my dashboard and see that the "change oil" light has not come on. I infer that my car does not need an oil change yet. My inference happens to be an instance of modus tollens:

I would like to address a concern about the possibility of deriving a general rule about knowledge from one instance of knowledge. The argument is valid in extending the certainty of the proposition "I am a thinking thing" to any other proposition which can be known in just the same way. Descartes uses the label "clearly and distinctly perceived" to describe the way in which we can be certain of "I am a thinking thing." So long as we do not include anything under the label "clearly and distinctly perceived" which is not known in just the same way that "I am a thinking thing" is known, then the conclusion is valid. The problem is that it is not obvious that anything else can be known in just the same way. This first item of knowledge seems to be unique or at least very special. It seems Descartes chooses the knowledge of his own existence for his first item of knowledge because it is uniquely or specially capable of withstanding all of the skeptical doubts. Moreover, in the letter to Clerselier he claims that there is no proposition which is better known to us and easier to discover than our own existence. If Descartes's first item of knowledge is knowable only because of some unique or unusual feature that it has, then our method of knowing it will not be able to be extended to other propositions by means of a general rule like the C&D Rule.

In Descartes's Method of Doubt Broughton expresses what is special about our

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1. Whenever my car needs an oil change, a light comes on.
2. A light has not come on.
3. Therefore, my car does not need an oil change.

We can accurately describe the way in which I know my car does not need an oil change by saying that my knowledge is a valid logical inference by modus tollens. Even though my inference is valid because it is an instance of a valid inference rule, I do not need to have studied logic or know that modus tollens is a valid inference rule in order to correctly draw the conclusion that my car is not due for an oil change. My knowledge of the conclusion may be said to depend on the validity of the general inference rule, but it does not depend on my knowledge of the inference rule. The validity of the inference rule is not part of my grounds for judging that my car needs an oil change. My grounds are the fact that the "change oil" light has not come on. Similarly, Descartes can know that he exists and know it by way of clearly and distinctly perceiving it, even before he knows the truth of the C&D Rule. The C&D Rule must be true in order for him to know that he is a thinking thing, but it does not form part of his grounds for judging that he is a thinking thing.



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knowledge of our existence by describing it as a necessary condition on the possibility of doubting (ch. 7). Because the meditator must exist in order to doubt, his existence is a necessary condition of doubting and of any skeptical scenario. So, the belief, "I am a thinking thing" seems to have credentials that most other beliefs do not have. The belief that two plus three equals five, for instance, is very clearly and distinctly perceived, but, according to Broughton, it does not stand up to the evil demon doubt as well as the belief in one's own thinking and existence (181). Broughton claims that the truth of "two plus three equals five" is not a condition of the possibility of doubting, and therefore that it does not merit the same degree of certainty as "I am a thinking thing." Thus, a concern arises that Descartes is not entitled, by proposing as a general rule that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true, to extend the credentials of this first item of knowledge to other beliefs which do not have the same credentials.

One way in which knowledge of "I am a thinking thing" is special is that doubting it or thinking about it at all makes it true. Even if our doubt is so universal that we doubt even our own thinking and existence, it still follows from the fact that we doubt it that we do think and that we do exist. This feature of the proposition, "I am a thinking thing," means that it must be true of whoever considers it.

I do not think that this is the feature that explains why it is clearly and distinctly perceived to be true. Clear and distinct perception requires more than truth, it requires belief and knowledge. Even though the proposition "I am a thinking thing" must be true of anyone who doubts it, this feature does not imply that it must be known by anyone who doubts it. So, when Descartes clearly and distinctly perceives that he exists, the clear and distinct perception is not attributable to the fact that Descartes would have to exist even if he doubted his existence, the clear and distinct perception

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comes from the fact that Descartes does not doubt that he exists.

Let me say what I think Descartes's knowledge that he is a thinking thing does consist in. Descartes's first item of knowledge is a direct awareness of his own thinking and a perception that existing is inseparable from his concept of himself as actually thinking. The skeptical scenario of an all-powerful deceiver is an aid, which helps him recognize this truth about his nature. Descartes is able to recognize the conceptual connection between his thinking and his existence by considering the fact that so long as he is thinking not even God could make it so that he does not exist. In other words, thinking about what the deceiving God could or could not do, helps Descartes distinguish what is contingent from what must necessarily be true. Despite the fact that Descartes can use the deceiving God doubt as a tool for making his perceptions clear and distinct, I do not think it is quite right to say that they are clear and distinct in virtue of the fact that a deceiving God could not make them false. A proposition is clearly and distinctly perceived when we see that it expresses a conceptual truth, and because it is a conceptual truth it is impossible for it to be false. The impossibility of its being false implies that not even a deceiving God could make it false.

Thus, Descartes's first item of knowledge is not known just in virtue of the fact that thinking about that proposition makes it true. Rather, it is known because Descartes is able to recognize that thinking about that proposition makes it true, and he is able to recognize that fact because his own thoughts present to him conceptual truths or connections that not even a deceiving God could make false. Descartes is certain that he thinks and that so long as he thinks, a deceiving God could not make it false that he exists. He reflects on how he is certain of this, and it is because he is directly aware of his own thoughts and because he recognizes the necessary connection between thinking



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and existing. If a deceiving God could make it the case that thinking did not necessarily imply existing, then Descartes would not know that he exists. Descartes recognizes that he does know that he exists and he knows it because his clear and distinct awareness of his own thoughts reveals to him conceptual truths that could not possibly be false. Descartes's knowledge that he is a thinking thing consists in a direct awareness of his own thinking, and a perception that existing is inseparable from his concept of himself as actually thinking. The necessary conceptual connection between thinking and existing happens to be the first and most natural connection for him to recognize, but there are other connections presented in our ideas which are just as necessary. Similarly, there are other truths about our own states of mind that will be evident besides the simple fact that they we are thought by us. What makes this first item of knowledge clear and distinct, then, is not just that thinking it or doubting it makes it true, but that we can recognize the necessary connection between its being thought and its being true. Thus, Descartes's first item of knowledge is the basis for a general rule pointing out that any other proposition which presents a similarly evident conceptual truth will be similarly immune to the deceiving God doubt or any other doubt.

Supposing I am right so far, and Descartes thinks every item of knowledge is as immune to doubt as the first item of knowledge, then we may wonder why Descartes even needs the C&D Rule or any criterion of truth. The answer is that the C&D Rule describes the scope of our knowledge, although it does not by itself extend the scope of our knowledge. The term "clear and distinct" is a way of describing what our certain knowledge has in common. The C&D Rule provides a criterion for distinguishing certain knowledge from mere opinion, but knowing the C&D Rule does not confer the status of knowledge onto our clear and distinct perceptions. Our clear and distinct

perceptions already have the status of knowledge, and the C&D Rule is simply a recognition of that fact.[128] Being able to recognize the mark of a true idea, however, helps us to increase our knowledge by helping us identify which other ideas also have or can have that mark. So that, once Descartes has recognized what makes him certain that he is a thinking thing, he can also recognize that other of his ideas are certain in the same way. This is the main purpose of the C&D Rule, although Descartes does sometimes use the rule as a premise, such as in his Ontological Argument for the existence of God (CSM II: 45-46; AT VII: 65-66).[129]

## THE FREE CREATION OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS

I have been arguing that Descartes thinks clear and distinct perceptions are metaphysically certain even prior to knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver. This means, not just that a benevolent God could not make my clear and distinct perceptions false, but also that a deceiving God could not make my clear and distinct perceptions false. This very strong interpretation of the certainty of clear and distinct perception may appear to be in tension with what Descartes says about God's omnipotence and the free creation of the eternal truths. I will argue that the certainty of clear and distinct perceptions is not incompatible with Descartes's claim that God could have made the eternal truths otherwise.

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[128] To be specific, prior to knowledge of God, clear and distinct perceptions have the status of what Descartes calls *cognitio.* See Chapter Five for a discussion of Descartes's distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia.*

[129] Again there is an analogy to logical inference rules here. Knowing a logical inference rule such as modus tollens does not make previously invalid inferences valid. It helps us discover and formulate new valid inferences. Thus when we teach students logical inference rules, it is not because we think they are incapable of making valid inferences before they know the rule, but rather, it is because we think knowing the inference rule will help them expand the number of valid inferences they can make and help them make their thinking conform to these valid patterns.

Descartes holds the view, controversial at the time, that God created the eternal truths and that God could have created the eternal truths other than they are.[130] According to Descartes it is in God's power even to make it that two and three not equal five or that a triangle not have three sides. These eternal truths are paradigmatic objects of clear and distinct perception. If God can change the eternal truths, then it seems that God, at least if he were a deceiver, could make false the things that we clearly and distinctly perceive must be true.

Most of the time when Descartes considers the subject of whether God could make different eternal truths, he appeals to God's non-deceiving nature to show that we cannot be wrong about the eternal truths that we clearly and distinctly perceive, or he appeals to God's immutability to show that God will not change the eternal truths. These features of God's essence are only reassuring after it has been proven that God is immutable and is not a deceiver. How can Descartes be certain of the C&D Rule prior to knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver? In order to see why Descartes thinks knowledge is possible prior to the proof that God exists and is not a deceiver, I will look at Descartes's conception of clear and distinct perception of the eternal truths.

As I read Descartes, even though a deceiving God could have made the eternal truths differently, he cannot deceive us about our clear and distinct perceptions of the eternal truths. Although Descartes is clear that God could have made it so that we never existed and God could have made it so that two and three did not equal five, Descartes never claims that God could make our clear and distinct ideas false while we

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[130] See the Second, Fifth, and Sixth Replies (CSM II: 103, 261, 291; AT VII: 144-145, 380, 432), letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630 (CSMK III: 23-25; AT I: 146), letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1638 (CSMK III: 103; AT II: 138), letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (CSMK III: 235; AT IV: 118-119), letter for Arnauld, 29 July 1648 (CSM: III: 358-359; AT V: 223-224), and Conversation with Burman (Cottingham 3).

are perceiving them to be true.[131] In fact, Descartes is fairly explicit about the *cogito* that as long as I think that I am something (or think at all), not even God could bring it about that I am nothing (CSM II: 17, 100; AT VII: 25; 140). Such a statement, however, does not limit God in the sense that it implies God could not have made it that we do not exist. God could have made it so that we did not exist, however, if God had done that we would not think that we existed (or think at all). In the same way, I can easily imagine that I did not seem to see a light. Many times, in fact, I have not seemed to see a light. Given that now I seem to see a light, however, it is impossible that I also do not now seem to see a light. As I will explain below, the same will be true for necessary truths as is true for states of one's own mind. Because knowing what is true does not imply that it could not have been false, God's abilities are still for the most part unlimited by the certainty of clear and distinct perception. I am not merely claiming that a benevolent and immutable God would not make our clear and distinct ideas false while we perceive them to be true, I am claiming that a deceiving God could not do it.

I will draw on a point that Broughton makes in order to attempt to make it clearer why for Descartes conceptual truths besides the truth of one's own existence present constraints on what even a deceiving God can do. Although Broughton claims that truths like "2+3=5" cannot be known in the same way that "I exist" is known, she does not see knowledge of our own existence as a unique class of knowledge for Descartes. According to Broughton's reading of Descartes, other truths that we can be certain of in the same way that we are certain of our own existence are "carefully

[131] This point is made by Cottingham in his book Descartes (76 n. 22). Descartes perhaps comes closest to suggesting that that God could make our clear and distinct ideas false while we are perceiving them to be true, in the letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648 (CSMK III: 358-359; AT V: 223-224). I discuss this passage below.

worded self-reports" about our own experiences (134 ff.). According to Broughton, statements like "I seem to see a light," are also conditions on the possibility of doubting, or perhaps more precisely, conditions on the possibility of being deceived. Of course, seeming to see a light is not a condition on the possibility of being deceived about anything at all (as existing would be), but it is a condition on the possibility of being deceived about seeing a light. Given that I now seem to see a light, either my experience is really caused by a light, or it is a deception caused by dreams or an evil demon, or something else. Even in the case where my seeming to see a light is part of a deception, and there is no light, it is still necessary for that deception that it be true that I seem to see a light. So, if I now seem to see a light, whether or not I am deceived, I can at least be certain about the content of my own experience, whether or not it corresponds to things outside of me.

As I read Descartes, all clear and distinct perceptions are conditions on the possibility of doubting, even clear and distinct perceptions of 2+3=5 and a square has four sides. That means that an evil demon cannot deceive me about what I clearly and distinctly perceive because the truth of my clear and distinct perceptions is a necessary condition of my having them at all. At this point, the interpretation of Descartes's notion of clear and distinct perception as direct perception that I argued for in Chapter Three becomes important again. When we contemplate the essence of a square, for instance, the essence of the square is in our minds as the object of an idea or perception. It is not merely the case that a copy of the essence of a square exists in our minds, but rather, the very same essence that exists in God's mind and is instantiated in square things in the world exists in our minds as well. Because the idea of a square is a direct perception of the essence of a square, we cannot clearly and distinctly perceive that a

square has four sides unless the property of having four sides is necessarily contained in the essence of a square.

Because perceptions of necessary truths are direct perceptions of the contents of our own ideas, they can be certain in the same way that perceptions of our own states of mind are certain. The perceptions themselves constitute facts that are given, that cannot be denied along with the things that a deceiving God might change or make false. If I have a perception of what seems to be a light, a deceiving God can deceive me by changing the world such that there is no light. A deceiving God cannot deceive me by changing or removing the perception because if it ceases to seem to me that I see a light, I will not (mistakenly) believe that there is a light. Of course it is within his power to make me so that I never have a perception as of a light, but once I do have such a perception, that perception is a given, and if the deceiving God deceives me, it is by some means that is compatible with my having that perception. Similarly, when we perceive eternal truths, the ways in which a deceiving God can try and deceive us are limited insofar as they must be compatible with our having the perception.

I am claiming that the falsity of a clear and distinct perception is not compatible with our having that perception. Because perceptions of eternal truths are direct perceptions, we cannot directly clearly and distinctly perceive that a square has four sides unless there exists, at least in the mind, a four sided square to be perceived. If we clearly and distinctly perceive that a square has four sides, and our clear and distinct perception is possible only if squares do have four sides, then, given our perception, a deceiving God cannot have made it false that squares have four sides. This would be incompatible with the fact of our direct perception. A sense perception such as that there is a light, when considered as an indirect perception of a light in the world, is

logically compatible with God's making the world so that the light does not exist, does not cause my perception, or is not as my perception represents it to be. This is why only seeming to see a light escapes skepticism. Direct perceptions, on the other hand, are not compatible with a failure of correspondence to reality. They do not require the formal existence of their object (squares do not have to exist in the world in order for us to know that squares have four sides), and the directly perceived object cannot be other than it is clearly and distinctly perceived to be. Therefore, when we clearly and distinctly perceive that a square has four sides, even a deceiving God could not make our perceptions false.

I think Janet Broughton's notion of conditions of the possibility of doubting is applicable here.[132] Broughton argues that one way in which claims are indubitable for Descartes is that their truth is a necessary condition on the possibility of doubting them: "If the only way to doubt a claim is to construct a skeptical scenario about it, then one way in which such a claim might be indubitable is by being a claim whose truth is presupposed by the possibility that any skeptical scenario is correct" (DMD 105). Using Broughton's terminology, I am claiming that the truth of the clear and distinct perception is a necessary condition on the possibility of doubting the thing that is clearly and distinctly perceived. While Broughton thinks that only a few propositions are conditions on the possibility of a skeptical scenario for doubting them, namely, "I exist," and carefully worded propositions about our own states of mind, I claim that anything that is clearly and distinctly perceived is indubitable in this way.

It will be objected that without God's guarantee we cannot know for certain that

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[132] See Descartes's Method of Doubt chapters six and seven, especially pp.105 and 135.

clear and distinct perceptions are direct perceptions, and therefore we cannot know that we are not being deceived about them. If we think of perception as Descartes did, however, as occurring because the object of the idea exists (objectively) in the intellect, then perceptions which do not go beyond the contents of ideas, cannot be indirect. Our perceptions only become indirect when we judge that they represent something existing outside of the mind, a formally existing thing. It is within our own power to restrict our judgments to the direct perceptions of our own ideas. The reason that not even God could deceive us about our clear and distinct perceptions is that our clear and distinct perceptions are perceptions only of what is contained in our own ideas.

We might worry that God gave us the idea of a square with four sides, but created all squares five-sided. It is not obvious to me, however, that even such a contradictory state of affairs constitutes a falsity of clear and distinct perception. If I have a clear and distinct idea of a square as having four sides, then it can still be said that I at least correctly apprehend the nature of four-sided squares. In other words, I correctly apprehend the nature of the object contained in my idea. For Descartes, even existence in thought "cannot be called nothing," and if a four-sided square is the object of an idea it has a certain thin kind of reality called objective reality.[133] If I clearly and distinctly perceive that four-sidedness is essentially contained in my idea, then it is not really true that God has made all squares five-sided. Perhaps he has made a shape that is a five-sided square, but it is not the same shape that I perceive when I think of a four-sided square. Perhaps he has chosen to give existence only to five-sided squares, but the eternal truth or essence of four-sided squares is still not nothing even if it does not exist

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[133] See the Third Meditation (CSM II: 28; AT VII: 40f) and the Fifth Meditation (CSM II: 44; AT VII: 64).

outside a mind. In fact, Descartes does not think that genuine squares exist anyway, but that does not make the idea of a square false or a deception.[134] In other words, I may not know or understand what else God has created outside my ideas, but whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive to be necessarily contained in my idea is true and constitutes a true and immutable nature regardless of what other true and immutable natures or eternal truths God has created.

In a few places Descartes seems to admit the possibility that what we perceive clearly and distinctly to be true may be false "absolutely," or in God's understanding.[135] For instance, in a letter to Arnauld, Descartes says,

> But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot (*non posse*) make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. (CSMK III: 358-359; AT V: 223-224)

I believe that it is because Descartes is confident of the reality of what we clearly and distinctly perceive that he is able to be unconcerned about the possibility that God, or a deceiving God, could have made truths beyond and contradictory to the truths we clearly and distinctly perceive. Even if God did make contradictories true, it

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[134] In the Fifth Replies Descartes says,

> I nonetheless maintain that there are no such figures in our environment except perhaps ones so small that they cannot in any way impinge on our senses. Geometrical figures are composed for the most part of straight lines; yet no part of a line that was really straight could ever affect our senses, since when we examine through a magnifying glass those lines which appear most straight we find they are quite irregular and always form wavy curves. (CSM II: 262; AT VII: 381-382)

A genuine square would have sides that are perfectly straight lines. Descartes thinks that no such perfectly straight lines exist or if they do, they are too small to be perceived.

[135] See the Second Replies (CSM II: 103, 107; AT VII: 144-145, 150-151), Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630 (CSMK III: 23; AT I: 146), Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (CSMK III: 235; AT IV: 118-119), and Letter for Arnauld, 29 July 1648 (CSMK: III: 358-359; AT V: 223-224).

nevertheless must also be eternally true that 2+3=5 and that the same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time. The possibility of a contradictory reality beyond human conception should not concern us because it does not imply that the reality accessible to human conception is any less real. The eternal truths that God has seen fit to give us knowledge of follow the law of non-contradiction. If God has also created from all eternity a reality that allows contradictories to be true, it is of no interest to us because it does not falsify the truths that we do grasp, and it is not conceivable by us.

It may seem odd to attribute to Descartes the view that our own ideas constitute a reality, regardless of what God has created outside our ideas. This oddness is partly due to the fact that we are used to thinking of formal reality, or what exists, as the only reality. What I want to emphasize here is that objective reality is still reality for Descartes and plays an important role.

This conception of the nature of our ideas is fundamental for Descartes. The thesis that the contents of our ideas have their own true and immutable natures and are to that extent real, is a premise for the proofs of God in both The Third and the Fifth Meditations (CSM II: 28, 44; AT VII: 40f, 64). The mere fact that we have an idea of God, for Descartes, entails certain consequences. The Third Meditation (Cosmological) proof argues that the content of the idea of God has some reality just in virtue of existing in thought, and that reality must have a formally existing sufficient cause. The Fifth Meditation (Ontological) proof treats the clear and distinct perception of God as a perception of a true and immutable nature. Contained in a mere idea is certain proof of the nature of reality. Because our ideas give us direct perception of reality itself, we can deduce from them facts about the world. If Descartes thought it were possible for the nature of reality to be completely disconnected from the contents

of our thoughts, our ideas of God would prove nothing.[136] But Descartes thinks of the objects of thought as real, and therefore, our ideas of eternal truths, if they are perceived clearly and distinctly, must be ideas of the real eternal truths.

Any interpretation of the doctrine of the free creation of the eternal truths or any interpretation of Descartes's theory of perception that makes it possible for humans to have clear and distinct ideas of fake eternal truths which are not the eternal truths that God created, fails to be true to Descartes's robust conception of objective reality. Descartes thinks of the objects of ideas as having reality, requiring a cause, and having real natures which exemplify and are subject to the eternal truths. The objects of our ideas are not outside of the reality and the eternal truths that God creates. By giving us an idea, God has created a true and immutable nature and an eternal truth. Because of the way Descartes thinks about objective reality, even if God wanted to, he could not give us a clear and distinct idea of an eternal truth without at the same time creating the same eternal truth. Furthermore, it is not peripheral to Descartes's philosophy that the objects of our thought are real and have true and immutable natures. It is fundamental and forms the basis for his proofs of God.

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## THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

Although the transcendental argument, if sound, should be sufficient to establish the C&D Rule, Descartes nevertheless follows up his argument by immediately raising

[136] Of course, Descartes's proofs of God are not especially convincing to today's reader, and, Descartes's conclusions aside, the idea of God probably proves nothing about the existence of God. If we already think that Descartes's proofs fail, then an interpretation of Descartes that makes his proofs of God look weak may seem like a small loss. I think, however, that interpreting clear and distinct perceptions as direct perceptions of reality goes a long way toward explaining why Descartes thought his proofs of God could be successful, and why they are not subject to the complaint of circularity as I will explain in the next Chapter.

the worry that a deceiving God might make us go wrong even about what we perceive clearly and distinctly (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36). The fact that Descartes is able to go on to doubt clear and distinct perception is a persuasive objection to the claim that he is offering a transcendental argument for it as a criterion of truth. If Descartes thinks he has proved the C&D Rule, why does he see room for a further doubt? If Descartes thinks the transcendental argument is sound, then can he not simply defend his criterion and say that he has already proven that even God could not deceive him about things he perceives very clearly and distinctly? I think Descartes could do that, but there are reasons why he does not choose this strategy.

One reason that Descartes does not want to continue to use the transcendental argument as a reply to the deceiving God scenario is that knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver gives us a basis for knowing much more than we would know without it. Knowledge of God allows Descartes, in the Sixth Meditation, to prove the existence of corporeal things and to show that sense perceptions guide us in a way that is generally beneficial to the mind-body composite (CSM II: 55 ff; AT VII: 79 ff.).[137] Without knowledge of God, we would have no knowledge whatsoever about particular corporeal objects or about the purpose of our sensations. We would remain solipsists with only mathematical concepts to comfort us at night. The other reason Descartes does not want to continue to use the transcendental argument as a reply to the deceiving God scenario is tied up with the problem of the Cartesian Circle, and so I will return to it in Chapter Five.

[137] These things are also known because they are clearly and distinctly perceived, but they are clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from the fact that God is veracious and benevolent.

## CONCLUSION

I conclude that the short argument that Descartes offers at the beginning of the Third Meditation is an attempt to answer the problem of the criterion and establish the Clarity and Distinctness Rule as a criterion of truth. I think Descartes successfully avoids the problem of the criterion by finding a single item of knowledge which escapes every reason for doubt and then using that item of knowledge as the premise of a transcendental argument. Instead of inferring the knowledge from the criterion, he is able to infer the criterion from the knowledge.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

The problem of the Cartesian Circle is that Descartes seems to claim we cannot know that our clear and distinct perceptions are true until we prove that God exists and is not a deceiver, but we also cannot prove that God exists and is not a deceiver without relying on the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions.[138] The accusation of circularity in Descartes's proof of the existence of God and the reliability of our faculty of clear and distinct perception is as old as the Meditations themselves and was published along side them in the Replies (CSM II: 150; AT VII: 214).

In the Third Meditation Descartes says, "… I must examine whether there is a God, and if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else," and in the Fifth Meditation he says, "Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him" (CSM II: 25, 49; AT VII: 36, 71).[139] Descartes relies on his clear and distinct perceptions, however, to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver, and to finally establish the C&D Rule without a doubt. In the Fifth Meditation, for instance, Descartes uses the C&D Rule itself as a sort of premise for his proof of God, saying, "But if the mere fact that I can produce from my

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[138] In the Third Meditation argument for God, Descartes speaks both of clear and distinct perception and what is known or revealed by "the natural light". "The natural light" is a metaphor for the faculty reason, or understanding, which is the faculty used for clear and distinct perception. For discussions of the natural light as the faculty of reason, see Principles I: 30 (CSM I: 203; AT VIII A: 16-17), Rules I (CSM I: 10; AT X: 361), Discourse (CSM I: 116; AT VI: 10), Broadsheet (CSM I: 300-301; AT VIII B: 353), Meditations (CSM II: 42, 57; AT VII: 60, 82), and Search for Truth (CSM II: 416; AT X: 522-523).

[139] "*Hac enim re ignoratâ, non videor de ullâ aliâ plane certus esse unquam posse*" (AT VII: 36). "*Atque ita plane video omnis scientiae certitudinem & veritatem ab unâ veri Dei cognitione pendere, adeo ut, prusquam illum nossem, nihil de ullâ aliâ re perfecte scire potuerim*" (AT VII: 71).

thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God?" (CSM II: 45; AT VII: 65). Later he emphasizes that the proof is convincing because it is clearly and distinctly perceived, saying, "But whatever method of proof I use, I am always brought back to the fact that it is only what I clearly and distinctly perceive that completely convinces me" (CSM II: 47; AT VII: 68). At the end of the Fifth Meditation, however, Descartes says, "I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true," as though it is the conclusion and not the premise of his proof of God's existence (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70).

The circularity of this argument is pointed out to Descartes by Arnauld in the Fourth Objections (CSM II: 150; AT VII: 214), and the apparent inescapability of the skeptical scenario as described, is pointed out by Mersenne (CSM II: 89; AT VII: 124-125) and Bourdin (CSM II: 304-305; AT VII: 455-457). Descartes claims that his arguments involved no circularity and attempts to explain the reasons why in his Replies. Indeed, Descartes's way of removing the circularity is not just an afterthought; he seems to recognize the danger and tries to address it within the Fifth Meditation (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69-70). Nevertheless, critics ever since have remained puzzled or unconvinced. Many authors who are able to avoid concluding that Descartes's reasoning is circular do so by relying on uncompelling interpretations. In this chapter I will offer my own interpretation of how Descartes avoids circularity. I am, of course, indebted to many other authors for important pieces of this interpretation, but I think the reading I am offering, when combined with my account of how Descartes

understands clear and distinct perception, will further illuminate the problem of the Cartesian Circle.

## THE WEAK INTERPRETATION OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION: FRANKFURT AND GEWIRTH

I will begin my discussion of the Cartesian Circle by briefly arguing against the approaches of Frankfurt and Gewirth because I believe their solutions to the Cartesian Circle depend on a mistaken conception of clear and distinct perception.[140] In Chapter Two I argued that both Frankfurt and Gewirth mistakenly think of clear and distinct perception as yielding only subjective, or psychological, certainty and not metaphysical certainty. Accordingly, their solutions to the Cartesian Circle begin with what I call a weak interpretation of clear and distinct perception. Frankfurt and Gewirth place more emphasis on passages where Descartes says that we cannot know anything until the existence of God is proven, and they place less emphasis on the passages where Descartes says that not even God could make him wrong about what he clearly and distinctly perceives. They place weight on Descartes's claim that knowledge of God guarantees the C&D Rule, and in order to avoid circularity they deny that the C&D Rule guarantees the truth of the premises in the proof of God. According to the subjective certainty interpretation, the premises of the proof of God are not known to be true, they are only subjectively certain. Thus, when Descartes reaches the conclusion that everything he perceives clearly and distinctly is true (CSM II: 48; AT: 70), he will have reached it without assuming the conclusion as a premise.

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[140] See Harry Frankfurt, Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen , and Alan Gewirth, "The Cartesian Circle" and "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered".

The problem with this argument is that if we can only be subjectively certain of the premises for the proof of God's existence, then we can only be subjectively certain of the conclusion that God exists and only subjectively certain of the conclusion that all of our clear and distinct ideas are true. Being subjectively certain that all of our clear and distinct ideas are true is not the same as knowing that they are true, and thus, on this interpretation Descartes never really gains any certain knowledge.

Both authors are aware of this difficulty and try to resolve it in different ways, but their attempts are unsatisfying. Frankfurt argues that Descartes's conception of truth is not one of correspondence, but one of coherence. In other words, a perception is true not when it corresponds to reality, but when it is consistent with all of our other perceptions. According to Frankfurt, clearly and distinctly perceiving the proof for the existence of God just shows us that we will not have any clearly and distinctly perceived reason for doubting our clear and distinct perceptions. Clear and distinct perception gives us an assurance of coherence between our subjectively certain ideas. Whether our ideas achieve metaphysical certainty, that is, accurately represent the world outside the mind is, according to Frankfurt, not the point. Frankfurt concludes from the passage of the Replies at AT VII: 145 that, "Descartes evidently recognizes that his position entails that from our knowing something with perfect certitude it does not follow that it is, 'speaking absolutely' true" (DDM 179). [141] Thus, according to Frankfurt, the fact that

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[141] Frankfurt gives the passage as follows:

> *What is it to us if someone should perhaps imagine that the very thing of whose truth we have been so firmly persuaded appears false to God or to an angel and that as a consequence it is false speaking absolutely? What do we care about this absolute falsity, since we by no means believe in it or even have the least suspicion of it? For we are supposing a persuasion so firm, that it can in no way be removed–a persuasion, therefore, that is exactly the same as the most perfect certainty.* (DDM 179; AT VII: 145)

we cannot know whether our ideas correspond to reality does not worry Descartes. Once we have shown that none of our clear and distinct ideas will conflict with one another, this is all the truth we can hope for. Thus, we should not worry whether God really exists or is veracious, so long as we are assured never to have an idea that contradicts the belief that he exists and is veracious.

The suggestion that Descartes is interested in a coherence rather than a correspondence theory of truth is unpalatable as an interpretation of Descartes. I have presented Descartes's conception of truth in earlier chapters as essentially a correspondence theory of truth. I have argued that ideas are true for Descartes either if they accurately represent reality outside the mind or if they present or constitute reality existing within the mind. The claim that Descartes holds a coherence theory of truth is incongruent with Descartes's project. For instance, the skeptical scenario of the evil demon/deceiving God seems to be precisely the worry that our ideas might not correspond to reality.[142]

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Frankfurt sees Descartes as admitting in this passage the possibility that even our clear and distinct perceptions may not correspond to reality and reads Descartes as not caring about the possibility so long as we can never discover the absolute falsity of our clear and distinct perceptions. It seems much more likely, however, that Descartes meant only to concede that others might believe in such a possibility and that we should not care if others believe this because the suggestion cannot and should not undermine our belief in what we have perceived clearly and distinctly. The CSM translation of the passage is slightly more conducive to the latter interpretation (CSM II: 103).

[142] The reasons for rejecting the Frankfurt's coherence reading have been extensively argued by other authors. I will not try to repeat the arguments myself, but I will quote what some authors have said about the subject. John Cottingham in Descartes says of this interpretation, "to construe Descartes as foregoing any claim to have reached objective truth seems to me to involve viewing his work from a far too 'modern' or relativistic a perspective. Descartes, throughout his writings, describes the meditator as, par excellence, the seeker after truth" (69). Bernard Williams, in Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry, says, "We cannot understand Descartes if we break the connection between the search for certainty and the search for truth, or the connection between knowledge and the correspondence of ideas to reality" (200). Margaret Wilson, in her book Descartes, says, "Frankfurt imputes to Descartes a distinction between concern with certainty and concern with truth that is not really borne out by the texts" (236 n42).

Gewirth's approach to the Cartesian Circle is not to try to tinker with Descartes's conception of truth, but rather, to argue that the subjective certainty of the premises in the proof of God is enough to achieve metaphysical certainty of the existence of God. Nevertheless, I find it is not convincing that on the interpretation Gewirth argues for, we will end up with anything more than the coherence of our subjectively certain clear and distinct perceptions. I believe that Gewirth conceives of the problem for clear and distinct perception in a way that cannot be solved non-circularly.

Gewirth attributes to clear and distinct perceptions a problem which for Descartes only arises for indirect sense perceptions of the external world. Gewirth does not think that clarity and distinctness can be both internal characteristics of ideas and indicators of truth, prior to God's guarantee, because he conceives of the objects of our perceptions as always "extra-ideational" (CC 372; CCR 680). For Gewirth, metaphysical certainty requires knowledge that our ideas correspond with a world outside of our ideas. Clarity and distinctness are internal characteristics of an idea that do not tell us about the world outside the mind. In other words, Gewirth conceives of clear and distinct intellectual perceptions as representing in fundamentally the same way as sense perceptions. According to Gewirth, only with knowledge that God is not a deceiver can we be certain that our clear and distinct perceptions correspond with reality. Gewirth's task is to show that metaphysical certainty that God exists and is not a deceiver can really be achieved from only the psychological, or subjective, certainty that Gewirth thinks is afforded by clear and distinct perception.

Here is how Gewirth attempts to derive a metaphysically certain conclusion from subjectively certain premises. Gewirth argues that the metaphysical doubt (that

our ideas may not be true) can only exercise its function in virtue of its own rationality, and the rationality of the doubt can only be assessed by the clarity and distinctness of the reason on which it is based (CC 389). The reason on which the doubt is based is the possibility that God might be a deceiver. Therefore the metaphysical doubt can be dismissed merely on the basis of its internal characteristics: the idea of a deceiving God, which is the reason for the doubt, is not internally coherent. The premises of the proof of God, according to Gewirth, are only psychologically, or subjectively, certain, but the conclusion is metaphysically certain because the conclusion is not subject to any valid metaphysical doubt (CC 386). Clearly and distinctly perceiving that God necessarily exists refutes the metaphysical doubt about our clear and distinct ideas and thereby renders the conclusion and all future clear and distinct ideas metaphysically certain.

This solution comes close to capturing Descartes's intent, but fails if we take seriously Gewirth's interpretation of clear and distinct perception as merely subjectively certain. I do not see how this argument can succeed without acknowledging from the start that our clear and distinct perceptions can yield metaphysical certainty. The reason why Gewirth thinks that we cannot consider our clear and distinct perceptions as yielding metaphysical certainty is that clearly and distinctly perceiving something limits us to considering the internal characteristics of the idea and prevents us from considering the metaphysical doubts about our idea (CC 374). The difficulty is that if observations about the internal consistency or inconsistency of ideas do not yield metaphysical certainty in general, then I fail to see why they should begin to when applied to the metaphysical doubts themselves. If in previous cases we were free to say, "Sure our perceptions are internally coherent, but do they correspond to reality?", then when considering the metaphysical doubt, we must be entitled to recognize its

incoherence yet wonder whether it might not correspond to reality anyway. Gewirth's reading does not successfully eliminate the possibility that a deceiving God could make it seem that the idea of a deceiving God is internally incoherent. Clear and distinct perception of the proof of God ought to eliminate this worry, but the subjective interpretation of clarity and distinctness actually prevents us from eliminating the metaphysical doubt in this way. If the clarity and distinctness of a perception does not prove its truth, then the clear and distinct perception that the metaphysical doubt is impossible cannot prove its falsity. Only if the internal characteristics of a perception are allowed to have some metaphysical significance can they eliminate the evil demon/deceiving God scenario as a reason for doubting. Thus, if we begin by supposing that clarity and distinctness can only yield subjective certainty, I do not see how the conclusion of the proof of God could surpass subjective certainty.

Furthermore, Gewirth describes the "methodological moment" in which we consider the clarity and distinctness of a perception and experience subjective certainty, as excluding consideration of metaphysical doubts concerning the truth of what is perceived (CC 374). If we think of clear and distinct perception as causing this kind of tunnel vision, then clear and distinct perception that the reasons for doubt are internally incoherent will be inherently untrustworthy. After having brought clear and distinct perception to bear on the deceiving God scenario and having found it to be incoherent, we would still not know whether that clear and distinct perception corresponded to the truth of the matter. We would be left with the concern that the apparent incoherence of the metaphysical doubt was really just another deception of the deceiving God. We would be left with this concern because we began with a conception of clear and distinct perception as a faculty that could not penetrate beyond the realm of ideas to see how the

world can and cannot be. Our faculty of clear and distinct perception will only be adequate to evaluate metaphysical doubts such as the deceiving God scenario if we think it can tell us what is and is not metaphysically possible.

Both Frankfurt and Gewirth approach the problem of the Cartesian Circle with a weak interpretation of clear and distinct perception. They claim that Descartes avoids circularity because he does not assume that clear and distinct perceptions are true prior to proving the existence of God. According to these authors, prior to the proof of God, clear and distinct perceptions are not strictly, metaphysically certain. I disagree with the weak interpretation of clear and distinct perception because I do not think it can ever yield metaphysical certainty of the existence of God nor can the C&D Rule subsequently be established with certainty.

## THE STRONG INTERPRETATION OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

I want to now look at what Descartes says about the problem of circularity, with a view to showing that Descartes indicates a solution that begins with a strong conception of clear and distinct perception, one that allows clear and distinct perception to yield metaphysical certainty prior to the proof of God. In order to avoid circularity, the strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception must weaken or qualify the extent to which knowledge requires God's guarantee. I think the texts clearly show that this is what Descartes means to do. Thus, I think the strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception is preferable both because it is truer to the texts and because it avoids circularity. I have in earlier chapters argued, on grounds mostly independent from considerations about circularity, for a strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception according to which not even a deceiving God could makes us wrong about what we clearly and distinctly perceive to be true. The account of clear and distinct

perception that I am suggesting supports the interpretation I offer in this chapter of Descartes's solution to the Cartesian Circle. The fact that Descartes could not have avoided circularity, however, on the weak interpretation of clear and distinct perception, in turn lends further support to the strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception which I have been arguing for.

Descartes denies that his argument is circular, or the skeptical doubt inescapable. He responds to the charges (CSM II: 100-101, 171, 309; AT VII: 140-141, 245-246, 460) by reiterating a passage at the end of the Fifth Meditation which explains what role exactly the knowledge that God is not a deceiver plays in our ability to have other knowledge. In the Fifth Meditation Descartes says,

> Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it. And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, if I were unaware of God: and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions….
>
> Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on. (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69-70)

From this explanation, it seems clear that Descartes is not understanding the role of the knowledge of God as being as crucial as we might have thought based on isolated quotations. According to this passage, our knowledge of God allows us to have knowledge of what we once clearly and distinctly perceived, when we are no longer

clearly and distinctly perceiving the reasons for its truth. When we are clearly and distinctly perceiving those reasons we have knowledge anyway. Descartes is saying that we can only doubt a thing that we have clearly and distinctly perceived when our "mental vision" is no longer fixed on it or when we are no longer attending to the argument which led us to see its truth.

If we look again at the Third Meditation, where Descartes suggests that a deceiving God could make him wrong about even his clear and distinct perceptions, we see that Descartes finds himself, in fact, unable to resign himself to this doubt. Immediately after he raises the doubt, he turns his mind again to his clear and distinct ideas, and he still finds them absolutely certain, so certain that he is sure that he cannot be deceived about them:

> Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36)

These passages set up a conflict. When we think about the omnipotence of God, we think that God could deceive us about our clear and distinct perceptions, yet while we clearly and distinctly perceive something, we realize that we could not be deceived about it.

Why does Descartes think that the hypothesis of a deceiving God does not give him reason to doubt his clear and distinct perceptions at the time he is perceiving them? I think the reason is simply that in each case, he perceives the impossibility of its being otherwise. In the Second Meditation, Descartes sees that even if there is an omnipotent being deceiving him in every way that he can, "he will never bring it about that I am

nothing so long as I think that I am something" (CSM II: 17; AT VII: 25). Likewise, as long as he seems to see a light, it cannot be false that he seems to see a light (CSM II: 19; AT VII: 29). There are propositions that when we consider them clearly and distinctly we see the impossibility of their being false. Descartes understands a state of affairs to be impossible even for the deceiving God to create if we clearly and distinctly perceive that it involves a contradiction (CSM II: 50, 108; AT VII: 71, 152). Now, a proposition such as 'I do not seem to see a light' is not, in itself, contradictory, nor is our distinctly perceiving it contradictory. It is contradictory, though, that we should clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of 'I do not seem to see a light' while we do seem to see a light, and that is also the only time when it is not possible that we do not seem to see a light. Thus, our clear and distinct perceptions present conceptual, necessary truths that not even a deceiving God could make false.

If Descartes can be certain of his clear and distinct ideas, why does he say that he needs to prove the existence of a non-deceiving God before he can be certain about anything else? One possibility is that Descartes finds God's guarantee to be necessary for some but not all clear and distinct perceptions. In the Second Replies, Descartes gives an explanation of clear and distinct perceptions where he claims that the simple ones cannot be doubted. Descartes says,

> Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them. (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145-146)

It might be inferred from this passage that there are some things which Descartes never in fact intended to call into doubt by the deceiving God scenario because we cannot fail

to perceive them clearly and distinctly. This reading is further supported by what Descartes goes on to say:

> …There are other truths which are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge (*cognitio)* of them depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them. (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 146)

Descartes is apparently setting up a contrast between simple truths and truths which require arguments, in order to qualify which perceptions require God's guarantee. These passages by themselves suggest a tempting, but I think ultimately mistaken, way of limiting the scope of the deceiving God doubt and the role of God's guarantee. From these passages we might think that Descartes means to say that clear and distinct perceptions of simple propositions are not susceptible to the deceiving God doubt and do not require God's guarantee. On the other hand, the deceiving God scenario, on this interpretation, would call into doubt only those truths we have clearly and distinctly perceived by means of argument. So, in order to guarantee the truth of those propositions, we must still prove that God exists and is not a deceiver.[143]

This reading of the Second Replies is consistent with Descartes's comments in the Fifth meditation that doubt comes in when he is no longer attending to the arguments which led up to a previously made judgment (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69), but

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[143] For a different and more sophisticated way of limiting the scope of the deceiving God doubt, see Janet Broughton's Descartes's Method of Doubt (Chs. 6-9). She argues that the premises in the proof of God do not fall under the scope of the deceiving God doubt because they belong to the conditions of the very possibility of doubting, and she describes different ways in which the different premises of the proof of God are necessary conditions of doubting God's existence. I am not going to take up this interpretation here, except to give the inadequate reply that, while her case is compelling for some of the premises, I find the textual support insufficient for considering other of the premises (e.g. the causal principle) to be conditions on the possibility of doubting in the way she describes. Ultimately, I think that all clear and distinct perceptions stand or fall together. Even though I disagree with the way Broughton describes the causal principle as a condition of the possibility of doubting, I have argued in Chapter Four that I think that the truth of any clear and distinct perception, including the perception of the causal principle, can be described as a condition of the possibility of doubting it, similar to the way that Broughton describes the truth of claims about our own states of mind as conditions of the possibility of doubt.

this interpretation so far cannot explain other things Descartes says in the Meditations. First, Descartes's conclusion at the end of the Fifth Meditation, "that the certainty and truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my awareness of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him" (CSM II: 49; AT VII: 71), does not seem consistent with the proposed interpretation. If the deceiving God hypothesis calls into doubt only those clear and distinct perceptions which are based on arguments, then it is simply not true that I am not capable of perfect knowledge of anything else before I am aware of the true God.[144]

In the First Meditation, Descartes describes the deceiving God problem as a scenario where "I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident" and Descartes says that it would be "easy" for God to make me wrong "even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36). Yet the interpretation considered above has the deceiving God scenario calling into doubt only those things which are not completely evident but require an argument in order to be seen to be true.

Finally, Descartes used the same deceiving God hypothesis to doubt whether two and three make five (CSM II: 14, 25; AT VII: 20, 36) or whether a square has four sides (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 20). At the same time he refers to these propositions as "the

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[144] This quotation might be rendered compatible with the view that the deceiving God argument only renders doubtful the conclusions of arguments, if "perfect knowledge" is interpreted to pick out only knowledge which is the result of an argument, and not simple, self-evident truths. In "*Cognitio, Scientia*, and the Cartesian Circle," Carriero argues that Descartes's notion of perfect knowledge comes from Aristotle's Posterior Analytics and points out that there Aristotle argued that all scientific knowledge comes through syllogistic demonstrations and that the intuition of first principles does not count as scientific knowledge. If Descartes followed such a definition, we might think that this claim in the Fifth Meditation that all perfect knowledge depends on knowledge of God still does not imply that simple, self-evident truths depend on knowledge of God. It is not clear whether Carriero himself wants to endorse this reading of Descartes. It would not only mean that self-evident truths are not doubted by Descartes, but also that they never count as perfect knowledge even after we have knowledge of God's existence. Even if we can make this Fifth Meditation quotation fit into the view that the simplest truths are never brought under the scope of the deceiving God doubt, the following quotations from the First Meditation and Third Meditation do seem to show that Descartes can sometimes doubt the simple and self-evident truths.

simplest and most general things" and "transparent truths" (ibid.). It would seem that these truths fit into the very category that this reading supposes are not to be doubted under the deceiving God hypothesis. In fact, it is apparently not impossible for Descartes to doubt even his own existence, since he does so in the First Meditation. He does not doubt his own existence explicitly, but before he considers the certainty of the *cogito*, he says, "I…am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised" (CSM II: 14-15; AT VII: 21).

I believe there is a better interpretation of Descartes's comments in the Second Replies and in the Fifth Meditation. In the passage at the end of the Fifth Meditation, Descartes mentions two reasons why he can come to doubt his clear and distinct perceptions if he is unaware of God. The second reason is that he remembers the conclusion to an argument that he clearly and distinctly perceived, without remembering the argument. The first reason, however, is simply, "I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly" (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 69). The reason in the Second Replies that Descartes says we could never doubt the simple truths, is that whenever we think of them, we are compelled to believe they are true. I think we can reconcile this statement with the fact that he doubts his own existence in the First Meditation by considering that he doubts it while not thinking of it.

As I see it, the claim in the Second Replies that we cannot doubt perceptions unless we think of them is not quite true for Descartes. In the First Meditation Descartes doubts his own existence because he is not specifically thinking of the proposition at all, but rather it is subsumed under a general doubt of all of his former beliefs. Likewise, in the Third Meditation, Descartes doubts all of his clear and distinct perceptions because he thinks of them as a general class, describing them as, "those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye" (CSM II: 25; AT VII:

36). When he thinks of the simple clear and distinct perceptions individually, he is unable to doubt them. Since, however, he cannot keep his attention continually on every one of these truths, the ones that he is not attending to can be doubted in a general way. Thus, there can be times when he doubts all of his knowledge.[145]

I think the deceiving God scenario is indeed supposed to call all knowledge into doubt. Recognizing, however, that the deceiving God scenario is supposed to make us doubt all of our perceptions, even the simplest and most evident ones, will tend to push the reader of Descartes to the weak interpretation of clear and distinct perception. If clear and distinct perceptions, such as of our own existence, fall under the scope of the deceiving God doubt, it is tempting to think that that means they are less than metaphysically certain prior to the proof of God. There is, however, an alternative that allows us to hold on to the strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception. This interpretation weakens the role that knowledge of God plays so that God's guarantee is not required for metaphysical certainty. The textual evidence for this interpretation is quite strong.

Several authors have pointed out that in the passage at the end of the Fifth Meditation (CSM II: 48-49; AT VII: 70-71) and in the Replies (CSM II: 100-101; AT VII: 140-141) Descartes distinguishes between knowledge qua *scientia* and knowledge qua *cognitio*.[146] *Scientia* is stable, on-going knowledge, whereas *cognitio* is a momentary

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[145] That Descartes is able to doubt all of his clear and distinct perceptions, even the most self-evident ones, by doubting them as a general class has been argued or pointed out by several authors including Curley, and Newman and Nelson (Curley 123; Newman and Nelson CCC 375).

[146] I am thinking of Williams (187-202), Cottingham (CSM II: 101 n. 2; Descartes 70), and Carriero, "*Cognitio*, *Scientia*, and the Cartesian Circle."
I am primarily indebted to Williams for pointing out the important distinction that Descartes makes between *cognitio* and *scientia* (187-202). Williams himself, however, does not give a straightforward account of how *scientia* can be derived from *cognitio* without begging the question, and he seems to say that we should endorse the C&D Rule merely on the grounds that skepticism would prevail if we did not (202-207).

or "time-bound" (Williams 201) knowledge. So, Descartes thinks that before we have knowledge of a non-deceiving God, we can only have *cognitio*, time-bound knowledge, whereas "true knowledge" is true *scientia*, the stable, on-going kind of knowledge which cannot be called into doubt at a later time (CSM II: 101; AT VII: 141). We cannot build up a systematic body of knowledge until we can move from *cognitio* to *scientia*. This is because, as Descartes pointed out, we cannot continually attend to our clear and distinct perceptions. We can imagine that the more pieces of knowledge we need to build an argument, and the more arguments we need to build a system of knowledge, the more

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Cottingham in his book Descartes (66-73), and John Carriero, in his unpublished paper, "Cognitio, Scientia, and the Cartesian Circle," have also offered solutions to the Cartesian Circle which turn on the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*, and which are very similar to the interpretation I present here. Cottingham argues that *cognitio* of simple, self-evident truths, such as, '2+3=5,' "is an exception to the principle that all knowledge depends on God" (70). Cottingham says that the proof of God plays the role of allowing us to rely on memory and of eliminating the "nagging doubt" that God may be a deceiver which keeps our knowledge from being stable (71). My own account is in agreement with Cottingham's but goes beyond it in two ways. First, building on my analysis of the nature of clear and distinct perception, I offer a more thorough account of why Descartes thinks present clear and distinct perceptions are such that not even a deceiving God could make them false. Second, I offer a more detailed account of the doubt that is raised by the deceiving God argument, claiming that it is a doubt about whether what seemed evident was evident, or what seemed to be clearly and distinctly perceived really was clearly and distinctly perceived. This account helps explain why Descartes at times claims to doubt even the most self-evident truths and why he refers to all knowledge as dependent on knowledge of God.

Carriero also argues that the solution to the Cartesian Circle requires understanding the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*, and that we are justified in believing clear and distinct perceptions (*cognitio*) prior to proof of God. Carriero, drawing from Aristotle's Posterior Analytics gives a more detailed analysis of the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia* than Cottingham or I do. Carriero explains the role of the proof of God is to give the meditator an "*understanding* of her position in the world as a knower", and argues that this "grasp of one's epistemic position" marks an important difference between *scientia* and *cognitio* (Part 2). Carriero argues that what makes *cognitio* temporary, is that while we are presently clearly and distinctly perceiving something, the trustworthiness of our nature is not an assumption or premise for what we claim to know, but when we merely remember the conclusion, we must assume the trustworthiness of our nature and therefore we must know that we were created by God before our belief is justified (Part 3). In this chapter I take up at length the question of why the deceiving God argument should cause us to doubt remembered clear and distinct perceptions but not present ones. I offer a slightly different explanation than Carriero does of why we must establish the trustworthiness of our nature in order to rely on remembered clear and distinct perceptions. I claim that doubts about the trustworthiness of our nature can cause us to doubt whether what we remember having clearly and distinctly perceived was actually clearly and distinctly perceived. I interpret the role of the proof of God as being primarily one of eliminating a reason for doubt rather than of establishing a necessary assumption about our status as knowers. Also, while Carriero focuses on the doubtfulness of remembered clear and distinct perceptions which are the conclusions of proofs, I emphasize that Descartes thinks all clear and distinct perceptions, even simple self-evident ones, can be doubted when they are thought of indirectly. Although my explanation of the role of the proof of God is somewhat different from Carriero's, I am not sure ultimately whether it is in conflict with his explanation or just a different approach to explaining the same thing.

difficult it would be to perceive all of the relevant bits of knowledge clearly and distinctly. Thus, the further we go into our investigations, the more we will need a basis for stable knowledge. While we can have *cognitio* before we know whether God exists or is a deceiver, we cannot have *scientia* until we have proven that God exists and is not a deceiver, because it is the possibility of a deceiving God that makes us doubt previous clear and distinct perceptions and so keeps the certainty of our clear and distinct perceptions time-bound.

In numerous places, Descartes carefully clarifies that knowledge of what we clearly and distinctly perceive depends on knowledge of God only when we are no longer having the clear and distinct perception.[147] In the Conversation with Burman Descartes says,

> If we did not know that all truth has its origin in God, then however clear our ideas were, we would not know that they were true, or that we were not mistaken – I mean, of course, when we were not paying attention to them, and when we merely remembered that we had clearly and distinctly perceived them. For on other occasions, when we do pay attention to the truths themselves, even though we may not know God exists, we cannot be in any doubt about them. Otherwise, we could not prove that God exists. (CSMK III: 353; AT V: 178)

Here Descartes is specifically addressing the problem of circularity. In this passage, Descartes acknowledges that if present clear and distinct perceptions are not known to be true, then it cannot be proven non-circularly that God exists. His strategy for removing the circularity is to qualify the claim that knowledge that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true depends on knowledge that God exists.

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[147] I quote the following passage from the Conversation with Burman because it is so clear and concise. See also the Fifth Meditation, the Second Replies, and the Seventh Replies (CSM II: 48, 100, 104, 309; AT VII: 69-70, 140,145-146, 460).

In light of this distinction between temporary and ongoing knowledge we can better understand the conflict Descartes sets up at the beginning of the Third Meditation (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 35-36). By vacillating between certainty about his clear and distinct ideas while he is focusing on them, and uncertainty about his clear and distinct ideas while he is focusing on God's omnipotence, Descartes demonstrates that his clear and distinct ideas give him real knowledge, but so far only very temporary knowledge, *cognitio*. If he could, however, disarm the skeptical scenario of a deceiving God, then he would not have cause to doubt his clear and distinct perceptions even when he was no longer specifically attending to them. Thus he would not have to attend to them all of the time in order to be certain of them. Because this doubt only creeps in when he is not attending to his clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes refers to it as "very slight" and "metaphysical" (ibid.). Even though the doubt is slight, however, we have seen that it prevents him from having ongoing knowledge. For this reason Descartes resolves, as soon as possible to determine whether there is a God and whether or not he could be a deceiver (ibid.).

On this interpretation, we still need to prove the existence of God in order to have stable and lasting knowledge of even the simplest clear and distinct perceptions. Furthermore, we can see that by doubting all former beliefs as a class, or doubting the class of all of our most evident perceptions, it is possible for us to doubt even our most certain piece of knowledge, that we exist, as long as it is only one of a class and outside our mental vision. According to this interpretation, the argument for God will not be circular because, as we have seen, our clear and distinct perceptions cannot be called into doubt by the deceiving God skeptical scenario so long as they are clearly and distinctly perceived. So, we can prove the existence of a non-deceiving God in an

argument that we carefully attend to, and then once the proof is complete, we will have dissolved the skeptical scenario so that it can no longer cause us to doubt.

It will be natural to object that God's guarantee is not really necessary just for the stability of knowledge, for, even though we cannot always keep our attention on a proposition so as to always clearly and distinctly perceive it, nevertheless we can remember that we once clearly and distinctly perceived it. We have seen from the Second Replies that for very simple clear and distinct perceptions, this might work because as soon as we remember them individually, we would clearly and distinctly perceive their truth (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145-146). Descartes, however, thinks that memory cannot be sufficient for *scientia* in the cases where we only remember the conclusion of an argument, unless we know that God exists and is not a deceiver. In both the Fifth Meditation and the Second Replies, Descartes explains that when we are no longer attending to the arguments which we once clearly and distinctly perceived, then we are susceptible to doubts about those conclusions (CSM II: 48, 104; AT VII: 69, 146).[148] Similarly, the deceiving God scenario can make us doubt our simple clear and distinct perceptions when they are not thought of individually, and therefore the

[148] Descartes may be making this same point in the Seventh Replies, where he says to Bourdin,

> …when, as often happens, we are not attending to any truth in this way [very clearly], then even though we remember that we have previously perceived many things very clearly, nevertheless there will be nothing which we may not justly doubt so long as we do not know (*nesciamus*) that whatever we clearly perceive is true. (CSM II: 309; AT VII: 460)

Descartes, however, does not mention God here, and therefore he may be saying only that once we know the C&D Rule as it was argued for in the Third Meditation prior to the proof of God, then our clear and distinct perceptions may be justly doubted. Descartes goes on to say:

> From the fact that at one point I said that there was nothing that we might not doubt – namely in the First Meditation, in which I was supposing that I was not attending to anything that I clearly perceived – he [Bourdin] draws the conclusion that I am unable to know anything certain, even in the following Meditations. (ibid.)

The context leaves it ambiguous whether Descartes means to imply that knowledge of God is required before doubt is unjustified, because Descartes's point of contrast in this passage is the ignorance of the First Meditation. If Descartes is anticipating a circularity objection, then he might be offering the Third Meditation C&D Rule as precluding doubt rather than God's guarantee.

memory that there were many simple propositions that were once perceived clearly and distinctly will not count as *scientia* for Descartes.

According to Descartes, even though we remember that we clearly and distinctly perceived something, if we are not at present attending to it, the deceiving God scenario can give us cause for doubt. I think this claim is plausible. The hypothesis of an omnipotent being deceiving us in any way he can is a powerful skeptical scenario. If we focus on his omnipotence, it seems to be within his power to deceive us about anything, including clear and distinct perceptions. We would have to have clearly in mind the specific reasons why a thing could not be false in order to be certain that such a powerful being could not make it false. That is why we could doubt something even though we remember that we clearly and distinctly perceived it. If we remember only that we once clearly and distinctly perceived it, but no longer remember why it could not be false, then such a powerful doubt as the evil demon/deceiving God scenario causes us to doubt even what we remember having been certain of.

I am not claiming that the skeptical scenario causes us to doubt the veracity or reliability of our memory. The deceiving God scenario is the hypothesis that our faculty of understanding, that is, of clear and distinct perception, tends toward error, not that our faculty of memory tends toward error. Although Descartes says that doubt enters when we rely on the memory of clear and distinct perceptions, the doubt does not appear to be aimed at the faculty of memory but at the perception.

It is tempting to shift the location of the error from the faculty of clear and distinct perception to the faculty of memory both in light of the fact that Descartes emphasizes doubt about remembered clear and distinct perceptions, and the fact that he has already given a transcendental argument for the C&D Rule at the beginning of the

Third Meditation and so does not seem to need God to validate the rule.[149] Nevertheless, this "memory answer" to the Cartesian Circle is, on close examination not very appealing.[150] The texts seem to show that Descartes is not concerned about the reliability of the faculty of memory, and the memory answer leads to its own sort of circularity.[151] Descartes thinks the skeptical scenario makes us doubt the faculty of clear and distinct perception itself, not just our memory of what we perceived (CSM II: 14, 25, 48, 104; AT VII: 21, 36, 70, 146).

I am also not claiming that God changes the facts around after we have stopped clearly and distinctly perceived something.[152] Although this might be in the domain of a deceiving God, such a scenario would not really constitute a doubt about the faculty of clear and distinct perception. We would still know that what we once perceived clearly and distinctly was true at the time that we perceived it. Descartes is questioning whether his faculties tend toward error, and that means he doubts the truth of the original perception at the time it was perceived, and not just whether the perception continues to be true.

Here is the conundrum. If the possibility of a deceiving God is a reason for doubting the truth of our remembered clear and distinct perceptions, it sounds as though the certainty that we have while we are presently clearly and distinctly

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[149] See Chapter Four.

[150] Willis Doney has argued in "The Cartesian Circle" that rather than doubting his faculty of reason, Descartes only doubts his faculty of memory. This solution is sometimes referred to by critics as "the memory answer".

[151] That the problem for Descartes does not lie in the reliability of my memory has been argued by many authors including Frankfurt (MCC and DDD Ch. 14), Williams (191-198), Cottingham (Descartes 71, 77-78 n. 25), and Curley (102-104). There is a passage in the Conversation with Burman that is usually cited as evidence that Descartes is not concerned with the possibility that memory might not be reliable (CSMK III: 334; AT V:148). I will return to some of the problems with the memory answer later in this chapter.

[152] Émile Bréhier argues for this interpretation (200).

perceiving something is simply stubbornly unjustified. If the deceiving God scenario gives us a legitimate reason (before we have proven the existence of a non-deceiving God) to doubt our clear and distinct perceptions when we are not attending to them, why should it not be cause for us to doubt our clear and distinct perceptions when we are attending to them?

One motivation for thinking that any certainty about present clear and distinct perceptions is unjustified is the worry that the only reason we cannot doubt our clear and distinct perceptions is that we are unable to think about the deceiving God scenario at the same time as we are having a clear and distinct perception. If this interpretation were correct, clear and distinct perception would indeed be only subjectively certain.[153]

The certainty that we have about our clear and distinct perceptions would not be a very useful sort of certainty if we could only have it by failing to consider a relevant skeptical scenario. This is reason by itself to look for a more charitable interpretation of Descartes. Moreover, Descartes gives no reason (before the proof of the existence of a non-deceiving God) why we should not be able to consider the deceiving God scenario at the same time as we are attending clearly and distinctly to some proposition. In the Third Meditation when Descartes turns his mind to those things he clearly perceives, he asserts that not even God could deceive him, indicating that he is considering the possibility.

One reason why someone might consider certainty about present clear and distinct perceptions stubbornly unjustified is because they think that if the possibility of

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[153] This is Gewirth's position (CC 374). [154] See also the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 53; AT VII: 77), the Sixth Replies (CSM II: 289; AT VII: 428), Principles Part I, §§5, 13, and 30 (CSM I: 194, 197, 203; AT VIII A: 6, 9-10, 16), and the letter to Regius, 24 May 1640 (CSMK III: 147; AT III: 64-65).

a deceiving God is a legitimate reason for doubt at all, then it is a legitimate reason all the time. In the Seventh Replies, however, Descartes tells Bourdin that he should not think that the fact that the scenario causes us to doubt at one time and not at another, implies that it was not a legitimate reason for doubt (CSM II: 309; AT VII: 460). Descartes says that something's being a legitimate reason for doubt, does not imply that the doubt must be permanent or unanswerable. The deceiving God scenario causes us to doubt only when we do not at the moment perceive the reasons which make it impossible for the remembered clear and distinct perception to be false. The deceiving God scenario presents an unusually strong reason for doubting. Only a present clear and distinct perception of some truth is powerful enough to overcome the thought that God could make us wrong about that fact. Just the fact that the scenario can cause us to doubt some of the time is enough for Descartes to consider it a legitimate reason for doubt until proven false.

The main reason that I think certainty about present clear and distinct perceptions prior to the proof of God's existence is not stubbornly unjustified depends on my strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception. That is, I think Descartes understands clear and distinct perception in such a way that it does not make sense that actual clear and distinct perceptions could be false. That is the reason why, when we are presently having a clear and distinct perception, we cannot doubt its truth.

If I am right that Descartes thinks clear and distinct perceptions cannot be false, then the doubt that the deceiving God scenario poses is not really a doubt about whether clear and distinct perceptions are true. I would like to suggest that it is a doubt about whether the clear and distinct perceptions that we are not presently attending to were really clear and distinct perceptions at all. The worry is not that we might be

misremembering, but that what we remember as clear and distinct perceptions might have merely seemed clear and distinct at the time. If humans were created by a deceiver, then even the very best perceptions our faculties can produce are erroneous. If they are erroneous then they were never clearly and distinctly perceived; they only seemed to be. If we remember finding an idea very clear and distinct but no longer remember why, then we cannot be sure that we were not actually making an error at the time that we thought we clearly and distinctly perceived it. That is why other considerations can creep in to make us doubt what we remember having perceived very clearly and distinctly.

This is a doubt that can only enter when our perceptions are not actually clear and distinct. A genuinely clear and distinct perception at the time we are having it is self-verifying. When we clearly and distinctly perceive something, we see that deceiving God or no, we cannot be mistaken about this. So long as we have some reason, however, for doubting our faculty as a whole, whatever is not being clearly and distinctly perceived at the moment can be doubted. The only way to verify that it was a genuine clear and distinct perception is to clearly and distinctly perceive it again.

The text of the Meditations supports reading Descartes's doubt as a doubt about whether his clear and distinct perceptions were genuinely clear and distinct. In the Third Meditation he says, "[P]erhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36 emphasis added). In the Fifth Meditation Descartes says,

> For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely when I remember that there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain (*pro*

> *veris & certis habuisse*), but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false." (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70 emphasis added)

Descartes is not expressing the worry that what we actually clearly and distinctly perceive might be false. Rather, he is expressing the worry that we might be made so that we mistakenly believe falsehoods that seem like evident truths, and thereby fail to actually clearly and distinctly perceive anything. That is why instead of suggesting that what is evident is at the same time false, he suggests that what seems evident may be false, and Descartes is fairly consistent in using this sort of locution.[154]

In order to explain the way that the deceiving God makes us go wrong, Descartes employs an analogy to times when he has regarded things as certain but later been made to realize those conclusions were false. If this is how the deceiving God deceives us, then God does not make actually certain propositions false, but rather, he makes us err so that we take to be certain what is not certain. In this analogy, we see that the mistaken belief is not indistinguishable from genuinely certain truths, because later arguments lead Descartes to be able to recognize his mistake. Similarly, if the deceiving God makes us go wrong it is by making us so that we accept as clear and distinct, perceptions that are not clear and distinct. The deceiving God does not make us go wrong about actually clear and distinct perceptions because those involve no error of our faculties at all. Thus, the deceiving God does not make us go wrong by making necessary truths false, rather, he makes us so that we fail to distinguish necessary truths from falsehoods.

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[154] See also the Sixth Meditation (CSM II: 53; AT VII: 77), the Sixth Replies (CSM II: 289; AT VII: 428), Principles Part I, §§5, 13, and 30 (CSM I: 194, 197, 203; AT VIII A: 6, 9-10, 16), and the letter to Regius, 24 May 1640 (CSMK III: 147; AT III: 64-65).

In the First Meditation Descartes says, "…[S]ince I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable?" (CSM II: 14; AT VII: 21; emphasis added). To some readers it may seem that in this passage Descartes is raising the possibility that even his clear and distinct perceptions are false, just as the perceptions of others are frequently false even though they claim they have perfect knowledge. We must keep in mind, however, that he is not considering whether actual perfect knowledge could be false. He is considering the fact that people sometimes go wrong when they judge their beliefs to be perfect knowledge. He raises the possibility that he too has misjudged in this way and taken something for perfect knowledge which was not perfect knowledge. For Descartes, clear and distinct perception is perfect knowledge, and if he goes wrong when he adds two and three, then he does not have perfect knowledge nor is he clearly and distinctly perceiving the sum of two and three; at best he thinks he is. It is to prevent just this kind of mistake that he learns to distinguish clear and distinct perceptions from the obscure and confused ones which we unjustifiably take for perfect knowledge.

There are of course other ways of interpreting the passages I have quoted. The passages can still be read so that the doubt is that actual clear and distinct perceptions are false. Once we understand, however, what makes clear and distinct perception so special, it becomes hard to describe a scenario, even with a deceiving God, on which actual clear and distinct perceptions are false. Their falsity cannot consist in a failure of correspondence to reality, because the perceptions also constitute reality. Nor does Descartes talk of clear and distinct perceptions as failing to correspond to reality. After

the introduction of the C&D Rule in the Third Meditation, Descartes frames doubt about clear and distinct perception as doubt about how we are made and the reliability of our faculties. If there is no God or if God is a deceiver, then we might have been made so that we are prone to error even in the things that seem most evident. If we make errors about things that seem evident, that implies that they are not in fact evident and are not in fact clearly and distinctly perceived.[155]

Finally, confidence in our present clear and distinct perceptions may still seem unjustified if we think that God could make necessary truths false and make possible even what we clearly and distinctly perceive to be impossible (or vice versa). Margaret Wilson objects to the interpretation I am advocating, namely, that on Descartes's view it is impossible for God to make false what we clearly and distinctly perceive must be true, because, Wilson says, it would place an unacceptable limitation on God's power (Wilson 134). In Chapter Four I address this concern by arguing that even though God could change the necessary truths or even make contradictory propositions true, he

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[155] In the Seventh Set of Objections with Replies, Descartes says that someone entertaining the First Meditation doubt about whether he is dreaming or awake should not infer that, "nothing can be certain and evident to him, but things can only seem or appear so.… I would like people to remember… that if something is clearly and distinctly perceived, then no matter who the perceiver is, it is true, and does not merely seem or appear to be true" (CSM II: 348; At VII: 511). Thus, even when we are in the grip of First Meditation doubts, if something is clearly and distinctly perceived, then it does not merely seem true, but rather it is known with certainty to be true. In the secondary literature, the deceiving God doubt is frequently framed as a doubt that our clear and distinct ideas might be false or that God might make the eternal truths false. See for instance, Wilson (135) and Frankfurt (DDM 166). Newman and Nelson come close to recognizing the point that I am trying to make. They say, "Descartes invites us to entertain, not that a powerful demon sees to it that 2+3=5 is *made false*, or *made no longer true*, nor that we are *made to forget*, but that our cognitive faculties have, by whatever means, been *made flawed*" (CCC 376-377). From the fact, however, that the flaw is in our faculties and not in the falsity of what can be clearly and distinctly perceived, Newman and Nelson do not draw the conclusion that whatever is genuinely clearly and distinctly perceived must be true. They acknowledge the assent compelling character of clear and distinct perception, but they do not come out and say that clear and distinct perception, without God's guarantee, establishes truth. Thus, they leave it a puzzle exactly how our flawed faculties might lead us into error about clear and distinct perceptions.

cannot make them false while we are clearly and distinctly perceiving them to be true since this would be incompatible with the fact of our clear and distinct perceptions.

My solution of the Cartesian Circle and my interpretation of how the evil demon/deceiving God scenario is supposed to make us doubt our clear and distinct perceptions appears to be vulnerable to a couple of objections that are leveled against the "memory answer" to the Cartesian Circle. I will therefore raise and respond to those objections.

Frankfurt argues against the interpretation that it is the reliability of memory that is called into doubt by the deceiving God scenario, saying that this interpretation implies that after the proof of God, memory would be infallible (MCC 506-507). If ignorance in God causes us to doubt our memory, then in order for knowledge of God to erase the doubt, God would have to guarantee the reliability of our memory. It would be ridiculous, however, to claim that God has given humans infallible memory. Memory is known to be fallible, even if God exists and is not a deceiver. If it were a doubt about the reliability of memory that undermined certainty about past clear and distinct perceptions, and memory continues to be unreliable after the proof of God, then proving the existence and veracity of God does not make our past clear and distinct perceptions certain.

A similar objection can be raised against my own interpretation. Even if we know that God exists and is not a deceiver, we cannot always know that our past clear and distinct perceptions were genuinely clear and distinct and not just apparently clear and distinct. There will be times when we make mistakes and think that we see something evidently when we do not. Therefore, whenever we are not presently clearly and distinctly perceiving something, we can doubt it, even without having to appeal to a

deceiving God. Proving that God is not a deceiver will not rescue us from a doubt about whether our remembered clear and distinct perceptions were genuinely clear and distinct.

Descartes acknowledges that it frequently happens that people think they see something very evidently, but they are wrong. The possibility of error does not disappear when it is proven that God is not a deceiver. This is a problem Descartes takes seriously, and he dedicates the Fourth Meditation to explaining the source of human error. Nevertheless, the fact that people are mistaken, even when they think they perceive something very clearly, does not undermine the reliability of clear and distinct perception for Descartes. He thinks that we can, at least with practice, learn to distinguish genuine clear and distinct perceptions from mistakes.[156] Then we can always avoid error by assenting only to what is clearly and distinctly perceived. At the end of the Fifth Meditation Descartes considers the objection, "that I have in the past regarded as true and certain many things which I afterwards recognized to be false" (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70). With the deceiving God scenario out of the way, and ordinary human error explained in the previous meditation, he thinks the objection is easily answered, saying, "But none of these were things which I clearly and distinctly perceived: I was ignorant of this rule for establishing the truth, and believed these

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[156] In the Seventh Set of Objections with Replies, Descartes says, "[I]t requires some care to make a proper distinction between what is clearly and distinctly perceived and what merely seems or appears to be…" (CSM II: 310; AT VII: 461-462), and, "There are… few people who correctly distinguish between what they in fact perceive [clearly and distinctly] and what they think they perceive [clearly and distinctly]; for not many people are accustomed to clear and distinct perceptions" (CSM II: 348; AT VII: 511). Since Descartes claims to have provided by example in the Meditations a method for determining whether or not we are deceived when we think we perceive something clearly and distinctly (Fifth Replies, CSM II: 250; AT VII: 362), we can infer that Descartes thinks that by carefully following the Meditations people can learn to distinguish genuine clear and distinct perceptions from merely apparent ones.

things for other reasons which I later discovered to be less reliable" (CSM II: 48-49; AT VII: 70). It is only when knowledge of God is combined with the ability to distinguish clear and distinct perceptions from perceptions that only appear certain, that we can be confident in what we remember clearly and distinctly perceiving.

The worry that comes from the deceiving God scenario is that if we were created so as to be prone to frequent error, then perceptions might seem clear and distinct which are not clear and distinct. After we have proven that God exists and is not a deceiver, a doubt about the authenticity of our clear and distinct perceptions can no longer be formulated as a worry that we were made so as to go wrong. A benevolent God would not make us so that we went wrong when we used our faculties correctly. After the proof of God, the doubt can at best be motivated by remembering past times when we have been mistaken. Descartes, however, thinks that we can examine all of our past mistakes and see that they are distinguishable from genuine clear and distinct perceptions. Descartes thinks that all reasons for doubting the authenticity of remembered clear and distinct perceptions have been eliminated. Descartes does not think that we should ever have the experience of perceiving something clearly and distinctly and then later discovering that we are wrong. Another objection that Frankfurt brings against the memory answer is that whenever we want to rely on our memory, in addition to the thing we are remembering, we should also need to hold in our minds the proof of God (MCC 508-509). The reason that we should always have to hold it in our minds is that the proof cannot be used to validate the use of memory if the conclusion of the proof is merely remembered rather than clearly and distinctly perceived. To validate the use of memory by relying on memory would be to argue in a new circle. It is too difficult to have this proof in mind all the time we are remembering

things. According to Frankfurt, the memory answer requires either an "intellectual juggling act" or a new fallacy of circularity (MCC 509).

The same objection might apply to my own interpretation. If we cannot know whether those things that we recall clearly and distinctly perceiving were actually clearly and distinctly perceived, it would appear to be no help that we also recall having clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and is not a deceiver. It seems we should have to clearly and distinctly perceive that God exists and is not a deceiver every time we want to rely on a remembered clear and distinct perception, in order to be assured that our faculty of clear and distinct perception is not systematically prone to error.

I do not think it is correct to say that we should need to clearly and distinctly perceive the proof that God exists and is not a deceiver every time we rely on our memory of what was clearly and distinctly perceived. At most, we need to remember the proof of God when the deceiving God scenario occurs to us. The reason is that the only thing that prevents remembered clear and distinct perceptions from being *scientia* is the fact that we can be made to doubt them. In other words, the role of the proof of God for Descartes is not to validate what would otherwise be invalid conclusions. What the proof of God does is eliminate our most powerful reason for doubting. It rules out the evil demon/deceiving God scenario, so that that particular reason for doubting our faculties will no longer arise and will no longer get in the way of *scientia*. We only need to recall the proof during those times when doubt arises about our clear and distinct perceptions.

Even if we do only need to recall the proof of God at those times when we can doubt our clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes thinks that we cannot doubt them

again so long as we remember the conclusion that God exists and is not a deceiver and that all of our clear and distinct perceptions are true. Descartes thinks that if we have proven the existence of God just once, after that we can rely on the memory of the conclusions of arguments. He thinks we do not need to remember the proof of God every time we rely on remembered clear and distinct perceptions, only the conclusion of that proof.[157] Descartes is presumably thinking the deceiving God scenario will not cause us to doubt anymore because we remember that it has been answered. We remember that God cannot be a deceiver, and therefore even remembered clear and distinct perceptions can be trusted.

Can we not reapply the deceiving God doubt to the memory of the proof that God exists and is not a deceiver? After all, is it not possible that the deceiving God has made us so prone to error that despite our memory of clearly and distinctly proving that God exists, it was in fact not clearly and distinctly perceived? It seems as though remembering the conclusion alone will not be enough to prevent us from reapplying the deceiving God doubt to the proof of God. Then, either a new circle arises, or we have to remember the whole proof to keep this doubt at bay.

Oddly, Descartes does not seem worried about the possibility of the doubt recurring when we merely remember the proof of God. Descartes has two responses available to give the skeptic who wants to reapply the deceiving God doubt to the remembered conclusion of the argument proving God's existence. For both responses, there is some evidence that Descartes endorsed them. Nevertheless, we might wish that Descartes had been more explicit both in recognizing the problem and endorsing one or

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[157] See the Fifth Meditation (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70) and the Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640 (CSMK III: 147; AT III: 65).

both of these solutions. I think these solutions might be taken separately, and so I will try to present them that way first, but they work best and most naturally together and the evidence that Descartes would endorse the second answer seems also to be evidence that he would endorse the first.

The first answer Descartes has available is to say that we do not rely on the memory of the conclusion alone, but rather, when the doubt arises, we think of the whole proof that God exists and is not a deceiver. Although the proofs of God may seem complex at first, we can rehearse one until we can recall it all at once instead of merely remembering the conclusion.[158] There is textual evidence that in fact, Descartes did think that the ontological argument for the existence of God could be grasped all at once. In the Fifth Meditation, after proving the existence of God, Descartes says,

> For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?
>
> Although it needed close attention for me to perceive this, I am now just as certain of it as I am of everything else which appears most certain. (CSM II: 47-48; AT VII: 69).

If God's existence becomes self-evident and as certain as anything else, the implication is that it is among the propositions that are clearly and distinctly perceived to be true the moment they are thought of (CSM II: 104; AT VII: 145). In the Second Replies (in the arguments arranged in geometrical fashion) Descartes says that if we spend enough time and effort considering it, we can understand the ontological proof of God's existence all at once and not as the conclusion of an argument:

> …I ask my readers to spend a great deal of time and effort on contemplating the nature of the supremely perfect being. Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain

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[158] Anthony Kenny briefly argues that Descartes does not think his proofs of God depend on memory (Descartes 189).

> possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a formal argument, will make them realize that God exists; and this will eventually be just as self-evident to them as the fact that the number two is even or that three is odd, and so on. For there are certain truths which some people find self-evident, while others come to understand them only by means of a formal argument. (CSM II: 115; AT VII: 163)

Here Descartes calls knowledge of God's existence self-evident and says that it does not necessarily require a formal argument.[159] That God is not a deceiver should be equally evident from contemplating his nature, since the fact that the concept or essence of God includes benevolence or veracity should be at least as evident as that it includes existence.[160] Thus, if we follow Descartes's advice here, we can quite easily think of the answer to the deceiving God doubt whenever it arises.

Some authors have suggested that the reason the deceiving God doubt cannot arise again is that the reason for doubt cannot itself be clearly and distinctly perceived or does not meet a requirement of reasonableness.[161] That is, the doubt might occur to us, but it would not be allowed to undermine our confidence in our clear and distinct perceptions unless the deceiving God scenario could be clearly and distinctly

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[159] The Conversation with Burman, might also be seen as evidence for this sort of solution, where, in response to the accusation of circularity, Descartes insists that the proof of God's existence can be grasped all at once in its entirety (CSMK III: 335; AT V: 149; Cottingham Conversation 7). The context of this comment, however, appears to be a defense of our ability to grasp the proof for the first time, rather than our ability to subsequently remember the proof.

[160] See Descartes's own argument in the Third Meditation that God is not a deceiver (CSM II: 35; AT VII: 52).

Newman and Nelson also argue that not only does Descartes think of God's existence as self-evident, but also, that God, "is veracious, that everything else depends on him, and that the guarantees the C&D Rule" (CCC 389). In support of this interpretation they cite a letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641, where Descartes says that the skeptics would have known that whatever is clearly understood is true if they had had a sufficient acquaintance with God (Newman and Nelson ibid; CSMK III: 196; AT III: 433). Newman and Nelson infer, "where one has a *readily accessible* cognition of God that is *due* and *sufficient* to resist hyperbolic doubt, it conceptually contains a recognition of the divine guarantee of the C&D Rule" (CCC 389).

[161] See for instance, Frankfurt (DDM 175), Gewirth (CC 389-393 and CCR 681-683), and Newman and Nelson (CCC 390-391).

understood to be possible. The proof of God shows however, that the deceiving God scenario is not possible, and so that reason for doubt will never meet the standard of clarity and distinctness. In other words, this second solution shifts the burden of proof to the skeptic. We shall not let our certainty be undermined until the skeptic meets his burden, and he cannot meet it.

The following passage from the Second Replies might be taken as evidence that Descartes thought the deceiving God doubt could not be reapplied because it did not meet a necessary requirement of conceivability:

> Hence you see that once we have become aware that God exists it is necessary for us to imagine that he is a deceiver if we wish to cast doubt on what we clearly and distinctly perceive. And since it is impossible to imagine that he is a deceiver, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain. (CSM II: 103; AT VII: 144)

While prior to the proof of God, Descartes thought that the deceiving God scenario could be imagined and therefore could cause us to doubt, after the proof of God, Descartes thinks the scenario can no longer be imagined and therefore can no longer cause us to doubt. Newman and Nelson cite in support of this interpretation a letter to Voetius, May 1643, where Descartes says that the idea of a deceiving God "implies a conceptual contradiction – that is, it cannot be conceived" (CSMK III: 222; AT VIII B: 60).

As I said earlier, I think these two responses work best when they are combined. The first response, claiming that the existence and veracity of God can be self-evident, supports the second response, explaining why the deceiving God scenario can no longer be coherently imagined by the skeptic. The first answer alone, allows that the skeptical scenario might actually continue to cause us doubt, so that we might be continually

raising and answering the same doubt over and over. The second answer alone, by shifting the burden of proof to the skeptic, claims that the doubt should not continue to bother us – for lack of proper credentials, but does not require that we automatically remember why it lacks proper credentials. Only by remembering the proof of God do we remember why the skeptic cannot meet his burden of proof. Taking these two answers together, on the other hand, we see how Descartes might think that the deceiving God scenario never actually causes us to doubt. If as soon as we consider the skeptical scenario, we recognize it as an incoherent and involving a contradiction, then while we can think about it, it can never make us doubt. Moreover, it seems most natural to take these two answers together since the reason that the skeptical scenario does not meet a requirement of clarity and distinctness or conceivability is the same reason that the existence and veracity of God is self-evident, namely, that both existence and freedom from defect (such as deceptiveness) belong to the very concept of God.

I say that Descartes has these responses available to him, but the textual evidence is strong that the reapplication of the skeptical scenario to the proof of God either did not occur to Descartes or did not appear threatening enough to consider explicitly. While, indeed, there are places where Descartes describes knowledge of God's existence as self-evident, he does not seem concerned to show that that self-evidence will close the possibility of regress or circularity left open by a mere memory of the conclusion. Let us recall the following passage from the Fifth Meditation:

> Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it….For what objections can now be raised? That

> the way I am made makes me prone to frequent error? But I now know that I am incapable of error in those cases where my understanding is transparently clear. (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70)

Descartes is explicitly claiming that it is not necessary to remember the whole argument, but only the conclusion. Likewise in a letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, Descartes says that we need only clearly perceive the proof of God once, and provided that we remember the conclusion, even if we no longer remember the reasons for it, thereafter we have *scientia* (CSMK III: 147; AT III: 65). This seems to undermine the first answer presented above, along with the combined answer. At any rate, Descartes does not seem to think it is necessary for the existence of God to be self-evident in order for his argument to avoid circularity.

The second answer is not entirely ruled out by these passages, but it is also not an answer he gives there. He does not say that the skeptical doubt cannot be raised again because it cannot be formulated clearly and distinctly. He simply says that he now knows he is incapable of error in those cases where his understanding is clear. Descartes is apparently thinking that our newly gained confidence in remembered clear and distinct perceptions protects against the deceiving God doubt arising again. Remembered clear and distinct perceptions are promoted to *scientia* once we have clearly and distinctly perceived the proof of God. For Descartes that means that the memory of a clear and distinct perception is an adequate weapon against the recurrence of the deceiving God doubt. It is not obvious, however, that we should not be able to revisit the same doubt, and having done so, only another clear and distinct perception that God exists and is not a deceiver would put it to rest. Moreover, so long as we can forget the clearly and distinctly perceived reasons why God must exist and cannot be a deceiver, the doubt might reoccur over and over.

This is certainly a weak point in Descartes's defense against the charge of circularity. Nevertheless, I am not inclined to conclude that Descartes's argument is at bottom circular because he did have answers to this charge available to him. I think the textual evidence cited above is sufficient to show that he would have happily agreed to both answers, had he fully recognized the weight of the problem. Indeed, it may be precisely because the existence of God is self-evident to Descartes that he fails to fully press the skeptical scenario. Descartes himself would not think of the skeptical scenario without thinking of it as incoherent in light of God's necessary existence and veracity. Perhaps that causes Descartes to overlook the fact that anyone who finds the proof of God's existence difficult to remember could raise against the proof the same skeptical scenario that it was designed to answer.

I have been arguing so far that Descartes was not guilty of circularity because he does not doubt present clear and distinct perceptions, only ones that he is no longer attending to. Moreover, I have been arguing that he does not doubt this latter class of perceptions insofar as he thinks they are really clear and distinct perceptions, but rather, he doubts whether they are clear and distinct perceptions at all. This second thesis is similar to, but not the same as the memory answer, and I have offered responses to objections that might be leveled against the interpretation on the basis of its similarity to the memory answer. If I am right, and Descartes does not actually doubt his clear and distinct perceptions, then there is no circularity involved in proving the existence of God by relying on a clearly and distinctly perceived argument with clearly and distinctly perceived premises. The charge of circularity also arises, however, because Descartes seems to draw the conclusion from his proof that God exists and is not a

deceiver, that all of his clear and distinct ideas are true (the C&D Rule). I would like to say something briefly about this part of the supposed circle.

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes says, "Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true" (CSM II: 48; AT VII: 70). He appears to claim that the C&D Rule follows from the fact that God exists and is not a deceiver, but there is a significant amount of arguing that has gone before that puts this instance of the C&D Rule in perspective. Descartes has just finished explaining in the paragraph before that the only clear and distinct perceptions that cannot be doubted are those that we no longer remember the arguments for. The proof of God is just one piece in an argument for the C&D Rule that began with the transcendental argument of the Third Meditation and included the explanation of human error in the Fourth Meditation.

In the Second Replies, Descartes also seems to argue that the C& D Rule can be reached by way of the argument that God exists and is not a deceiver. He concludes by saying,

> Hence you see that once we have become aware that God exists it is necessary for us to imagine that he is a deceiver if we wish to cast doubt on what we clearly and distinctly perceive. And since it is impossible to imagine that he is a deceiver, whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain. (CSM II: 103; AT VII: 144)

This passage, however, does not indicate one way or the other what the scope is of the doubt that can be brought against clear and distinct perceptions by imagining that God is a deceiver. When we look more widely, to the rest of the Second Replies, for context,

we find that Descartes makes just the distinctions necessary to indicate that God's guarantee is only required for clear and distinct perceptions that are not attended to. Earlier in the reply, he explains, "…when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge (*scientia*) of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them" (CSM II: 100; AT VII: 140). Later in the reply the distinction is again made between simple truths that cannot be thought of without believing they are true and truths which are known by way of argument and whose arguments may later be forgotten, and only with respect to the second class does Descartes say that certainty requires knowledge that God gave us an intellectual faculty which tends toward the truth (CSM II: 104-105; AT VII: 145-146).

What about the places where Descartes claims that <u>all</u> knowledge depends on God? If all knowledge depends on God, it will be objected, then neither the C&D Rule nor individual clear and distinct perceptions can be known until after the existence of God is proven. Then, naturally, the claim that all of our clear and distinct perceptions are true will be the conclusion of, and not the premise of, the proof of God's existence.

In the Fifth Meditation Descartes says, "Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge (*scientia*) depends uniquely on my awareness (*cognitione*) of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge (*perfecte scire*) about anything else until I became aware of him (CSM II: 49; AT VII: 71). Here, however, with the phrase "perfect knowledge," Descartes leaves room for the temporary knowledge, *cognitio*, to be had prior to awareness of God. In the Seventh Replies, Descartes makes a similar claim, beginning, "Again, until we know that God exists, we have reason to doubt everything…" but this time, in an attempt to make plainer to his

objector what can and cannot be known, he follows the claim, saying, "(i.e. everything such that we do not have a clear perception of it before our minds, as I have often explained)" (CSM II: 373; AT VII: 546). In the Third Meditation, Descartes does say, "For if I do not know (*ignoratâ*) this, it seems that I can never be quite certain of anything else" (CSM II: 25; AT VII: 36). This is one of Descartes's more unequivocal statements of the dependence of knowledge on God. If this statement stood alone, and Descartes had not so frequently emphasized that the scope of the deceiving God doubt was limited to those clear and distinct perceptions that are not presently attended to, then it would tend to show that Descartes really did think that nothing could be certain before knowledge of God's existence. With the preponderance of evidence limiting the role that knowledge of God plays, however, this statement seems to be nothing more than a rhetorically pleasing moment of piety.

## WHY WE NEED TO PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AFTER THE TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT

In Chapter Four I argued that early in the Third Meditation, prior to the proof of God's existence, Descartes offers a transcendental argument for the C&D Rule. One problem for interpreting this passage as a transcendental argument is that a successful transcendental argument for the C&D Rule would mean that we could have knowledge of our clear and distinct perceptions without proving that God exists and is not a deceiver. Yet, Descartes clearly thinks that the possibility of a deceiving God poses an important challenge to the possibility of knowledge. If Descartes thinks he has proved the C&D Rule, why does he see room for a further doubt?

The argument for the C&D Rule avoids the problem of the criterion because, as a transcendental argument, it changes the order of the steps, in this one instance making the criterion (the C&D Rule) into the conclusion, and the conclusion (I am a thinking thing) into the criterion. Once the rule is established, however, it will be applied in an ordinary fashion as a criterion for the certainty of other clear and distinct perceptions. A persistent skeptic will question any further application of the C&D Rule as a criterion.

The persistent skeptic will try his usual strategy again as soon as Descartes tries to apply the C&D Rule. Suppose Descartes argues that he can be certain that a square has four sides. The skeptic will ask how he knows, and he will give the C&D Rule for a criterion. The skeptic argues that God may be a deceiver and deceive Descartes even when he perceives things very clearly and distinctly in which case his criterion would not be reliable.

Descartes could simply defend his criterion and say that he had already proven that even God could not deceive him about things he perceives very clearly and distinctly. In Chapter Four I offered one reason why Descartes does not choose this strategy. A second reason Descartes does not want to continue to use the transcendental argument as a reply to the deceiving God scenario is that when we are no longer considering or no longer recall the transcendental argument for the C&D rule, it can then be brought into doubt again by the deceiving God argument. While it might be possible to learn the transcendental argument and recall it whenever the deceiving God scenario is raised, this strategy never invalidates the deceiving God scenario, it just goes around it. By relying on the transcendental argument alone, we leave intact the possibility that God is a deceiver, and thereby leave intact a powerful

skeptical scenario which can cause us to doubt. The door to doubt has been left open just a crack, and when we are not vigilant it may creep back in. For Descartes, this crack prevents us from considering our knowledge to be *scientia.* Until the door to doubt can be closed, Descartes classifies our knowledge as mere *cognitio.* By proving that God exists and is not a deceiver, on Descartes attacks the deceiving God scenario directly, and proves that the scenario itself is incoherent and cannot be clearly conceived without a contradiction. By undermining the deceiving God scenario, Descartes has cleared the way for stable and lasting knowledge that can never be doubted. Only with the proof that God exists and is not deceiver is the door to the doubt of our clear and distinct perceptions completely closed.

For these reasons, we can see that Descartes has good reason to want to prove the existence of God as soon as possible. The transcendental argument is a stepping-stone along his path to achieving *scientia.* It gets us to knowledge of our clear and distinct perceptions, but that knowledge only lasts for the time that we are clearly and distinctly perceiving the item in question. Furthermore, as I argued in Chapter Four, the transcendental argument by itself does not get us to knowledge of the existence of the corporeal world. Before we can get to those things we need to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver.

SUMMARY

Let me review why Descartes's argument for the proof of God's existence and the truth of clear and distinct perceptions is not circular. First, according to the strong interpretation of clear and distinct perception, Descartes thinks that clearly and distinctly perceived propositions are metaphysically certain, even prior to the proof of

God's existence. When these propositions are no longer being clearly and distinctly perceived, they can be called into doubt by the hypothesis that we have been made so that our rational faculty tends toward error. Although we remember having clearly and distinctly perceived them, we can doubt whether they were genuinely clear and distinct and did not just appear clear and distinct. So long as clear and distinct perceptions can come to be doubted in this way, Descartes does not consider them to be true knowledge, or *scientia*. In order to eliminate the reason for doubt, Descartes offers proofs that there is a God and that he is not a deceiver. We can have knowledge of the conclusion because the proofs rely only on premises which are clearly and distinctly perceived and because we attend to the whole proof at once clearly and distinctly. Once we have dissolved the possibility of the skeptical scenario, Descartes supposes it can no longer cause us to doubt those propositions to which we are not carefully attending. We might worry that the skeptical scenario can be reapplied to the conclusion that God exists and is not a deceiver when we no longer recall the argument. Although it is not clear to me that Descartes fully appreciates this possibility, he has an answer available to him. He can say that with sufficient contemplation it becomes self-evident that God must exist and cannot be a deceiver. Then we will not be able to raise a doubt about our creator without instantly realizing that the doubt is incoherent. Therefore, we have no further reason to doubt the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions.

## CONCLUSION

Descartes claims that everything we perceive clearly and distinctly is true. Although this rule is fundamental to Descartes's theory of knowledge, readers from Gassendi and Leibniz onward have complained that unless Descartes can say explicitly what clarity and distinctness is, how we know when our ideas are clear and distinct, and why clear and distinct perception cannot be wrong, then the rule is without meaning. In my dissertation I have shown how Descartes answers these complaints.

In Chapter Two I offer an analysis of clear and distinct perception drawn largely from the definitions Descartes gives in the Principles and examples in the Meditations where Descartes makes his ideas clear and distinct. I argue that we should understand clarity and distinctness as intrinsic norms of perception. I claim that for Descartes a perception is clear when we are paying attention to it and are aware of what it essentially contains, and a perception is distinct when it includes nothing that is not essentially or necessarily connected. Thus clear and distinct perceptions are perceptions of truths about the contents of our own ideas.

I believe many doubts about the usefulness of the Clarity and Distinctness Rule have arisen from the mistaken assumption that in clear and distinct perception, like sense perception, we must be able to establish a correspondence between perception and reality before we can know it to be true. In Chapter Three I argue that Descartes understands sense perception and intellectual perception differently, and whereas sense perception is indirect perception, intellectual perception is direct perception. On Descartes's view, by relying on the intellect instead of the senses, we can have direct perception, not only of our own ideas, but also of a mind-independent reality. This is

possible, I argue, because Descartes endorses a Scholastic doctrine according to which the essences of things have objective being in the intellect. This means that the essences of things and the eternal truths about them are directly accessible to the mind. Because clear and distinct perceptions are direct intellectual perceptions, the same problems of correspondence that arise for sense perception do not arise for clear and distinct perception.

In Chapter Four I argue that in the Third Meditation passage where the Clarity and Distinctness Rule is introduced, Descartes takes himself to be answering the problem of the criterion and offering the Clarity and Distinctness Rule as a criterion of truth. Descartes is able to avoid the threat of regress or circularity in establishing his criterion of truth because he offers a kind of transcendental argument where the criterion is inferred from the first item of certain knowledge instead of inferring the knowledge from the criterion. This description of the argument also explains why Descartes sees knowledge of his own existence as an Archimedean point and first principle which enables him to increase his knowledge.

By offering a systematic account of clear and distinct perception according to which not even a deceiving God could make us go wrong about what we clearly and distinctly perceive, my interpretation also provides a fresh way of thinking about the problem of the Cartesian Circle, which I present in Chapter Five. I interpret the doubt that a deceiving God could make us wrong, not as a doubt that our clear and distinct perceptions might be false, nor as a doubt about the Clarity and Distinctness Rule, but a doubt about whether remembered clear and distinct perceptions were genuine clear and distinct perceptions. This is why I agree with interpreters like John Cottingham who argue that what knowledge of God gives us is not certainty of what we are clearly and

distinctly perceiving, but the stable and lasting certainty, or *scientia*, that allows us to build up a systematic body of knowledge.

The systematic, detailed analysis, and defense of clear and distinct perception I offer in this dissertation fills in the details about what is probably the most fundamental element of Descartes's theory of knowledge. I show that Descartes did have in mind an account of clear and distinct perception and a method for knowing when our ideas are clear and distinct, as well as a metaphysical picture on which problems of correspondence to reality do not arise for clear and distinct perceptions. The benefit of this close analysis of clear and distinct perception is a thorough and charitable explanation of why Descartes thinks he is able to succeed in his famous search for truth and to escape from the radical doubts of the First Meditation's skeptical scenarios.

In addition to contributing to the understanding and interpretation of Descartes's philosophy, I hope to have shown that Descartes's method of escaping doubt is philosophically interesting and defensible, at least with respect to a priori knowledge. Descartes has a great deal of confidence in the ability of the human intellect to attain certain knowledge, and he does not make our ability to have knowledge as dependent on God's good will as some have thought. Although his confidence depends in part on questionable assumptions, such as that essences have objective being in the intellect, I think he also offers some sound epistemological strategies. I think the transcendental style argument for the Clarity and Distinctness Rule as a criterion of truth is a viable answer to the problem of the criterion. I also share Descartes's intuition that if we confine ourselves to simple enough ideas and propositions, we can avoid error, and we can do that just by thinking very carefully about the contents of our ideas. Simple

propositions like, “A square has four sides,” are propositions that we can know because when we examine our ideas we see that they present us with conceptual truths.

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