

## Descartes' Recurring Problem With Circles<sup>1</sup>

HARJEET PARMAR

ONE EFFECTIVE WAY to critique a philosopher's theory without having to refute his premises or show his reasoning invalid is to reveal the view of the world entailed by the theory, showing that, had the work been perused, it would have been unacceptable even by his or her own standards. In this paper I will employ the same method: first I will give an exegesis, and then present a critique of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (henceforth *MFP*). I will give a terse interpretation of the sections and passages relevant to my paper—the "Fifth Meditation" is the one upon which I will concentrate my efforts—showing that by the way of the epistemological and metaphysical arguments made antecedent to and in the "Fifth Meditation," Descartes' theory of recollection leads to an incongruous theory of knowledge.

Historically, the focal point of dispute over Descartes' philosophy stems from his view that clear and distinct propositions are required to justify the existence of a non-deceiving God, while God's veracity is utilized to guarantee our clear and distinct propositions. This is how I have interpreted the charge of circularity traditionally applied to Descartes. The new charge of circularity, a consequence of my interpretation of Descartes' writings, involves Descartes' philosophical beliefs on remembering (henceforth "recollection"). Descartes insists that clear

*Harjeet Parmar is a senior Philosophy student at Clark University. Although not sure of future plans, Harjeet hopes to remain a student of Philosophy.*

<sup>1</sup>I would sincerely like to thank the following people for their time and effort in regards to making this a better paper: Patrick Derr, Elizabeth Lemon, Gary Overvold, and special thanks to Michael Merithew for reading and rereading the drafts of this paper, for his patience, and for his enthusiastic encouragement.

and distinct propositions currently under the focus of the mind's eye do not require God's guarantee (henceforth "divine veracity"), because they are not susceptible to methodological doubt. However, all clear and distinct propositions will at one time or another require divine veracity insofar as it is Descartes' position that our ephemeral attention span cannot keep focused on those propositions with the requisite mental acuity so as to keep perceiving them clearly. Once the mind's eye loses focus, Descartes presumes that the demonstration, as well as the belief that the demonstration was carried out, is stored in memory.

In the process of recollecting from memory's store, awareness of divine veracity is employed to guard against methodological and metaphysical doubts. If the clear and distinct propositions utilized to justify divine veracity do not themselves require reliance on recollecting the demonstration of or belief in divine veracity, then Descartes has been exonerated from the charge of circularity; but under my interpretation of the text, this involves him in another kind of circle. Furthermore, this contradicts Descartes' assertions that all clear and distinct propositions, including divine veracity, require the use of divine veracity. On the other hand, if the clear and distinct propositions utilized to demonstrate divine veracity do require reliance on recollecting divine veracity, then Descartes' argument is circular. In either case, I will show that Descartes' philosophy entails a circularity of some kind.

## I.

Toward the end of the "Fifth Meditation," Descartes makes suspect claims about the process of recollection, i.e. remembering, that have immediate consequences for his project: a systematic doubting of the principles that form the foundations for all his beliefs and opinions in order to accumulate new veracious ones.<sup>2</sup> Descartes writes in what I will term Passage One:

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

<sup>2</sup>In the acquisition of knowledge of a given proposition, Descartes has destroyed the grounds for his original doubt about the proposition and has restored

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 judgement 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 opinions, if I were unaware of God; and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. (*Writings 2*: 69)

Descartes asserts in this passage that without the availability of divine veracity one cannot properly pass into a state of perfectly knowing any proposition. Descartes, as I have interpreted him, means to say that divine veracity is not a necessary condition for having knowledge; however, divine veracity is a necessary and sufficient condition for having "true and certain knowledge." This assertion is rather peculiar. For what could be different about perceiving clearly and distinctly proposition X, namely that 2 and 2 is 4, and calling that knowledge, and perceiving clearly and distinctly proposition X while being aware of God and calling that "true and perfect knowledge?"

This bifurcation between knowledge and "true and perfect knowledge" seems rather pretentious. However, this distinction is of paramount importance to Descartes' theory of knowledge. Descartes wants to say something to the effect that the agnostic does not have the same privileges to clear and distinct propositions, like X, after his awareness dissipates, as does the theist. The theist's awareness of a non-deceiving God's existence certifies the veridicality of the clear and distinct propositions during periods of recollection. For Descartes, this is tantamount to saying that God guarantees our recollection of clear

---

his belief in the truth of the proposition by establishing it on the sure and certain grounds of clarity and distinctness. This is a principle akin to: I have grounds for doubting any proposition P1 so long as all the evidence E that I have for P1 is of kind K and so long as there is some other proposition P2, all of whose evidence is of kind K, such that I formerly believed P2 but subsequently came to know that P2 was false and therefore realized that evidence of kind K alone is insufficient to establish the truth and certainty of any proposition.

and distinct propositions from methodological doubt.<sup>3</sup> The next passage, Passage Two, will help to explicate and justify this interpretation.

For example, when I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; so long as I attend 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 unaware of God. (2: 69–70)

Under further interpretation, making use of Descartes' ecumenical view, an agnostic has knowledge of the geometrical proposition Y, namely that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, only insofar as

1. The agent is (currently) aware of all the steps of the proof: a, b, c,
2. their relation to one another, and the mental acuity required for perceiving propositions clearly and distinctly.<sup>4</sup>

Knowledge of this type is fallible, recalling Passage One, where Descartes ascribes to our nature a transient attention span: "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 distinctly]." Thus, there must be a time during which an agnostic shifts his attention from Y and its demonstration,

<sup>3</sup>For an exposition of methodological doubt, see volume 2, pages 18–23.

<sup>4</sup>Descartes writes in rule 11 of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*: "But in the same passage [rules 3 and 7] we said that a simple deduction of one fact from another is performed by means of intuition. It was necessary to proceed in that way, because two things are required for mental intuition: first, the proposition intuited must be clear and distinct; second, the whole proposition must be understood all at once, and not bit by bit" (1: 368). Descartes understands proposition Y to be a "simple deduction" in the quoted passage of the "Fifth Meditation." He writes in rule 3: "Thus everyone can mentally intuit that he [as in the "I" of the "I think, I am"] exists, that he is thinking, that a triangle is bounded by just three lines, and a sphere by a single surface, and the like" (1: 368).

and when he later recalls that demonstration he subsequently falls into doubt about the soundness and the validity of Y. It is the issue of doubt that creates the gap between knowledge and "true and certain knowledge."

## II.

Perhaps we ought to discuss in more detail the type of doubt Descartes ascribes to the agnostic, and withholds from the theist, before we proceed further for the purposes of explicating "true and certain knowledge," and for the edification of the critical section of this paper. The doubt the agnostic suffers from in recollecting propositions like X, namely that 2 and 2 is 4, arises predominantly in the form of what Descartes has articulated in the First Meditation: doubt induced by the assumption of a Malicious Demon. This doubt can be induced in two ways, either psychologically or metaphysically. Psychological doubt consists in our trepidation about accepting any proposition based on the positing of a Malicious Demon who has made it his exclusive occupation to deceive us in our acquisition of "true and certain knowledge." This Malicious Demon inundates us with demonstrations in the world that lend themselves to proof, but these demonstrations are so similar that, after establishing the truth of one demonstration clearly and distinctly, another similar demonstration, subtly altered, leaves us perturbed over the veracity of the demonstration we thought we intuited clearly and distinctly.<sup>5</sup> This point is an adaptation of the next passage, Passage Three.

For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceived 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, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false. (2: 70)

Admittedly, Descartes makes no mention here of the Malicious Demon, but only of our fallible "natural disposition." However, I think the earlier

<sup>5</sup>Propositions as the objects of our clear and distinct perceptions are used in Descartes' philosophy to form demonstrations. Consult volume 2, pages 33-45.

point parallels and even explicates Passage Three well. Furthermore, becoming aware of God's non-deceiving nature suffices to alleviate our doubts concerning the reliability of our mental faculties (this point will be further discussed later in this paper). Metaphysical doubt, a consequence of our psychological doubt, stems from Descartes' view that certain propositions are truth bearers by divine endorsement, namely the laws of logic and mathematics.<sup>6</sup> A Malicious Demon "of the utmost power and cunning" may resolve to change, when we weren't looking, so to speak, the laws of logic and mathematics so that we may never come to possess "true and certain knowledge."

As a peripheral point, Descartes could not have wanted to attribute doubt exclusively to a treacherous faculty which hinders an agent's ability to perceive clearly and distinctly. If he did, then his philosophy would entail the absurd consequence that upon perceiving the existence of a non-deceiving God, our treacherous faculty would miraculously transform so that it was no longer defective. Furthermore, it is unclear how one could come to perceive God's existence clearly and distinctly had one only the use of a faculty that was completely untrustworthy. Descartes insists that God could not possibly have equipped us with a completely unreliable faculty: God is no deceiver, and to supply his creations with a faculty which was completely unreliable would go against His non-deceiving nature. This reinforces my interpretation that "true and perfect knowledge" is attainable just in the case that an agent has affirmatively concluded that God exists. Failing to distinguish between clear and distinct propositions from what is apparently clear and distinct, theists, as well as the agnostics, can impute their errors to a *misuse* of their faculties as opposed to defective faculties.

In any case, commentators on Descartes' philosophy have taken a similar view about memory: God does not guarantee our faculty of memory, but His awareness is necessary and sufficient to guard it against

<sup>6</sup>In a letter to Arnauld, Descartes writes: "For since the very basis of truth and goodness depends on his [God's] omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot 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" (3: 224).

methodological doubt. Harry Frankfurt writes in response to Willis Doney's interpretation that God vindicates (guarantees) memory: "But if memory is actually fallible, how can it be vindicated, by God or in any other way? On the other hand if it is really vindicated by God, how can it be fallible?" (57). Frankfurt's confusion over this point is justified, I believe, unless Descartes wants to say something to this effect: God causally intervenes to adjust our faculty so that it is no longer completely unreliable. I agree with Frankfurt's contention that Descartes could not have meant vindication of this kind, for to do so would burden Descartes' philosophy with a farcical consideration. Furthermore, my interpretation of this contentious Cartesian polemic aims to locate divine veracity functioning not to guarantee memory, but to guarantee our psychology during periods of recollection.<sup>7</sup> Descartes writes:

Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this [methodological] 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 [methodological] doubt until he acknowledges that God exists. (2: 142)

In this passage, Descartes most definitely implies that the atheist's insecurities about his knowledge claims are psychological. This shifts the emphasis from an active act of guaranteeing to psychological reassurance during periods of recollection. Nowhere in the discussion of divine veracity in the "Fifth Mediation" of the *MFP* do we find Descartes even discussing the faculty of memory, but only the process of recollection. As concerns memory, Descartes is quite explicit in his *Conversations with Burman*: "I have nothing to say on the subject of memory. Everyone

<sup>7</sup>I presume to understand the difference between memory and recollection in Descartes writings as such: memory is a faculty in which our ideas are stored, whereas remembering, i.e. recollection, is the process of picking out ideas in storage. Though there is no direct evidence that Descartes held this view, I provide evidence in the paper that allows me to move in the direction of this interpretation.

should test himself to see whether he is good at remembering. If he has any doubts on that score, then he would make use of written notes and so forth to help him" (3: 148). If it was Descartes' intent to have divine veracity function as guarantee upon memory, he certainly would not have responded in this fashion. Moreover, in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes maintains that memory is "weak and unstable" and needs to be strengthened through "continuous and repeated movements of thought" (1: 408). If memory is ultimately guaranteed by God, why should an agent concern herself with enhancing it? It would suffice to prove the existence of a non-deceiving God, whereby the agent would become aware that his memory is being guaranteed by God. In view of these considerations, it is very unlikely that it was Descartes' intent to have divine veracity function in the capacity that Doney envisions. Now, concerning recollection and other faculties of the mind, it is my belief that Descartes intended divine veracity to appease our psychological and metaphysical doubts about the reliability of those faculties. This reading is quite plausible considering the ample amount of evidence in support of this interpretation in Descartes' writings. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes writes:

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 [even when we were using it properly]. This disposes of the most serious [methodological] 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. (146)

The psychological consequence of divine guarantee is that it makes "true and certain knowledge" possible by alleviating our doubts concerning the reliability of our faculties and grounds the laws of logic and mathematics in a non-deceiving God.

Descartes has thus far justified to our satisfaction, I believe, the privilege which accounts for the theist's "true and certain knowledge," while at the same time severely attenuating the agnostic's claims to knowledge. However, there are still many more passages and terms in need of clarification, one or more of which may force Descartes to recant the view of theistic privilege as something merely apparent. Thus, as a consequence of Descartes' willingness to assert boldly rather than to



state precisely his doctrines, we will do well to clarify passages and define terms so that any interpretation we may provide of him is sure to reach a confluence with his overall views and project.

### III.

First, it is unclear what Descartes' usage of "unaware" is supposed to denote within the context of his statements in Passages One and Two. Descartes' notion of awareness, though intimately connected with explicating "true and certain knowledge," will shift emphasis under the present discussion for the purpose of clarifying the role of divine veracity. Insofar as Descartes employs the word "unaware"—referring to his writings—we may do well to ask what he means by the word "aware." The interpretation of awareness leads us to two theses about the point Descartes is trying to articulate by his usage.<sup>8</sup> Under the first thesis, "aware" could mean something like the following:

1. An agent is aware of Demonstration A: P, Q, R (premises) and S (conclusion), if and only if A is currently under the focus or scrutiny of the mind's eye. All the steps of the proof are held simultaneously in the mind, their relation to one another, with the necessary mental acuity. (Extant Thesis)

Under the second thesis:

2. An agent is conscious of having demonstrated A at time T1 in the past. At time T2 the agent remembers having demonstrated A, and is by the way of residual features of A, application of the step(s) of A applied elsewhere or by reflecting on A, aware of having proved Demonstration A. (Residual Thesis)

So the question then comes to us in this form: does Descartes require that we accept the Extant Thesis or the Residual Thesis insofar as the he requires awareness of God? *Prima facie*, the Extant Thesis may seem

<sup>8</sup>The two theses of awareness that I ultimately adopt for the purposes of this paper come from Descartes' own views about awareness. See volume 2, page 149.

an odd and cumbersome requirement to impute to an epistemological position. Moreover, it is questionable whether the Extant Thesis directly applies with regard to recollection. The acceptance of the Extant Thesis was for the agnostic appurtenant in any claim of his to knowledge, since the agnostic was not theistically privileged. However, for an agent who has proven the existence of a non-deceiving God, thereby concluding on divine veracity, the Extant Thesis is no longer necessary, as Passage Four will reveal.

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 lead me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter arguments to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. (2: 70)

In this passage, Descartes most definitely implies that an agent who remembers having clearly and distinctly perceived God's existence, His non-deceiving nature and His omnipotence—thereby establishing divine veracity—does not have the same reasons for doubting as does the agnostic. Passage Four comes down squarely on the side of the Residual Thesis with respect to clear and distinct propositions about God. But the Residual Thesis no doubt begs the question that Descartes wants to address in the "Fifth Meditation." If the veracity of any clear and distinct proposition is put to question, then it becomes necessary to doubt the clear and distinct proposition of divine veracity. To invoke divine veracity, by recollecting that one had clearly and distinctly demonstrated it in the past, as a means of justifying divine veracity, would beg the question. Moreover, to presume the veracity of such a recollection would generate a new circle.

Furthermore, the two interpretations of doubt, psychological and metaphysical, together with the Residual Thesis supported by the text, only strengthen the case against Descartes because a second form of psychological doubt develops. For in the case of an unscrupulously Malicious Demon "of the utmost power" an agent could be led to the

false belief that at some time in the past he had had a clear and distinct perception of a non-deceiving God. Suppose that an agent at time  $T_1$  has not proven the existence of a non-deceiving God, the Malicious Demon would find this time especially convenient to delude the agent into thinking that he had proven the existence of God clearly and distinctly. Then insofar as he recollects having clearly and distinctly demonstrated the existence of a non-deceiving God, what reason could he have to prove it again? This point is explicit in Passage Four, where Descartes asserts that once an agent has demonstrated clearly and distinctly the existence of a non-deceiving God, thereby establishing divine veracity, the agent no longer has reasons to attend to the arguments as long as he remembers clearly and distinctly perceiving them. In this case, he shall always remain under the pretenses of the Malicious Demon and never achieve theistic privilege. Descartes' conclusions about the residual recollection of divine veracity are simply inconsistent, which also leaves him open to a most perturbing form of doubt.

We should stop here and take stock of what we have ascribed to Descartes thus far, reminding ourselves of the appropriate distinctions and attributions before we move to the critical section of this paper. This way, if our interpretation seems to be departing on a tangent, leading us to associate the origins of an absurd conclusion to the domain of this great thinker's philosophy, we may right ourselves. At the outset of our exegesis, we established Descartes' notion of theistic privilege, whereby "true and certain knowledge" became a reality, only to call it into question later on the pretenses of the Malicious Demon. Subsequently, we provided two interpretations to account for Descartes' notion of awareness. The first interpretation, the Extant Thesis, we discounted insofar as it conflicted with the text. The second interpretation, the Residual Thesis, we discredited as inconsistent. We demonstrated that Descartes' philosophy explicated through the manifold of the Residual Thesis entailed the circular procedure of relying on the recollection of the clear and distinct proposition of divine veracity to adequately ground divine veracity, namely that God guarantees the recollection of clear and distinct propositions from methodological doubt. The following section of this paper, the critical section, will have the onus of conclusively proving that Descartes' notion of theistic privilege is illusory, and that the case's exhaustive interpretation of Descartes' notion of awareness entails that his philosophy is incongruous, riddled with procedural circularity, if not outright ludicrous.

#### IV.

Now that I have sufficiently developed an interpretation of the parts of Descartes' philosophy germane to this paper, I will proceed to articulate the reason why his philosophical outlook is untenable while trying scrupulously to be consistent with his overall view. First, let us turn to Descartes' notion of awareness. Earlier in the paper, we sketched the reason for rejecting the Residual Thesis on the basis that it was circular. Thus, Descartes cannot properly proceed under the interpretation of the Residual Thesis. But let us be sure about this.

##### Argument One: God's Existence

1. If existence is a perfection and God is perfect, then God exists.
2. Existence is a perfection and God is perfect.
3. Thus, God exists. (1, 2) (2: 10, 64–68, 126–28)

##### Argument Two: God's Non-Deceiving Nature

1. If something deceives, then it is imperfect.
2. God is not imperfect.
3. Thus, God does not deceive. (1, 2) (2: 16–17, 53–55)

Arguments One and Two are obviously valid, and for the purposes of my paper, I will assent to their soundness, showing that even if the arguments are taken to be sound, they entail a ludicrous conclusion.

##### Argument Three: Divine Veracity

1. "My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true." (Passage One)
2. I clearly and distinctly perceive X, that 2 and 2 is 4.
3. I have an ephemeral attention span, thus I cannot keep my attention focused on the demonstration so as to keep perceiving it clearly. (Passage One)
4. I am subject to doubts about X during periods of recollection.
5. I clearly and distinctly perceive that God exists, and He is no

deceiver.

6. Awareness of 5 entails that I am no longer subject to methodological doubt about X.

7. God guarantees recollection of clear and distinct propositions against methodological doubt.

8. I am theistically privileged, allowing me to claim I have "true and certain knowledge."

Argument Three enumerates the reasons for concluding on divine veracity. It also makes clear the consequence of employing the Residual Thesis, namely that it involves Descartes in a circle. When he is asked to defend his clear and distinct propositions, if Descartes relies on recollecting that God guarantees the recollection of clear and distinct propositions from methodological doubt as a method of grounding divine veracity and exonerating divine veracity from methodological doubt, then his argument is circular. What is required of Descartes is that he attend once again to the demonstration of divine veracity, Arguments One, Two and Three or a variant of their sort. Relying on his belief that he had once engaged in these demonstrations will not suffice. Confirming his belief that divine veracity was demonstrated in the past is insufficient because that belief may have been surreptitiously placed in Descartes' mind by the Malicious Demon. Under the delusion caused by this artifice, one would be assured that our demonstrations, about whatsoever, were guaranteed against methodological doubt by a non-deceiving God. However, we have no reason to assume such security unless the demonstration is currently under the focus of the mind's eye. This restriction is a consequence of the second type of psychological doubt discussed earlier.

As a result, the theist and the agnostic are left to acquire knowledge on a level playing field; the theist is no more privileged against his methodological doubts than is the agnostic. Therefore, in rejecting the Residual Thesis, we have shown that Descartes is inconsistent in the *MFP*: clear and distinct propositions employed to demonstrate divine veracity themselves require reliance on recollection of the demonstration for divine veracity. This inconsistency also destroys the grounds for theistic privilege. There can be no more claims to "true and certain knowledge" by either party, and knowledge is attainable only insofar as we are extantly aware.

## V.

Though the hopes of the Cartesian that lay in theistic privilege are left weakened, they are by no means dashed. The circularity caused by the adoption of the Residual Thesis is not inescapable. If it can be shown that the clear and distinct propositions used to demonstrate divine veracity do not themselves rely on recollecting the demonstrations for divine veracity, then Descartes has been exonerated from the charge of circularity. One way of carrying out this task is to interpret the text using the Extant Thesis, even though there is clear evidence in the *MFP* against such an interpretation. It is, however, a blunder on Descartes' part to insist that no non-Extant propositions are immune to doubt. The Extant Thesis was rejected in the exegetical part of this paper primarily because of the textual support for the Residual Thesis. But Descartes maintains in *Rules* that it is possible if a demonstration is "simple and transparent" enough, that it can be intuited in a single intuition, thus obviating its reliance on memory. He writes:

Say, for instance, in virtue of several operations, I have discovered the relation between the first and the second magnitude of a series, then the relation between the second and the third and the third and fourth, and lastly the fourth and fifth: that does not necessarily enable me to see what the relation is between the first and the fifth, and I cannot deduce it from the relations I already know unless I remember all of them. That is why it is necessary that I run over them again and again in my mind until I can pass for the first to the last so quickly that memory is left with practically no role to play and I seem to be intuiting the whole thing at once. One cannot fail to see that in this way the sluggishness of the mind is redressed and its capacity even enlarged. (1: 148–49; 408–09)

Descartes can escape the circularity objection by obviating the need to rely on memory, thereby adopting the Extant Thesis solely in the cases where the demonstrations for divine veracity are at issue. But along with adopting the Extant Thesis, for the sole purpose of establishing divine veracity, comes the rejection of Residual Thesis on those same demonstrations. The two theses can be allowed to dovetail just in case the proof for divine veracity is held extantly. This can allow Descartes to

maintain that he is extantly aware of divine veracity, and residually aware of all clear and distinct propositions including divine veracity. Descartes can be allowed to reflect on, but not to justify, divine veracity residually when and only when he is extantly aware of divine veracity. The reason for splitting up the epistemological task this way is that even though Descartes maintains that "simple and transparent" proofs can be held in a single intuition, he nowhere claims that all "simple and transparent" proofs have to be held in a single moment. So not every proposition of knowledge has to be intuited in a single intuition, nor is such a mentally Herculean task necessary to escape circularity. It will suffice if the demonstrations for divine veracity are held extantly.

As a consequence of assuming the Extant Thesis for demonstrating divine veracity, since the theist can no longer utilize his memory to justify divine veracity, an agent will have to keep her attention focused on the demonstrations for divine veracity, Arguments One, Two, and Three or a variant of their sort, also maintaining the mental acuity required for perceiving the steps and their relation to one another clearly and distinctly. In the acquisition of knowledge, it will become necessary to demonstrate a proof requiring the use of divine veracity, in which case the agent must attend not only to the current demonstration but also to the demonstrations of God's existence, His non-deceiving nature, and divine veracity.<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, the steps of the current proof can be moved in and out of memory so long as the agent is extantly aware of divine veracity. However, this procedure of multi-tasking is obviously too tedious a mental task, and it is questionable whether such a procedure could ever be carried out. I am rather inclined to believe that if the consequences of Descartes' philosophy were presented to him in this way, even he would find this mentally Herculean task not parsimonious.

But to comprehend the cogency of the objection against Descartes under my interpretation, one only need see that the demonstrations for divine veracity are susceptible to our transient attention span. Once the theist shifts mental vision from the demonstration of divine veracity, in order recapture it in a single moment again, she must re-demonstrate God's existence, His non-deceiving nature and divine veracity. The reason for this redundant procedure is presumably that the reliance

<sup>9</sup>This example is a direct adaptation from Frankfurt.

upon memory for the grounding of divine veracity is a route no longer open to Descartes because it entails generating a new circle. Then the following question naturally arises: since Descartes asserts that we have a transient attention span whereby “[we] cannot fix [our] mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly,” how long can an agent engage in this unwieldy mental act? Descartes does not specify any length of time since perspicacity can vary among people depending upon how much effort they supply to “redress” the “sluggishness of the mind” and to enlarging its capacity. But there would eventually come a time during which the theist could no longer focus his mental vision so as to pass over the steps of the demonstrations with the requisite mental acuity, namely during periods of sleep. Even if we admit that an agent can keep extantly focused on divine veracity as long as he is awake, it is a difficult endeavor to prove that the necessary mental acuity will remain during periods of repose to keep divine veracity firmly situated in his mind.

When an argument is “simple and transparent,” Descartes insists that it can be extantly held in one single, encompassing intuition, thus obviating the reliance on memory. If we concede that divine veracity is a “simple and transparent” argument, then this absolves Descartes from the charge of circularity. Furthermore, it allows the Cartesian to engage in demonstrations for the purposes of augmenting her knowledge, without engaging in a circle, just in case she is extantly aware of divine veracity. In expanding our knowledge, Descartes admits that an agent will encounter demonstrations that cannot be captured in a single, encompassing intuition, which he calls “complex and involved” demonstrations.<sup>10</sup> When an agent engages in a demonstration which is “complex and involved,” the demonstration for divine veracity must accompany the “complex and involved” demonstration extantly, whereas the steps of “complex and involved” demonstration can be moved in and out of memory. However, any discontinuities in our transient attention span, which cannot continuously be fixated on some demonstration(s), would entail not only re-demonstration of divine veracity, but putting into suspension the “complex and involved” proof until the demonstrations for

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of these two types of proofs, “simple and transparent” and “complex and involved,” see volume 2, pages 360–430.



divine veracity were once again captured in a single intuition. That is to say it would require inculcating the "simple and transparent" proofs for divine veracity extantly, before moving on with the "complex and involved" proof. The individual cannot continue with the "complex and involved" proof residually, moving the steps in and out of memory, if there is any vacillation concerning her belief over divine veracity. The reason for this involves the agent's reliance on moving steps of the demonstration in and out of memory. To recollect the step(s) of the "complex and involved" demonstration without the use of divine veracity would cause psychological and metaphysical doubts concerning the "complex and involved" demonstration. On the other hand "complex and involved" proofs by definition cannot be demonstrated extantly. Therefore, when divine veracity dissipates from an agent's mind (and it must at some time do so according to Descartes), he must re-demonstrate the proofs for it in order to reestablish theistic privilege. This could not possibly be a consequence of the epistemological criterion envisioned by Descartes, but it follows if we take Descartes' writings for what they are worth.

It is reasonable to inquire about Descartes' Foundationalist program, that once the foundation for knowledge evanesces, what is the agent to think about the knowledge claims constructed on that foundation? Once an agent loses mental focus of those demonstrations, what is the epistemological status of the current "complex and involved" proof being entertained and of all our prior knowledge claims established on divine veracity? Are we burdened with re-demonstrating all our knowledge claims once divine veracity dissipates? If so, the Cartesian agent's claims to "true and certain knowledge" would be just as prolonged as his attention span. To accept this construction, however, would be a mistake. When Descartes writes that an atheist cannot have "true and certain knowledge," he does not mean that every one of the atheist's convictions is false, but merely dubitable. The atheist's convictions are dubitable because they are still susceptible to methodological doubt; however, dubitability does not materially imply falsity. Once the agent's mental focus on the demonstrations of divine veracity dissipate, all his claims to knowledge become dubitable. Once divine veracity is reestablished, the agent's clear and distinct propositions become, once again, "true and certain knowledge." Concerning "complex and involved" proofs, it is true that an agent could continue them even without reliance upon

divine veracity, it is only that the agent would be taking a chance of being psychologically not sure about the content and validity of the demonstration. Under Descartes' epistemology, it is always best to proceed with the task of the acquisition of knowledge after having established the existence of a non-deceiving God, but I have shown that Descartes' best is simply not good enough.

## VI.

A consequence of the conclusion upon which I arrive using the Extant Thesis not only entails the absurd conclusion that re-demonstration of divine veracity becomes a morning ritual along with bathing, but if the agent is to have an ablution from methodological doubt, then re-demonstration is a must. As we have already concluded, Descartes cannot rely upon his belief that at some time in the past he demonstrated divine veracity to justify divine veracity; that would be circular. He must attend again to its demonstrations after his awareness of divine veracity dissipates. However, under this interpretation, the Cartesian cannot help but fall in and out of certitude, never coming to achieve long-term theistic privilege, constantly having to re-demonstrate divine veracity over again. This redundant procedure is the other form of circularity that results. This use of the notion of circularity is an equivocation on the traditional use of the term as it applies to Descartes' philosophy, but the redundant process of re-demonstration that is the result of my interpretation was what I set out to prove—only adding to Descartes' recurring problems with circles.

### Works Cited

- Descartes, Rene. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. 3 vols. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Doney, Willis. "The Cartesian Circle." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 3 (1955): 324-38.
- Frankfurt, Harry G. "Memory and the Cartesian Circle." *The Philosophical Review* 71.4 (1962): 504-511.