

# Can an Atheist Know that He Exists? *Cogito*, Mathematics, and God in Descartes's *Meditations*

Jan Forsman

Tampere University

jan.forsman@tuni.fi

## Abstract

Descartes's meditator thinks that if she does not know the existence of God, she cannot be fully certain of anything. This statement seems to contradict the *cogito*, according to which the existence of *I* is indubitable and therefore certain. Cannot an atheist be certain that he exists? Atheistic knowledge has been discussed almost exclusively in relation to mathematics, and the more interesting question of the atheist's certainty of his existence has not received the attention it deserves. By examining the question of atheistic knowledge in relation to the *cogito*, I articulate the advantage Descartes sees in having knowledge of God. I challenge a long-held reading of the *cogito* where "I exist" is the first full certainty and argue that while atheistic *cogito* is more certain than atheistic knowledge in mathematics, it cannot be a starting point for lasting and stable science, because science requires knowing the existence of the non-deceiving God.

## Keywords

Descartes – *cogito* – mathematics – God – atheism – skepticism

## 1 Introduction

In the Second Meditation, Descartes's meditator concludes that "this proposition, *I am, I exist* (*Ego sum, Ego existo*), is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (AT VII 25, CSM II 17; emphasis in the original).<sup>1</sup> Existence of the thinking and conceiving *I*, epitomized by the

<sup>1</sup> I generally refer to the English translations by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (CSM), and Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch and Kenny (CSMK). However, in some instances, I have

so-called *cogito*,<sup>2</sup> has been taken as the first full certainty and as a *foundationalist* truth in many readings.<sup>3</sup> For example, it has been described in the following way: “[B]efore God’s existence is proved, methodical doubt ... prevents legitimate assent on every proposition *except the cogito*...” (Keeling 1968: 273; emphasis added). According to this reading, by setting up the first *datum* of certainty, Descartes can create a method of acquiring permanent opinions for a rational foundation upon which science can be built. I call this *Cogito Foundationalism*.<sup>4</sup>

However, in the Third Meditation, Descartes states the following:

But in order to remove even [the slightest] reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises 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 *fully certain (plane certus)* about anything else.

AT VII 36, CSM II 25; emphasis added and translation modified

What Descartes suggests here is that the meditator cannot know anything with full certainty before knowing whether God exists and whether he might deceive. Can she therefore know that she exists? Suppose I am an atheist and do not acknowledge God’s existence. Can I nevertheless discover the truth of the *cogito*? Can the atheist be fully certain that he exists?<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I examine the question of the atheist’s existence by discussing what Descartes sees as the importance of knowing that God exists. In particular, I consider the atheist’s certainty in mathematics (found in several Objections and Replies) in relation to the *cogito*. Although there has been a fair amount of discussion about atheistic knowledge, virtually all of it has dealt

---

modified the translations to better fit the original Latin text collected by Adam and Tannery (AT).

- 2 So named after the more famous phrasing: *ego cogito, ergo sum*. See the *Principia* I, §7 (AT VIII A 7, CSM I 195). Cf. the French phrasing in the *Discourse*, Part IV (AT VI 32, CSM I 127).
- 3 Note that the quote has the meditator proclaiming her existence as a *necessary truth* instead of as a full certainty. Typically, “necessarily true” is taken as a sign for something to be fully certain. See, e.g., Williams (2015: appendixes 1 & 2). Cf. the Third Meditation (AT VII 45, CSM II 31), where God’s existence is similarly a necessary truth.
- 4 It should be noted that readings of the *cogito* are by no means homogenous. However, I consider readings which view the *cogito* as establishing a foundational propositional content, as an inference, as a performatory thought act, or as both inferential and performatory (see Hintikka 1962, 1963; Markie 2005), as also falling guilty of *Cogito Foundationalism*.
- 5 To distinguish between the meditator and the atheist, I refer to the former with the pronoun *she* and to the latter with *he*.

only with mathematics (e.g., Curley 1978, Cottingham 1986, Newman & Nelson 1999, Cunning 2010).<sup>6</sup> Della Rocca (2005) is an exception, but as he aims to provide a route to full (or in his words “normative”) certainty on clarity and distinctness without relying on the knowledge of God, he is not concerned with the issue of atheistic *cogito*.<sup>7</sup>

In the end, I argue that *Cogito* Foundationalism is mistaken, as neither the meditator’s nor the atheist’s existence is sufficient for lasting and stable science for Descartes. To be fully certain of his existence, the atheist would have to recognize God’s existence, and here is where the meditator (as she morphs into the Cartesian scientist) has an advantage. Concurrently, I argue that Descartes does not reduce truth to psychological states, such as mere indubitability, and his project is epistemically externalist, with the external reliability of clarity and distinctness being verified by God’s existence. This proposed reading could be dubbed ‘*God* Foundationalism’.

The question of atheistic self-knowledge has been bypassed in the research literature but deserves to be properly addressed for at least three reasons. Firstly, as the *cogito* is taken to be the corner stone of Descartes’s philosophical project, it is more urgent to consider atheistic knowledge in relation to the *cogito* than in relation to mathematics. Secondly, atheism is one of the positions Descartes intends to overcome in the *Meditations*, along with Scholastic Aristotelianism and radical skepticism. It is hence important to map out what an atheistic *cogito* would be like, and what the knowledge of God brings for Descartes. Thirdly, the question at the heart of atheistic *cogito*—can I know my existence without knowledge of God?—is closely related to the Cartesian Circle: Descartes needs clear and distinct ideas to confirm the existence of God

6 Lennon and Hickson (2013: 19–21) also consider the question of the meditator’s existence in relation to God but do not consider the question of the atheist’s existence. They are on the right track, but consider the certainty of the *cogito* as permanent, and depending on the knowledge of God only with regard to the meditator being created by God (i.e., there was a time she did not exist). As I go on to argue, the certainty of the *cogito* depends on the knowledge of God also in a more intimate way: without it, the meditator cannot be absolutely certain that she exists.

7 For an interesting take on the issue, see Cunning (2007), who also deals with the dubitability of the self’s existence, but from a different point of view and without considering the existence of the atheist’s self. According to him, Descartes considers the meditator to have a confused, material, and sensation-based understanding of the self in the beginning of the *Meditations*, and even after the *cogito* passage, she often perceives the self only dimly and obscurely. Therefore, the meditator is in a position to doubt her existence (cf. Cunning 2010: ch. 3). I advance the position that, besides viewing herself obscurely, the meditator can doubt her existence by losing attention from self-awareness.

and the existence of God to confirm clear and distinct ideas. Finding an answer to the atheistic *cogito* can help find answers to the Circle.

The paper approaches atheistic self-knowledge through four tasks: (1) explaining why there is a problem about claiming that the atheist knows that he exists, (2) examining the dissimilarity between awareness of mathematics and awareness of one's own existence, (3) clarifying a specific distinction between two kinds of certainty, *cognitio* (or more precisely *persuasio*) and *scientia*, and (4) criticizing the standard form of *Cogito* Foundationalism based on the preceding discussions and arguing for *God* Foundationalism instead.

## 2 Reason for Questioning the Atheist's Existence

In the Second Meditation, the meditator faces the Deceiver doubt head on: perhaps there is a Deceiver of "supreme power and cunning" who is deliberately and constantly trying to deceive her. From this possibility, she concludes that in order to be deceived, she has to exist. And if she is not deceived, she is nevertheless unable to doubt that she exists (AT VII 25, CSM II 17).

As Descartes is often read to take full certainty as the result of indubitability, the fact that the existence of the doubter cannot be doubted would make it fully certain (see, e.g., Williams 2015: Appendixes 1, 2; Markie 2005: 140, 156). Descartes is thus made into a *Cogito* Foundationalist.<sup>8</sup>

This reading is supported by the Third Meditation, where Descartes stacks the deck by stating:

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

8 This reading is rather widely held. It is found already in Stout (1929) and Gueroult (1953) with others (including, e.g., Keeling 1968: 273; Kenny 1968: 185–186, 194–195; Wilson 1978: 37, 133; Williams 2015: Appendix 2; Van Cleve 1998; Rodis-Lewis 1986: 280–281; Marion 1986: 126 [who recognizes *two* foundations]; Markie 2005; Broughton 2002: 177–185). For critiques of this reading, see Gewirth (1941: 385 n. 49); Curley (1978: 95); Sosa (1997: 234); Newman & Nelson (1999: 398–399 n. 25); Christofidou (2013: 42–44) and Wagner (2014: 76). The *Cogito* Foundationalist reading was also the basis of Kant's criticism on Descartes (A342–347/B400–406; 2000: 412–415).

*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.*

AT VII 36, CSM II 25; emphasis added

It seems that not only is the *cogito* certain, but also such intuitively perceived clear and distinct mathematical truths as  $2 + 3 = 5$  enjoy certainty. Clear and distinct perceptions are Descartes's remedy for skeptical scenarios, providing indubitable and therefore fully certain propositions. The infallibility of clarity and distinctness has also been referred to as Descartes's Truth Rule: whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true (AT VII 35, CSM II 24).

Immediately following the last quote, however, comes Descartes's statement that as long as the meditator does not know whether there is a God and whether God might deceive, she can never be fully certain of anything else (AT VII 36, CSM II 25. Cf. the *Discourse*: AT VI 38–39, CSM I 130). This statement has puzzled many scholars.<sup>9</sup> At best, Descartes's statement is in tension with the passages quoted above. At worst, it shows an actual contradiction. How should the statement and these passages be understood?

Let us start with some background. Why would Descartes think that only by knowing that God exists and is not a deceiver could we know clear and distinct perceptions with absolute certainty? It is because the Deceiver doubt still applies at the beginning of the Third Meditation. Although the meditator has established that she exists and can therefore oppose the Deceiver, the doubt is not yet resolved. Consequently, the meditator cannot be sure that her clear and distinct perception is true.

To see why this is so, let us look into the nature of the Deceiver doubt in the First Meditation:

[F]irmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?

AT VII 21, CSM II 14

Even eschewing God does not release one from the doubt, but actually makes the case more fatal:

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Gewirth (1941: 368), Van Cleve (1998: 112 n. 30), Marion (1986: 126–136), Sosa (1997: 235, 246 n. 23), Cunning (2007, 111–112 with n. 2).

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than believe that everything else is uncertain. ... 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 also so imperfect as to be deceived all the time.

AT VII 21, CSM II 14

Even if I am an atheist and believe that “I am” at my present state by fate or chance, it would not release me from the grips of this doubt, as my nature has the propensity to be so imperfect that I might be deceived (even by clear and distinct perceptions) and therefore would not grasp reality as it is.<sup>10</sup> Disallowing God and claiming something like “it just happened” or “it was just meant to be” could not solve the problem at hand.

Why does Descartes include this atheistic rendition of the doubt? As made clear in the Dedicatory Letter to Sorbonne, atheism is one of the positions which the *Meditations* undermines: “the only reason why many irreligious people are unwilling to believe that God exists ... is the alleged fact that no one has hitherto been able to demonstrate [it]” (AT VII 3, CSM II 4).<sup>11</sup> Descartes expects some of his readers to be atheists, as he expects some of them to be Aristotelians and skeptics. In fact, atheism and skepticism are for Descartes closely linked, as he stresses in the Seventh Objections and Replies, claiming that skepticism is “vigorously alive” in his time and that “atheistic (*atheorum*) skeptics” are in need of refutation (AT VII 549, CSM II 375).

The atheistic version also reveals the central idea of the scenario. Unlike the way it has sometimes been phrased (e.g., Kenny 1968: 34; Frankfurt 2008: 119; Della Rocca 2005: 21–23; Wagner 2014: 11), the nature of the Deceiving God doubt is not that God specifically comes in the middle of each and all of my thought processes. Instead the point of the argument is that God could have created me so that I am not able to grasp what is real and true even if I were

10 Descartes describes truth as a conformity relation and likens truth to being, in the sense that if something (thought of) exists, it is true. “[T]he word ‘truth’, in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object...” (AT II 597, CSMK 139). Thus, truth for Descartes is *metaphysical* rather than a propositional attribute. See the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 54–55, 60–62; CSM II 38, 42–43), where falsity is defined as a privation or negation of truth and as participating (*participare*) in *non-being*. Cf. the *Discourse*, AT VI 38–39, CSM I 130; Fifth Replies, AT VII 376, 378, CSM II 258, 260; and the *Principia* I, §31, AT VIII A 17, CSM I 203–204.

11 Cf. AT VII 1–2, 5–6, CSM II 3, 5–6. See the Letter to Mersenne, 25 November 1630 (AT I 181, CSMK 29).

using my natural abilities as they were intended and reached my cognitive best. Therefore, it is more a doubt about my own imperfect nature than about an evil and petty God (cf. Carriero 2009: 53–60; Newman & Nelson 1999).<sup>12</sup> A Deceiving God does not have to actively deceive us, as it is enough that he has not created things in a way that corresponds to our clear and distinct perceptions of them.<sup>13</sup> Unlike what many *Cogito* Foundationalist readings claim, Descartes does not reduce truth to indubitability, as indubitable clear and distinct perceptions could still be false. At its core, the question is about the author of my nature, the creator or generating cause of my natural faculties. Is God the creator of my nature? If he is not, what is my origin and how can something less than perfect create me so that I truly grasp reality? If he is, how can I know that God has not created my nature so that I do not truly grasp reality even with my most evident perceptions?<sup>14</sup>

The scenario sets the frame for the issue at hand. As an atheist, how can I know that my nature is not so imperfect that, when I think that  $2 + 3 = 5$ , I am mistaken? The result of this is a gap between cognizing well by my own natural resources and cognizing truly.<sup>15</sup> According to Descartes, the atheist cannot bridge the gap himself. However, what I am discussing here is not bridging

12 Newman and Nelson, though, mix the Deceiving God and the Demon as one and the same (1999: 375–377).

13 Since Descartes views truth as a conformity relation of thought and reality, to allow us to be deceived God would only have to *not create* things as they appear to us in our most evident perceptions, thereby not making things as we clearly and distinctly perceive them part of existing reality. A Deceiving Demon might be seen as a more active Deceiver (see Lennon & Hickson 2013: 16). However, as I read Deceiving Demon to be a psychological instrument designed to help self-deception and ease out suspension of judgment, this contrast is not very significant.

14 This is made still more evident in *Principia* I, §13 (AT VIII A 9–10, CSM I 197): “[R]ecalling that [the mind] is still ignorant (*nondum scire*) as to whether it may have been created with the kind of nature that makes it go wrong even in matters which appear most evident, [it] sees that it has just cause to doubt such conclusions, and that the possession of certain knowledge (*certam scientiam*) will not be possible until it has come to know the *author of its being*” (emphasis added). Cf. *Principia* I, §30 (AT VIII A 16, CSM I 203) and the Sixth Meditation (AT VII 77, CSM II 53).

15 I use the words *cognizing* and *knowing* when discussing propositional attitudes in Descartes, where cognizing means to be aware of something and knowing to be truly certain, in the fullest sense, of something. Later, I will distinguish *conviction* from these two. It should be noted that being aware and being convinced differ propositionally but may have the same content. In this paper, I refer to awareness merely as a mental state that is *neutral* with respect to its epistemic status.

the gap for everything that is clear and distinct, but only the gap regarding my existence as an atheist. Can I claim the intimate and intuitive knowledge that I exist with certainty?

### 3 Existence and Mathematics: “Atheist Mathematician” in the Second Objections

In Mersenne's Second Objections, there is an interesting discussion of the topic of atheistic existence. The discussion starts with the remark that, as the meditator is not yet certain of God's existence, she cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until she has acquired knowledge of God's existence. Therefore, she does not “yet clearly and distinctly know that [she is] a thinking thing, since, on [her] own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God...” (AT VII 124–125, CSM II 89). Descartes's reply is intriguing, but before I get to it, I want to bring up the second issue in the discussion. It goes like this:

Moreover, an atheist is clearly and distinctly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; but so far is he from supposing the existence of God that he completely denies it.

AT VII 125, CSM II 89

Since the atheist denies God's existence but can clearly and distinctly perceive mathematical truths about a triangle, according to Mersenne, he seems to have an argument against Descartes. The atheist mathematician can make correct demonstrations in geometry and mathematics without having to rely on God's existence. Thus, when facing mathematical proofs, one's mind could indeed tell the Deceiver nonchalantly to “go hang himself,” as Gassendi in the Fifth Objections eloquently writes (AT VII 327, CSM II 227). This is what apparently happens when intuiting “I am thinking, therefore I exist” even without knowledge of God. What then is the epistemic advantage that the Cartesian scientist has over the atheist mathematician? Since Descartes seems to equate the meditator's knowledge of her existence and her ability to do correct mathematics in the Third Meditation (AT VII 36, CSM II 25), should the same apply to the atheist's existence or does the Cartesian have an advantage with regard to the knowledge of her existence over the atheist? The question in the Second Objections, whether anything can be known before knowing that God exists, has been treated as a version of the Cartesian Circle (see, e.g., Carriero 2009:



338).<sup>16</sup> However, it should be noted that the Circle is distinct from the question I am proposing here. Instead of asking for justification or circularity, the question regarding the atheist's existence asks whether the atheistic *cogito* can be considered as fully certain or permanent knowledge. In this paper, I do not address the specific problem of the Circle, since I believe that the question can be formulated without reference to it. I do view the change of perspective fruitful for clarifying important aspects of the problem of Circle as well. But the present discussion is aimed at posing a *novel problem* for Descartes scholarship.

In his reply, Descartes states that he does not deny that the atheist can have clear and distinct awareness of the triangle's mathematical features. But he maintains that "this awareness (*cognitio*) of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge (*scientia*)" (AT VII 141, CSM II 101). Here Descartes distinguishes two kinds of 'certainty': an isolated awareness of *p* (*cognitio*) and systematic and absolutely certain knowledge of *p* (*scientia*). *Cognitio* can be rendered doubtful, but *scientia* cannot. *Scientia* involves absolute certainty that is capable of defeating the most radical doubt and it is the final goal of the inquiry of the *Meditations*. The isolated awareness of the atheist cannot offer the stability required for *scientia* as the atheist cannot overcome the Deceiver/Imperfect Nature doubt in a satisfactory way:

[A]n atheist ... cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident ... [A]lthough this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists.

AT VII 141, CSM II 101<sup>17</sup>

- 
- 16 In the Fourth Objections (AT VII 214, CSM II 150), Arnauld asks how the existence of God can *justify* and at the same time *be justified* by clear and distinct perceptions. In addition to Arnauld's classic formulation of the Circle, the version of the Second Objections seems to be based on the following: I clearly and distinctly know something (e.g., my existence or mathematical propositions). [=>] I cannot clearly and distinctly know anything unless I know that God exists. [=>] I clearly and distinctly know that God exists. *Et cetera*.
- 17 Cf. the Sixth Replies (AT VII 428, CSM II 289): "As I have stated previously, the less power the atheist attributes to the author of his being, the more reason he will have to suspect that his nature may be so imperfect as to allow him to be deceived even in matters which seem utterly evident to him." Cf. also the Third Objections and Replies, where the matter is discussed in relation to the dream argument (AT VII 196, CSM II 137).

The atheist does not know the origin of his nature and therefore cannot be certain that his awareness is true or, as Descartes also puts it, constitutes “metaphysical” knowledge.<sup>18</sup> This means that the atheist can indeed have *cognitio*, which means that he can be aware of some certainty that imposes assent, but he does not have *scientia*, that is, lasting metaphysical certainty.<sup>19</sup>

#### 4 *Cognitio, Persuasio and Scientia*

In addition, the distinction between these states of certainty comes up in the Fifth Meditation:

I see plainly that the certainty and truth of *all knowledge (omnis scientiae)* depends uniquely on my *awareness (cognitione pendere)* of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of *perfect knowledge (perfecte scire)* about anything else until I cognized him.

AT VII 71, CSM II 49; emphasis added and translation modified<sup>20</sup>

At the beginning of the Third Meditation, the meditator says that “[i]n this first *cognition (cognitione)* there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am affirming (*affirmo*)” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24; emphasis added and translation modified). In the Fifth, with the existence of God already verified, she states that “[if I did not know (*ignorare*) God,] I should thus never have *true and certain knowledge (vera & certa scientia)*” (AT VII 69, CSM II 48; emphasis added). The distinction is most apparent in the Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, where Descartes writes:

18 Descartes uses *scientia*, metaphysical certainty (*certitude métaphysique*, AT VI 38, CSM I 130), full certainty (*plane certus, plane nota & certa*: AT VII 36, 71, CSM II 25, 49), and perfect knowledge (*perfecte scire*, AT VII 71, CSM II 49) interchangeably. He also refers to metaphysical knowledge (*Metaphysico sciendi*) in relation to what evidently amounts to *scientia* (AT VII 475, CSM II 320).

19 A further complication is that Descartes seems to use *scientia* with three different meanings: 1. Stable and unshakable knowledge or certainty (e.g., AT VII 141, x 362; CSM I 10, II 101); 2. A collection of stable and unshakable epistemic items, i.e., a body of knowledge (e.g., AT x 513, CSM II 408); and 3. Science (e.g., AT VII 17, CSM II 12). Meanings 2. and 3. are arguably the same (see AT x 513, CSM II 408). The verb *scire* seems to be connected to meaning 1.: I can know something with stability and lastingness. Yet *scientia* as a body of knowledge conforms *scire* to the meaning 2. as well, allowing us to conduct science: I can know something as a member of the group of things that are known for certain.

20 CSM translates *scientia*, *cognitione*, and *scire* all as “knowledge.”

[I]f we lack knowledge (*ignoremus*) of God, we can imagine that the conclusions are uncertain even though we remember that they were deduced from clear principles: because perhaps our nature is such that we go wrong even in the *most evident matters*. Consequently, even at the moment when we deduce them from those principles we did not have *knowledge (scientiam)* of them, but only a *conviction (persuasionem)* [...].

AT III 64–65, CSMK 147; emphasis added<sup>21</sup>

The word used here is *persuasio*, but the context makes it clear that Descartes uses it in the same sense as he uses *cognitio*. *Cognitio* is an umbrella term for Descartes and not a label for a specific ‘state’ of certainty. It refers to a wide variety of intellectual awareness—attentively grasping an instance of truth—and can be either *persuasio* (persuasive and compelling assent) or *scientia* (unshakable and metaphysical certainty, i.e., true knowledge).<sup>22</sup>

What seems to me the most crucial aspect of this distinction is stability: *persuasio* is unstable while *scientia* is stable (*firmus*) and lasting (*mansurus*) (AT VII 17, CSM II 12). *Cognitio* as *persuasio* is certain in the sense that it (momentarily) compels assent. For example, in the same Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640, Descartes writes: “[O]ur mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting (*assentiri*) to what it clearly understands” (AT III 64, CSMK 147). The same is stated in the Fifth Meditation: “Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true” (AT VII 69, CSM II 48). In the Third Meditation, the following is written: “Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced (*persuadeor*) by them that I spontaneously declare...” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). Clear and distinct conviction constitutes strong internal evidence. However, even if the meditator has access to evident cognition that imposes assent, her mind is easily distracted due to preconceived opinions:

[M]y nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing [...] to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory

21 It is not completely clear if the *cogito* is included among the evident matters regarding which we can go wrong, as its certainty is not deduced from any principles. However, I argue further down that it is included among those matters.

22 Descartes also uses conviction (*persuasio, persuadere*) right before the famous passage on the meditator’s existence in the Second Meditation (AT VII 25, CSM II 16–17), in the Third (AT VII 36, CSM II 25), and in the Fifth (AT VII 70, CSM II 48). He also uses it in the Second Replies (AT VII 144–145, CSM II 103). Although the tradition exists for distinguishing *cognitio* and *scientia* (e.g., Gewirth 1941, Curley 1978, Della Rocca 2005, Carriero 2009, Christofidou 2013, Wagner 2014, Newman 2016), not much has been done to trace how *persuasio* fits with these terms.

of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am *no longer attending* (*attendo*) 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 did not possess knowledge of God (*Deum ignorarem*); and I should thus never have *true and certain knowledge* (*veram & certam scientiam*) about anything, but only *shifting and changeable opinions* (*tantum & mutabiles opiniones*).

Fifth Meditation, AT VII 69, CSM II 48; emphasis added

Items of conviction can be grasped only while being attended to. Once they are not attended to, their certainty is made unavailable and only a memory of the once-reached certainty remains:<sup>23</sup>

[W]hen I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me [...] that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend (*attendo*) to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am without knowledge of God (*Deum ignorem*).

AT VII 69–70, CSM II 48<sup>24</sup>

Descartes also makes this clear in his answer in the Second Replies, when he explains how the meditator can know that she is (a thinking thing) if she has not proven God's existence:

[W]hen I said that we can know (*scire*) nothing for certain until we are aware (*cognoscamus*) that God exists, I expressly declared that I was

23 Commentators have argued that Descartes's cognition of clear and distinct perceptions is temporal (e.g., Williams 2015: 186–187, 198 n. 15; Christofidou 2013: 179–186; Wagner 2014: 102). I consider stability to be a better description, as non-temporality cannot yet be concluded from Descartes's comments. Likewise, if I am correct in my analysis, the main issue between *persuasio* and *scientia* is not the time truth is attended to but whether there is reasonable room for doubt. The Cartesian scientist's *scientia* of God is not temporally extended more than the human attention span allows but is rendered certain by the removal of the powerful reasons to doubt what we evidently perceive (cf. AT VIII A 16–17, CSM I 203). For temporal extension of thought in Descartes, see the *Conversation with Burman* (AT V 148–149, CSM K 335).

24 Cf. The Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640 (AT III 64, CSM K 147): “[W]e often remember conclusions we have deduced from [clear] premisses without actually attending to the premisses themselves...”.

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.

AT VII 140, CSM II 100<sup>25</sup>

Because conviction is unstable, it does not provide absolute certainty, as there remain reasons to doubt it. Stable and lasting certainty can be generated only by *scientia*, which only the cognition of God's existence can provide. As Descartes states in the Letter to Regius:

There is conviction (*persuasio*) where there remains *some reason which might lead us to doubt*, but knowledge (*scientia*) is conviction based on a reason so strong that *it can never be shaken by any stronger reason*. Nobody can have the latter if he has no knowledge (*ignorare*) of God. But a man who has once clearly understood the reasons which convince (*persuadent*) us that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided he remembers the conclusion 'God is no deceiver' whether or not he continues to attend to the reasons for it, will continue to possess not only the conviction (*persuasio*) but true knowledge (*vera scientia*) of this and all other conclusions the reasons for which he remembers he once clearly perceived.

AT III 65, CSMK 147

The ultimate advantage the Cartesian scientist has over the atheist is that her knowledge is permanent and lasting whereas the atheist's conviction is unstable and remains partly in doubt. The atheist is not aware of the nature of God and does not know whether he might be deceived about everything he thinks he knows evidently. However, we require a powerful reason to doubt what we perceive clearly and distinctly. This reason is provided by the Deceiver/Imperfect Nature scenario. When that is proven false by discovering the nature of God, our most evident perceptions are guaranteed to grasp the truth.<sup>26</sup> By becoming aware of the existence of a non-deceiving God, the Cartesian scientist is able to fix the unstable cognition and turn it into permanent and lasting metaphysical certainty.<sup>27</sup>

25 Again, as the *cogito* is not depicted as having an argumentative structure, it can be questioned whether it is included here. Below I argue that despite lacking this structure, the *cogito* is included here as well.

26 For the necessary requirement of the reasons for doubt, see Forsman 2017.

27 Of course, one problem is how cognition of God can turn into *scientia* of God. As Della Rocca (2005: 5–6) states, merely piling up instances of cognition does not make them less doubtful (contra Gewirth 1941). I will not be taking this problem head on. However,

Because of the restricted nature of conviction, I disagree with readings that claim that clear and distinct perceptions cannot be doubted (e.g., Owens 2008: 175–176). Owens acknowledges that Descartes speaks of doubting both clear and distinct perceptions and dim and obscure perceptions, but maintains it essential to make a distinction between them. Otherwise “we will find it hard to explain his insistence that he can’t fail to believe whatever he clearly and distinctly believes” (2008: 176). As argued, the insistence is explainable in terms of conviction and lack of stability.

By the same token, I disagree with readings that take clear and distinct perception to be sufficient for full certainty (e.g., Kenny 1968, Cottingham 1986, Della Rocca 2005). Della Rocca especially sees clear and distinct perception as “normatively” certain—if there are good reasons to assent to it, it must be true—while being apprehended (Della Rocca 2005: 4, 8, 13). The meditator can claim full certainty in all things clear and distinct at the time of attending to them. The difference between the Cartesian scientist and the atheist is that the atheist cannot be normatively certain of retrospective claims he recalls having perceived, while the Cartesian scientist can refer to the existence of God and be normatively certain of these claims as well. Although the atheist “can never achieve *scientia*,” he can know his own existence with full certainty while apprehending it. Knowing (*scire*) the truth would be possible at the level of *persuasio*, before metaphysical certainty of God’s existence is reached (Della Rocca 2005: 9–15).

As I have argued, there is another reading of the Deceiver doubt. To claim that the meditator can be fully certain of her clear and distinct perceptions before cognizing God’s existence is to miss the fact that the Deceiver scenario is designed to question one’s *most persuasive and evident* perceptions.<sup>28</sup> Descartes demands a *metaphysically* firm ground for all true epistemic claims.

The meditator can grasp that she has clear and distinct perception and can be cognitively certain of each clear and distinct perception before cognizing God’s existence, yet she cannot be metaphysically certain that this clarity and distinctness does not come apart from grasping the truth. It does seem that she gets to the truth each time she perceives clearly and distinctly, but she does not grasp why this would be so. As truth for Descartes is not reduced to

---

it seems that the existence of God is not based on any string of argumentation but on a simple intuition, similar to the one regarding the meditator’s own existence (see especially the Letter to Silhon, March or April 1648, AT v 137–138; cf. Newman & Nelson 1999; Christofidou 2013: 183; Wagner 2014: 5–6; Newman 2016: 6.2). Why one intuition is a case of *persuasio* and another a case of *scientia* is of course still left unclear.

28 See the Third, Fourth and the Sixth Meditation (AT VII 36, 70, 77, CSM II 25, 48, 53) and the *Principia* I, §13 (AT VIII 9–10, CSM I 197). Cf. Alanen (2000: 263) and Carriero (2009: 57).

indubitability, even if *momentarily* there are no good reasons to doubt the veracity of one's clear and distinct perception, it might still turn out to be unreliable and to fail to grasp the truth.<sup>29</sup> The Deceiver/Imperfect Nature doubt makes sure that even if I did clearly and distinctly grasp the truth, when that moment passes I can doubt not only the memory of being certain but the truth itself. Cognizing well by our innate faculties might not be the same as cognizing truly.<sup>30</sup> One may be able to glimpse the truth with *persuasio*, but this does not get us far in Descartes's eyes. We can have a compelling feeling to have reached the truth (a piece of reality), but cannot be completely certain that we have without confirming the second-order reliability of our cognition. Descartes's project is then epistemically *externalist*, with God's existence and nature verifying the external reliability of clarity and distinctness.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, as God does exist and is not a deceiver, the meditator's mathematical demonstrations and awareness of her existence are metaphysically guaranteed to be true. It may hence be asked whether God guarantees the atheist's beliefs in the same way, despite the atheist's ignorance of God. The atheist has some grasp of how things are but is not fully aware of why he is in touch with reality as it is. He has internal evidence (clarity and distinction) but lacks this *external* ground. To have *scientia* of something is not just to be certain that things are a certain way but to understand why one's certainty guarantees that they really are so (cf. AT VII 141, 196, 428; CSM II 101, 137, 289; see also Carriero 2009: 348).<sup>32</sup>

29 Thus, clear and distinct perception is not true just by being clear and distinct. Cf. Della Rocca (2005: 3).

30 Here I am in broad agreement with Carriero (2009: esp. 131, 337–358). However, he insists that the meditator reaches proper certainty that she exists (2009: 341–343). While I do agree that with *persuasio* we can momentarily get a grasp of how things truly are, Carriero's reading indicates that the atheist can reach proper certainty of his existence.

31 Della Rocca likewise describes Descartes's project as externalist, but in a different way. For Della Rocca, Descartes is externalist regarding the justification of current clear and distinct perceptions, as this sort of perception gives us knowledge "even without 'checking up' on that perception and realizing that clear and distinct ideas in general must be true" (2005: 18–19). However, this description overlooks Descartes's attempt to demonstrate the reliability of clearness and distinctness because of his metaphysical understanding of the truth as a conformity relation. If Descartes is this sort of externalist, the demonstration becomes superfluous, as clear and distinct would be reliable as a matter of fact. My reading explains Descartes's attempt at the demonstration while still describing him as an epistemic externalist.

32 I therefore disagree with accounts that build Descartes's scientific knowledge on epistemically coherent justification (Frankfurt 2008, Sosa 1997), unshakable psychological conviction or consistency of reason (Gewirth 1941, Loeb 2005).

## 5 Atheistic Mathematics and Atheistic Existence: Four Problems

Is the issue of atheistic existence solved? Cognizing one's existence is like cognizing mathematics. Everything the meditator perceives clearly and distinctly is *persuasio*, spontaneous and momentary conviction, but not the absolute certainty of *scientia*. “[W]hen I turn to things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously (*sponte*) declare...” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). This includes not only mathematics but also all things in whose denial the meditator recognizes a contradiction as well as the existence of herself. The atheist can then be certain of his existence restrictedly, in terms of *persuasio*. The moment *persuasio* slips from his mind, he is no longer aware of it and does not know it for certain. The Cartesian, however, has *scientia* of her existence because the veracity of her clear and distinct perception is guaranteed by her cognition of a non-deceiving God. Therefore, the atheist can never know his existence with absolute certainty.<sup>33</sup>

However, this reading faces the following problems:

### *Problem 1—Cognition of the Meditator's Existence Seems Stronger than Mathematical Cognition*

It is not accurate to say that Descartes treats mathematical cognition and the cognition of the meditator's existence as equals. The original Latin reads: “[V]el forte etiam [*nunquam efficient*] ut duo et tria simul juncta plura vel pauciora sint quam quinque ... ([O]r perhaps even [can never make it so] that two and three added together are more or less than five...)” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25, translation modified.)<sup>34</sup> Descartes states that no deceiver can make the meditator think she does not exist and perhaps even that mathematical truths do not hold. With that clause, Descartes seems to indicate that certainty of the self's existence is of a stronger variety than that of mathematics. However, this distinction is perhaps not pressing. Descartes's choice of *forte etiam* can be seen as a regular conjunction, without emphasizing the credibility of one certainty over the other. In fact, neither word is uncommon in the *Meditations*, nor is the discussed paragraph in the Third Meditation the only place where they

33 This reading is very close to what Curley (1978: ch. 4, esp. 94–95), Cunning (2007), and Christofidou (2013: 42–44, 179–186) argue for. Newman & Nelson (1999: 389–399 n. 25) and Newman (2016) also hint towards this, but do not flesh out the reading. None of them refer to the atheist's existence in their analyses.

34 CSM omits *forte etiam*, reading instead “[O]r bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five...” Cf. Broughton (2002: 182–183 n. 4).



figure together.<sup>35</sup> A better way to incorporate separation between the meditator's cognition of her existence and her cognition of mathematical truths is to consider the nature of mathematics. The atheist's clear and distinct awareness of the triangle's mathematical features (its angles are equal to 180 degrees), on which the discussion in the Second Objections and Replies centers, is arguably a state that can be produced only as a result of mathematical reasoning. As such, the prospects of destabilization after that process are larger compared to one's existence.<sup>36</sup>

***Problem 2—Cognition of the Meditator's Existence Resists the Deceiver Doubt (Cognition of Mathematics does not)***

One of the reasons Descartes employs the Deceiver doubt in the First Meditation is that it questions the veracity of mathematics, which resists the earlier dreaming scenario insofar as  $2 + 3 = 5$  is certain even in sleep. However, the existence of the meditator resists the Deceiver, too. Even if the meditator cannot be sure of anything else, not even mathematics, she can still be sure that she exists. This reinforces *Problem 1*, i.e., that the meditator's existence is of a stronger certainty or stability than mathematics.

***Problem 3—The Verb Scire***

At the beginning of the Third Meditation, the meditator runs through a list of things she has discovered so far, which includes her existence as a thinking thing and her ability to doubt, affirm, understand, will, imagine, and have something in the vicinity of sensory perception. According to her, this list consists of "everything I truly know (*omnia quae vere scio*)" or at least "everything I have so far discovered that I know (*vel faltem quae me scire hactenus animadverti*)" (AT VII 34–35, CSM II 24). Descartes uses the verb *scire* instead of *cognoscere*, which may imply that the awareness of these things counts as *scientia*.

***Problem 4—All Thinking Seems to Make One Aware of One's Thinking***

According to Descartes, we are always thinking, and as we think, we are aware that we think. Since Descartes does not deny the atheist *cognitio*, that tenet

35 Cf. The First, the Second and the Sixth Meditation (AT VII 19, 27, 74; CSM II 13, 27, 51–52).

36 The prospects might also differ for the mathematical cognition of  $2 + 3 = 5$ , which is considered in the paragraph from the Third Meditation. However, even this type of mathematical cognizing requires some form of reasoning, which can be lost once it is not directly attended to but only remembered (cf. AT VII 145–146, CSM II 104).

may make it difficult to see how the atheist would lose attention and not be aware of his thinking and, in consequence, of his existence, in which case there does not seem to be room for doubt. The problem, then, is that the atheist's existence may not seem restricted and doubtful in the same way as his awareness of mathematical truths from which one's attention can easily slip.

The question we are eventually faced with is whether awareness of the meditator's existence is an instance of *scientia*. If it is, what should we make of Descartes's claim that we cannot know anything with full certainty without the knowledge of God? Many commentators have examined this problem, and have proposed different ways of solving it. Those in favor of *Cogito* Foundationalism bite the bullet and regard knowledge of the meditator's existence as fully certain, despite Descartes's insistence to the contrary (e.g., Keeling 1968: 273; Rodis-Lewis 1986: 280–281; Broughton 2002: 179–183). Some maintain that the meditator's existence is not actually certain before the wax example or the Fourth Meditation (e.g., Wagner 2014: 76, 100–102, 209; cf. Curley 1978: 95). Still others try to diminish the importance of God and claim full certainty for clarity and distinctness (e.g., Kenny 1968, Cottingham 1986, Della Rocca 2005). All these strategies have their problems, and none can satisfactorily solve the issue.

## 6 Towards a Solution: Atheistic Existence and *God* Foundationalism

Looking at the four problems raised, I believe that some of them can be used in solving others. *Problem 4* especially offers insight into *Problems 1* and *2*. The meditator's existence resists the Deceiver, not because of its greater stability, but because of its special nature.<sup>37</sup> The meditator's existence is not an ordinary truth and the existence of *I* does not directly lead to anything else. The meditator must first closely examine what she is before moving any further.

Let us take a closer look at *Problem 4*. For Descartes, the mind is always thinking and always aware of the contents of its thinking.<sup>38</sup> Unconscious thinking is ruled out. Does this mean that the stability of the *cogito* is permanent? Not necessarily. For Descartes, being aware is not a singular activity

37 Carriero (2009: 341–342) argues that any clear and distinct perception is special by being immune to the Deceiver doubt. This puts mathematics on “even footing” with the *cogito*. I find this view problematic, and it seems to arise from the fact that Carriero does not consider atheistic existence. See also n. 32.

38 See the Second Meditation (AT VII 33, CSM II 22), *Principia* I, §9 (AT VIII 7–8, CSM I 195), Fifth Replies (AT VII 356–357, CSM II 246–247), and the Letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648 (AT V 220–221, CSMK 356–357).

but can come in different ways. Descartes distinguishes between two kinds of conscious thought, what he calls *direct thought* and *reflective thought*. Only the latter involves awareness of (the fact) that one is thinking (AT v 220–221, CSMK 357). Furthermore, he differentiates *reflective thought* from *attentive reflective thought* (the conscious thought of a person deliberately attending to her conscious reflection) (Lähteenmäki 2007).

However, regarding the meditator's and the atheist's existence, it can be said that Descartes makes a further separation between a sort of minimal self-awareness (where one is aware of one's thoughts as had by one, i.e., by having an idea of self) and full self-reflection (where one attends to the fact that since one possesses these thoughts, one has to exist). Not all reflective awareness includes the sharp attention to one's own existence (the so-called *cogito* moment). The discovery of one's existence in the *cogito* is after all intended to be a philosophical discovery, not a mundane experience. Now we can see that, as the existence of oneself is not attended to at each moment when one is aware that one is thinking, it can count as one of the shifting and changeable opinions (solving *Problem 4*) (AT VII 69, CSM II 48).<sup>39</sup>

We now have a better understanding of the dissimilarity between the *cogito* and mathematics. Despite the difference in stability, self-awareness and the awareness of mathematical truths are not radically different when compared to the metaphysical knowledge of God's existence. Prior to knowing the existence of God, neither the meditator nor the atheist has anything more than persuasive conviction that they exist and that the truths of mathematics hold. It is possible in both cases that one's attention lapses and the awareness of one's existence as well as of mathematical truths becomes minimal enough that doubt can creep in, as the nature of both the meditator and the atheist might have been authored so that they go wrong even in cases where fully attentive awareness leads to seeming indubitability. For example, the meditator can doubt her existence by considering that even though self-awareness seemed completely certain a moment ago, it is possible that she did not really reach the truth because of her potentially imperfect nature. The existence of both the meditator and the atheist can then indeed slip from attention and

---

39 Descartes does claim in certain paragraphs that some perceptions, such as one's existence, cannot in any way be open to doubt (e.g., the Third Meditation and the Second Replies: AT VII 38–39, 145–146; CSM II 27, 104). However, he can be seen as referring to a strongly persuasive perception at the moment it is perceived (cf. the Seventh Replies and the *Conversation*: AT v 178, VII 460, 546; CSM II 309, 373, CSMK 353). See Cunning (2007: 120–122).

will not be stable enough to qualify as *scientia*, falling into *persuasio* (cf. AT IXA 205, CSM II 271).

As the meditator evolves into the Cartesian scientist, she discovers that the nature of God is non-deceiving, thus erasing the powerful reason to doubt her evident perceptions. She knows that she is not being deceived, nor is she unable to grasp the truth with her cognitive faculties:

For God would deserve to be called a deceiver if the faculty which he gave us was so distorted that it mistook the false for the true. This disposes of the most serious doubt which arose from our ignorance about whether our nature might not be such as to make us go wrong even in matters which seemed to us utterly evident.

AT VIII A 16, CSM I 203

The atheist being unable to erase this ultimate doubt, his self-awareness cannot develop into *scientia*.

Yet, unlike mathematics, awareness of one's existence has a special nature. When recognizing their existence, both the meditator and the atheist glimpse a piece of reality, even if only momentarily and without further understanding why. The *cogito* works as an Archimedean point (without being a foundational ground) by making the meditator aware of the persuasive cognitive certainty of her own existence and by leading her to discover her true cognitive nature and the metaphysical grounding of that nature. Merely observing evident mathematics *does not* accomplish this.<sup>40</sup> The intimacy and intuitiveness of the *cogito* makes it stronger than mathematics (solving *Problem 1*),<sup>41</sup> and capable of overcoming the Deceiver (solving *Problem 2*).<sup>42</sup> In the end, what is required is not only something that *overcomes* or *resists* the Deceiver/Imperfect Nature

40 Also note that, unlike mathematical statements, the *cogito* asserts the existence of something non-abstract.

41 Gueroult likewise argues that the meditator's existence is more certain than mathematics, but he calls the *cogito* "une certitude entière" (1953: 51–52). A similar view is shared by Lennon & Hickson (2013: 20–21). Broughton (2002: 175–186) argues that some clear and distinct ideas are absolutely certain early on whereas some are not, seeing the favored set to include "I exist," but to exclude mathematics. Brown (2013: 33–36) discusses the question of why mathematics is less compelling than the meditator's existence but she neither emphasizes the question nor gives very adequate answers, which she acknowledges herself.

42 To be accurate, since there are two forms of the Deceiver, the *cogito* overcomes Deceiving Demon but does not clear Deceiving God, which is why it can be recalled into doubt at the beginning of the Third Meditation.

but something that ultimately *defeats* it. This is possible only by knowing the author of my nature, i.e., God's existence as a non-deceiver.

The point is confirmed by Descartes in the Second Replies:

[N]otion (*notitia*) of first principles (*principiorum*) is not normally called 'knowledge' (*scientia*) by dialecticians. And when we become aware (*advertimus*) that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion (*prima notio*) which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says 'I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist', he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes (*agnoscit*) it as something self-evident (*rem per se notam*) by a simple intuition of the mind.

AT VII 141, CSM II 100; translation modified

Here, Descartes appears to indicate that the meditator's existence is not an instance of *scientia*.<sup>43</sup> Even if Descartes uses the word *scire* at the beginning of the Third Meditation, he clearly indicates it to be actually *persuasio* later on. "I am so convinced (*persuadeor*) by them..." (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). When describing absolute knowledge brought by cognizing the existence of God in the Fifth Meditation, Descartes adds *perfecte* in front of the word *scire*, possibly indicating that *scire* without the qualification *perfecte* could fall into *persuasio* (AT VII 71, CSM II: 49). Thus, Descartes's use of *scire* at the beginning of the Third Meditation can be explained without tension (solving *Problem 3*.).

The atheist can be aware that he exists only in this restricted way. Being unstable, the atheist's awareness of his existence is not absolutely permanent, hence not *scientia*. What God provides in terms of the meditator's (and what he would provide for the atheist's) self-awareness is lasting, unrestricted stability: knowledge of existence that would last even if there is a gap in self-aware cognition. God's existence as the creator of our cognitive nature not only verifies earlier convictions but also the reliability of occurring clear and distinct perceptions. *Cognitio* of God provides awareness of God's existence and awareness of God's existence as a non-deceiver elevates the meditator's *persuasio* to *scientia*, along with awareness of herself, morphing her into the Cartesian scientist.

Of course, here we are closing in on the looming Cartesian Circle. I do not claim to be able to solve this problem nor did I attempt to do so. As stated, the Circle and atheistic self-knowledge are separate problems. However, I take my

43 Cf. the *Principia* I, §7 (AT VIII A 7, CSM I 195): "Accordingly, this piece of awareness (*cognitio*)—I am thinking, therefore I exist—is the first and most certain of all to occur..." (translation modified).

reading to *relocate* the problematic part of the Circle. The question is not how God's existence is proven with a persuasive clear and distinct perception and vice versa, but rather how cognition of God can become *scientia*. Considering atheistic self-knowledge, then, is also helpful in clarifying the inherent problem of the Circle and can point us towards a possible solution.<sup>44</sup>

Following my *God* Foundationalist reading, the four problems described above are not in tension with the doctrine of *cognitio*, *persuasio*, and *scientia*. However, for the *Cogito* Foundationalist reading, things look worse. If a certain reading causes tensions in the text, which another reading solves, discarding the tension-causing reading is advisable.

There is one more aspect to atheistic existence which I think Descartes would want to emphasize, since it is closely tied to his overall project. For Descartes, the cognition of self and the cognition of God are intrinsically tied together. When I become aware of my own existence and inquire further into my own nature, I ultimately cognize in myself the concept of God, and I come to the knowledge of God's existence as an intuitive and necessary truth (cf. the Third Meditation: AT VII 45–54, CSM II 31–36). Thus, since an atheist is restrictedly aware that he exists, he should also become aware of the concept of God, which ultimately proves God's existence: “[I]f we deny that the nature of God is possible, we may just as well deny that the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, or that he who is actually thinking exists [...]. The upshot will be that all human knowledge will be destroyed, though for *no good reason*” (AT VII 151, CSM II 107; emphasis added). This indicates that God is already included in every clear and distinct perception. By following the order of reasoning, no one would be an atheist.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the question of atheistic knowledge in relation to the *cogito*, comparing it with atheistic knowledge of mathematics by (1) showing why there is a question of whether the atheist can claim knowledge of his existence (the proposed *novel problem*), (2) discussing the dissimilarity between awareness of existence and awareness of mathematics, (3) clarifying the difference Descartes makes between *cognitio*, *persuasio*, and *scientia*, and (4) criticizing *Cogito* Foundationalism. I considered four problems for my

44 For recent possible solutions to the Circle that fit with my interpretation, see Christofidou (2013: 183–184) and Dicker (2013: 170–176). For another, very different one, see Wagner (2014).

reading, which I answered, thus solidifying my account. I separated minimal self-awareness from full self-reflection and argued that not every act of reflective awareness includes a *cogito* moment, leaving room between awareness of one's existence and metaphysical certainty (*scientia*).

As a conclusion, I have proposed *God* Foundationalism, according to which the atheist's awareness of his existence is more stable than his awareness of mathematics, but is nevertheless mere *persuasio*. *Scientia* can be provided only by acknowledging God's existence. According to the usual accounts of the relationship between God and clear and distinct perceptions, either everything clear and distinct (or some favored set of them) are fully certain, or they are all equally uncertain. When self-awareness is considered more certain than mathematics, it is typically described as permanent or fully certain. I have argued that none of these options is to be preferred. Self-awareness can be seen as more certain (or convincing) than mathematics without being permanent.<sup>45</sup>

## References

- Adam, C., & Tannery, P. (eds.). 1963–1967 [1899–1908]. *Œuvres de Descartes*. 12 vols. Paris: Vrin. (AT).
- Alanen, L. 2000. "Cartesian Doubt and Scepticism." In J. Sihvola (ed.), *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition*, 255–270. Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland.
- Broughton, J. 2002. *Descartes's Method of Doubt*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Brown, D. 2013. "Descartes and Content Skepticism." In K. Detlefsen (ed.), *Descartes' Meditations: A Critical Guide*, 25–42. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

45 Versions of this paper were presented at Graduate Conferences in Tampere and Oxford. While finalizing the draft, I was offered a chance to present the topic in the Dynamis Workshop in Metaphysics at the University of Tampere and in the Rationalist Circle at the University of Turku. I am grateful to all the members of the audiences for their helpful comments. My gratitude goes especially to Jaakko Hirvelä for pressing questions on Descartes's foundationalism, to Barbara Sattler for a stimulating discussion on atheism and suspension of judgment, to Timothy Williamson for deep considerations on the epistemological nature of *cognitio* and *persuasio*, and to Jani Sinokki for an insightful conversation on the polysemy of *scientia* in Descartes. Special thanks to my commentators Vili Lähteenmäki (in Tampere) and Paul Lodge (in Oxford) for their critical but encouraging comments. Vili was also kind enough to contribute feedback for a later draft as well. The paper has likewise benefitted in various stages from comments by Christian Barth, John Carriero, Valtteri Viljanen, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal. Final thanks to my wife, Monika, for traveling with me to Oxford and for staying patient and supportive through the long hours spent working on different versions of this paper.

- Carriero, J. 2009. *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's Meditations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Christofidou, A. 2013. *Self, Reason, and Freedom: A New Light on Descartes' Metaphysics*. London: Routledge.
- Cottingham, J. 1986. *Descartes*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., & Murdoch, D. (eds.). 1984–1985. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 2 volumes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (CSM).
- Cottingham, J., Stoothoff, R., Murdoch, D., & Kenny, A. (eds.). 1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3rd volume. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (CSMK).
- Cunning, D. 2007. "Descartes on the Dubitability of the Existence of Self," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (1): 111–131.
- Cunning, D. 2010. *Argument and Persuasion in Descartes's Meditations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Curley, E.M. 1978. *Descartes against the Skeptics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Della Rocca, M. 2005. "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70 (1): 1–33.
- Dicker, G. 2013. *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Forsman, J. 2017. "Descartes on Will and Suspension of Judgment: Affectivity of the Reasons for Doubt." In G. Boros, J. Szalai, & O. István Tóth (eds.), *The Concept of Affectivity in Early Modern Philosophy*, 38–58. Budapest: Eötvös University Press.
- Frankfurt, H.G. 2008 [1970]. *Demons, Dreamers, & Madmen*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gewirth, A. 1941. "The Cartesian Circle," *The Philosophical Review* 50 (4): 368–395.
- Gueroult, M. 1953. *Descartes: selon l'ordre des raisons* 1. Paris: Aubier Éditions Montaigne.
- Hintikka, J. 1962. "Cogito Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" *The Philosophical Review* 71 (1): 3–32.
- Hintikka, J. 1963. "Cogito Ergo Sum as an Inference and a Performance," *The Philosophical Review* 72 (4): 487–496.
- Kant, I. 2000 [1781–1787]. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translation by P. Guyer & A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (A/B).
- Keeling, S.V. 1968 [1934]. *Descartes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kenny, A. 1968. *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*. New York: Random House.
- Lähteenmäki, V. 2007. "Orders of Consciousness and Forms of Reflexivity in Descartes." In S. Heinämaa, V. Lähteenmäki, & P. Remes (eds.), *Consciousness: From Perception to Reflection in the History of Philosophy*, 177–201. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Lennon, T.M. & Hickson, M.W. 2013. "The Skepticism of the First Meditation." In K. Delefsen (ed.), *Descartes' Meditations: A Critical Guide*, 9–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loeb, L.E. 2005 [1992]. "The Cartesian Circle." In J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, 200–235. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



- Marion, J.-L. 1986. *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Markie, P.J. 2005. "The Cogito and Its Importance." In J. Cottingham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, 140–173. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Newman, L. 2016. "Descartes' Epistemology." In E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016).
- Newman, L. & Nelson, A. 1999. "Circumventing Cartesian Circles," *Noûs* 33 (3): 370–404.
- Owens, D. 2008. "Descartes's Use of Doubt." In J. Broughton & J. Carriero (eds.), *A Companion to Descartes*, 164–178. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rodis-Lewis, G. 1986. "On the Complementarity of Meditations III and v: From the 'General Rule' of Evidence to 'Certain Science.'" In A.O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, 271–295. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sosa, E. 1997. "How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian problematic: A Lesson from Descartes," *Philosophical Studies* 85 (2–3): 229–249.
- Stout, A.K. 1929. "The Basis of Knowledge in Descartes," *Mind* 38 (151–152): 330–342.
- Van Cleve, J. 1998 [1979]. "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle." In J. Cottingham (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Philosophy: Descartes*, 101–131. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wagner, S.I. 2014. *Squaring the Circle in Descartes's Meditations: The Strong Validation of Reason*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, B. 2015 [1978]. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Wilson, M. 1978. *Descartes*. London: Routledge.