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THE EPISTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE  
OF CURRENT CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTIONS  
IN DESCARTES' EPISTEMOLOGY

In the Prefatory Letter of 1647 to the French edition of *Principles of Philosophy* addressed to the Abbe Claude Picot, Descartes writes that knowledge understood as *scientia* is best illustrated by the metaphor of a tree: its roots are metaphysics, physics is its trunk, and the natural sciences and ethics are its branches (AT 9B:14, CSM 1:186). A similar image of knowledge—albeit expressed in somewhat different metaphors—can be found in Descartes' earlier works. In *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* Descartes argues that in order to understand the nature of knowledge, one needs to first and foremost see it analogously to a string of numbers. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, on the other hand, he claims that the metaphor of a building best conveys his conception of the structure of knowledge. Just like the endurance of a building depends on its foundations, the endurance of the edifice of knowledge rests on its first principles. If they are stable and certain, then the edifice of knowledge will be equally stable and certain (AT 7:17, CSM 2:12; AT 7:536–7, CSM 2:366).

Given this approach to the structure of knowledge, it is entirely understandable why Descartes chose the search for the first principles as one of the main objectives of his epistemology. Those principles, as he believed, needed to satisfy a number of conditions. First, they must be certain in the sense that their truth cannot be doubted when we attentively examine them; second, they must be primitive in the sense that they are capable of being known without a knowledge of other matters;

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and third, they must be foundational in the sense that they enable us to acquire knowledge of everything else (AT 9B:2, CSM 1:179/180; AT 10:370, CSM 1:15).

In this article, I will discuss closely one of the threads in Descartes' search for the basic principles of "the entire edifice" of knowledge, which together form the "first philosophy." Namely, I will focus on the epistemic role that Descartes believed was played in knowledge construction by current clear and distinct perceptions: the ideas or propositions which appear most evident to us when we are attending to them.<sup>1</sup> The issue has been a subject of heated philosophical debates among commentators of Descartes' epistemology for a long time. The reason for the controversy is *inter alia* that much depends on the issue: not only the way of interpretation of Descartes' epistemological project, but its philosophical merit more generally.

In recent literature, we can find two interpretations about the epistemic status and function of current clear and distinct perceptions in Descartes' epistemology. The first one may be called the psychological interpretation. It states that in light of the radical skeptical hypothesis of the deceiving God from the First Meditation, which seems to imply that nothing is exempt from doubt, current clear and distinct perceptions are only psychologically certain, at least anywhere prior to when God's existence is proven and the general rule of truth is established. Until we reach the conclusion of the proof of God's veracity—which eliminates the danger of the deceiving God hypothesis—anything with no exception may in fact turn out to be false, including propositions that appear evident at the moment. Thus, even though, as Descartes claims, we cannot but assent to propositions while clearly and distinctly perceiving them, they nevertheless remain at most psychologically, not normatively, certain before knowing of God's existence (see Gewirth 1941; Loeb 1992; Curley 2006).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Most generally, the discussion will concern *current clear and distinct perceptions*, or more specifically, propositions that are currently clearly and distinctly perceived. It is important to note that Descartes uses words: "to perceive" (*percipere*) and "perception" (*perceptio*) in a much wider sense than they are usually used in contemporary philosophy. In the most general sense, to perceive is for Descartes "to be aware of or to grasp ideas or mental contents" (NOLAN 2016, 574). However, it is crucial to stress, as we shall see, that when it comes to clear and distinct perceptions, they are accessed—according to Descartes—through intellect alone or pure mental apprehension of intellect.

<sup>2</sup> Gewirth accounts for the psychological certainty as a state of compulsory conviction when "the mind is compelled to assent to the truth of directly presented clear and distinct perceptions, but in which metaphysical doubt is still possible" (386). In turn, he characterizes normative certainty as metaphysical certainty, "in which the mind is so assured of the truth of clear and distinct perceptions that even metaphysical doubt is impossible." By metaphysical doubt, he means doubt caused by the deceiving God hypothesis (GEWIRTH 1941, 386).

The second interpretation can be termed normative. It states that Descartes believed that current clear and distinct perceptions are both utterly immune to doubt, including doubt occasioned by the deceiving God hypothesis (current clear and distinct perceptions can be doubted only when one is no longer attending to them), as well as true, even before God's existence is proven and the general rule of truth is established. Thus, their certainty, according to that account, is for Descartes not merely psychological but normative. In other words, the normative interpretation has it that the inability to withhold assent to that which is currently perceived clearly and distinctly stems from possessing knowledge, not, as the psychological interpretation claims, from being psychologically compelled (Cottingham 1986; Della Rocca 2005; Carriero 2008; Ragland 2016).<sup>3</sup>

I endorse the normative interpretation for a number of what I believe to be cogent reasons.<sup>4</sup> However, there are also some difficulties associated with it. These difficulties need to be tackled if one is to make a case for the normative interpretation as the correct one for the reconstruction of Descartes' epistemological program. Therefore, after presenting positive arguments for the interpretation in part one of the paper, I will discuss the difficulties of textual and substantive nature that the normative interpretation needs to address if it is to be upheld. This will allow me to assess the tenability of the normative interpretation, as well as to establish the extent to which it is consistent with other claims that Descartes undeniably made. Before I turn to the above task, however, let me briefly say a few more words about the psychological interpretation. This will allow me to highlight the main points in which the two interpretations differ, as well as to make clear the reasons why I believe that the psychological interpretation, although subtle and philosophically appealing, is untenable.

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<sup>3</sup> It can be also said that the difference between psychological and normative certainty is that the former lies in the subjective confidence in the proposition's truth, while the latter is an objective property of the proposition. As Della Rocca rightly notes, "if a claim is merely psychologically certain, then it may well be false; but, arguably, if a claim is normatively certain—if there is no good reason to doubt it—then it must be true" (DELLA ROCCA 2005, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Further, it needs to be noted that there are two different versions of the normative interpretation. The one that I endorse claims that all current clear and distinct perceptions are entirely immune to doubt and normatively certain. The other normative interpretation posits that only a small subset of current clear and distinct perceptions is entirely immune to doubt and normatively certain prior to proving God's existence and the rule of truth. I discuss this issue in later sections.

## I

It can be argued that accepting the psychological interpretation puts Descartes' theory of knowledge in serious trouble. If psychological certainty is all Descartes has at the outset of his search for the foundations of knowledge, then it seems that the initial set of propositions he needs to get his epistemological project off the ground cannot serve as an absolutely secure and firm starting point for inferring the rest of knowledge. Since everything that we know prior to proving the existence of God is only psychologically certain and it is subject to doubt in the face of the deceiving God hypothesis, then the path to knowledge that is absolutely certain, so extensively discussed by Descartes throughout his work, seems entirely blocked. The psychological interpretation appears therefore to be starkly at odds with Descartes' general epistemological program.

Proponents of the psychological interpretation would most likely object to the above claim. Some of them argue that the psychological interpretation does have support in Descartes' texts, and that it is not at all inconsistent with his epistemological project; that is, with the task of building knowledge on a "firm and solid foundation." Descartes might start off with propositions certain only in a psychological sense, but once God's existence is proven (and hence the deceiving God hypothesis eliminated), these psychologically certain propositions take on a higher epistemological status—they become normatively certain. This is nicely expressed by Gewirth, who claims that Descartes' epistemology hinges on the assumption that "a metaphysical certainty can emerge from propositions whose certainty, at the point at which they occur in the demonstration, is only psychological" (Gewirth 1941, 387; see also Gueroult 1955, 41–45). Thus, he argues that the psychological interpretation is consistent with Descartes' objective of building knowledge on "firm and solid foundation." In the same vein, Curley interprets Descartes by introducing "the idea of an assent-compelling argument." Here is how he puts it in his article "The Cogito and the Foundations of Knowledge."

I claim that what Descartes is trying to do in the *Meditations* is to construct an assent-compelling argument to the conclusion that God exists and cannot be a deceiver (2006, 42) ... It is sufficient that the premises of the argument and the inferential moves be psychologically compelling. It is not necessary for them to be indubitable in the strong sense which implies that they cannot properly be doubted. (2006, 44; see also Gueroult 1955, 41–45)

I do not believe this is a legitimate explanation both from a philosophical as well as from an interpretative perspective. Similarly to others, I do not think there is

such a thing as moving from psychological to normative certainty (Van Cleve 1998; Della Rocca 2005). The core of the problem is that there does not seem to be a way in which psychological certainty, which is a purely subjective state of mind, could found normative certainty about clear and distinct perceptions, which is an objective state (Van Cleve 2008, 104).<sup>5</sup>

Other supporters of the psychological interpretation offer a yet different exegesis of Descartes' epistemology (Frankfurt, Bennett). They claim that neither does the psychological interpretation pose any serious problems as far as Descartes' epistemological program is concerned, nor is it irreconcilable with his main objective. To make their point, they draw attention to the conception of Descartes' radical doubt—especially the skeptical hypothesis of the deceiving God—that he adopts in the First Meditation. This conception in their view completely subverts any claim to absolutely certain knowledge. The fact that Descartes adopted it suggests that he did not seek undeniable foundations or absolute truths understood as correspondence to reality. Rather, Descartes' task was to acquire only strong and reasonable beliefs that allowed him to do away with skepticism and achieve psychological certainty, irrespective of whether these psychologically certain beliefs were objectively true propositions. In other words, Descartes did not intend to build the edifice of knowledge on a true, certain, and absolutely warranted foundation. "These normative notions," as Bennett puts it, "actually play a small part in the work [of Descartes], most of which concerns intellectual stability, tranquility, peace in the doxastic kingdom—a system of beliefs that will stay put" (Bennett 2001, 377).<sup>6</sup> Support for this indeed being Descartes' perspective comes from his Replies to the Second Objections, where we read:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible

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<sup>5</sup> Van Cleve rightly points out that "Descartes played for higher stakes. The certainty he sought was certainty in a sense entailing both *maximal evidence* and *truth*" (1998, 106).

<sup>6</sup> A similar view is expressed by LOEB (1990) and FRANKFURT (1970/2008). "My own interpretation involves a rather different way of understanding him. Although I agree that he sometimes conceives truth and falsity in terms of correspondence, I do not believe that this conception plays a very important role in his treatment of the epistemological problems that concern him most. Descartes seems willing to recognize and to make limited use of a notion of absolute truth, which may be explicated in terms of correspondence. But this absolute truth is not what interests him. I am inclined to take more seriously than do most commentators the following passage, in which he denies that the truth he seeks consists in the correspondence of a belief to reality" (FRANKFURT 2008, 35). In a different passage: "Descartes's reasoning in the Meditations is designed not so much to prove that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, as to establish that there are no reasonable grounds for doubting this" (2008, 247).

for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged “absolute falsity” bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. (AT 7:144–145, CSM 2:103)

I find this interpretation unconvincing and believe that the above fragment fails to support it. I admit that the deceiving God hypothesis that Descartes adopted can lead to a suspicion that he claimed that doubt is essentially unbounded in its scope—I will address this issue later. I also admit that without context, the above fragment of Descartes’ response to the Second Objections can suggest that Descartes indeed did not intend to build a system of knowledge on the basis of an absolutely true and unmovable foundation. When we consider the context of his words, however, things start looking quite different. Before the cited excerpt, Descartes explicitly states that his intention is to defend the thesis that “whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive must be completely accepted as true and certain” (AT 7:144, CSM 2:103). Further, after the cited excerpt, he writes that it does not really matter if someone makes out that such propositions which we perceive very clearly and distinctly “might appear false to God or to an angel,” because “the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story” (AT 7:146, CSM 2:104). In sum, the sheer fact that we can find statements in Descartes’ works saying that one should not care whether something is absolutely true does not imply that (a) he pursued in his epistemology merely psychological certainty and that (b) we are allowed to take normative notions out of his whole epistemological program and interpret it purely in terms of confidence or tranquility.<sup>7</sup>

There are multiple passages where Descartes explicitly admits that his overarching desire is to discover completely certain and absolutely true foundations of knowledge understood as correspondence to or agreement with reality. For instance, in *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes discloses that from the very

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<sup>7</sup> I am not alone in my views, and it seems a number of other scholars share them, e.g., COTTINGHAM (1986, 77), WILLIAMS (1978, 55), KENNY (1968, 195), KULSTAD (1977), or HATFIELD (2003, 173–74). In the passage in question, Kenny writes: “Descartes does not say that it does not matter if our intuitions appear false to God or to an angel and are therefore absolutely false. He says that it does not matter if someone feigns this. Why does it not matter? Because we are certain that what he supposes is only a fiction” (1968, 195).

beginning of his philosophical enterprise, he wished to “devote [him]self solely to the search for truth” (AT 6:31, CSM 1:126). Similar comments can be found in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (Rule One), *Meditations on First Philosophy* (AT 7:62, CSM 2:43; AT 7:70, CSM 2:48; AT 7:226, CSM 2:159), as well as in his correspondence with Marin Mersenne (AT 2:597, CSMK 3:139). In light of all of those claims, it would be unreasonable to assume that Descartes’ philosophical goal was not what he said it was and that his search for the absolute truth understood as correspondence to reality was not what interested him in his epistemological program.

Furthermore, if the interpretation discussed above were to be taken seriously, it would force an entirely psychological reading of Descartes’ epistemological program. This would in turn mean that there is no tight connection between the certainty (the quest for certainty) and truth (the search for truth) in Descartes’ account of knowledge. Truth is a property of propositions that is constituted by their conformity with reality, whereas certainty is a property of propositions in relation to their justification. Descartes clearly distinguished the two. He was, however, deeply convinced that certainty entails truth. When one can be certain of a proposition  $p$ , then it means that  $p$  is true (AT 7:15, CSM 2:11; AT 9B:2, CSM 1:179; compare Gierulanka 1962; Kulstad 1977).

If my above arguments are sound, then it follows that one cannot interpret Descartes’ epistemology as a psychologically orientated program. A correct interpretation of Descartes’ epistemological program must account for, on the one hand, his claim that certainty about a proposition is bound up with its truth, and on the other, his claim that truth in the strict sense consists in “the conformity of thought with its object,” as he puts it in the letter of 16 October 1639 to Mersenne (AT 2:597, CSMK 3:139).<sup>8</sup>

## II

Let us now move to the positive argument for the normative interpretation of currently occurring clear and distinct perceptions. First, I will present textual grounds for attributing this interpretation to Descartes.

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<sup>8</sup> On this point I fully agree with Williams, who in his seminal book (1978/2005) convincingly argues that “we cannot understand Descartes if we break the connection between the search for certainty and the search for truth, or the connection between knowledge and the correspondence of ideas to reality” (2005, 185–86).

In the Third Meditation, Descartes states the following:

... when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive [*percipere*] very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. (AT 7:36, CSM 2:25)

It seems clear to me that the above explicitly demonstrates that, for Descartes, that which we currently perceive clearly and distinctly is entirely immune to all doubt. What is more, the final part of the cited excerpt suggests that this immunity to doubt stems from the fact that we have strong reasons for believing that our clear and distinct perceptions cannot be other than how we currently see them. This means that the immunity to doubt in question cannot be construed as a state of an exclusively psychological nature.

Further support for this interpretation comes from Descartes' concept of perception (*perceptio*) in the context of perceiving clear and distinct ideas or propositions. In the Second Meditation, in the famous fragment about wax, Descartes states that perceiving (*perceptio*) something clearly and distinctly is not a matter "of vision or touch or imagination—nor has it ever been ... —but of purely mental scrutiny" (AT 7:31, CSM 2:21). Of course, in order for such perception by the mind (*perceptio ab intellectu*) to happen, some conditions have to be met.<sup>9</sup> If they are met, however, we are, according to Descartes, capable of the kind of knowing that is (a) free of the distortive influence of the imagination, and which is (b) the result of a "clear and attentive mind," or—as Descartes had it in *Rules for the Direction of Mind*—knowing "which proceeds solely from the light of reason (*lumen naturale*)" (AT 10:368, CSM 1:14).

What is interesting is that the expression *lumen naturale* (or *lux rationis*) appears most often in the context of clear and distinct, or evident, perceptions (see, e.g., AT 7:15, CSM 2:11; AT 7:401, CSM 2:28; AT 7:49, CSM 2:33). It can be assumed, then, that Descartes takes knowing by the natural light as always clear and distinct.<sup>10</sup> The above is consistent with what Descartes writes in the latter part of the Third

<sup>9</sup> The details about the conditions are extremely complex. Apart from the conditions put forward in reference to the subject, there are conditions for the object, its structure, if it is to be capable of being known clearly and distinctly.

<sup>10</sup> A similar view appears in the comments of other historians: CARRIERO (2008, 305) and KOPANIA (1988, 170).



Meditation, when he is discussing the difference between that which “is revealed ... by the natural light (*lumen naturale*)” and that which “is taught by nature”:

Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light — for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on — cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. (Med 3, AT 7:38, CSM 2:27)

Considering the above together with the fact that according to Descartes the natural light is a sure mark of discerning the truth, we can conclude that perceiving something in a clear and distinct way amounts to learning the truth. That, in turn, seems to legitimize the conclusion that, for Descartes, the reason for which we cannot help but assent to propositions currently clearly and distinctly perceived is the truth. Descartes claims in the cited passage that we do not have any other, more authoritative faculty which could make us think that such propositions which we perceive currently clearly and distinctly are not true. Thus, it is not merely a psychological impulse, but most of all the undeniable reason that the natural light unveils before us that compels us to affirm as true that which is currently perceived clearly and distinctly.

The Fifth Meditation provides further strong support for the view that Descartes sees clear and distinct perceptions as normatively certain, absolutely true, and immune to doubt. He writes thus:

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; and so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. (AT 7:69/70, CSM 2:46)

He makes analogous statements in his Replies to the Objections brought against the Meditations. For instance, in his Replies to the Second Objections, Descartes explains that when he stated that nothing can be known for sure until God’s existence is ascertained, the word “nothing” was meant to refer solely to that which *is not* currently perceived clearly and distinctly. Therefore—Descartes continues—an atheist can be certain of that which he/she perceives currently in a clear and distinct way because the certitude of such perceptions does not hinge on the knowledge of God’s existence, but on what the light of reason clearly and distinctly reveals to him or her. When we perceive something clearly and distinctly, we *ipso facto* know that it is true, without recourse to anything else. Light that makes something visible makes itself visible as well and renders any other light redundant for that purpose; a similar model, according to Descartes, holds for current clear and dis-

inct perceptions. They themselves supply everything that is needed for one to be certain of them. This claim is expressed by Descartes in the following manner:

... when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. The fact that an atheist can be “clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” is something I do not dispute. (AT 7:140–141, CSM 2:100–101)

In a different passage, he writes similarly:

I have explained, in several places, the sense in which this “nothing” is to be understood. It is this. So long as we attend to a truth which we perceive very clearly, we cannot doubt it. But when, as often happens, we are not attending to any truth in this way, then even though we remember that we have previously perceived many things clearly, nevertheless there will be nothing which we may not justly doubt so long as we do not know that whatever we clearly perceive is true. (AT 7:460, CSM 2:309)

Yet another piece of support for the normative interpretation can be found in *Principles of Philosophy*, where Descartes states that the “mind [...] knowing itself” discovers in itself also “certain common notions for which it constructs various proofs; and, for as long as it attends to them, it is completely convinced of their truth” (AT 8A:9, CSM 1:197). Furthermore, *Conversation with Burman* also lends some strong support. Descartes explains there that even if we did not have the knowledge of God’s existence, we would still not doubt the truths that are clear and distinct to us. We know that they are certain and true, because we perceive them clearly and distinctly. Thus, the knowledge of that which is currently clear and distinct precedes the knowledge of God’s existence. If it was the opposite, we would not be able to prove His existence.

If we did not know that all truth has its origin in God, then however clear our ideas were, we would not know [*sciremus*] that they were true, or that we were not mistaken. I mean, of course, when we were not paying attention to them, and when we merely remembered that we had clearly and distinctly perceived them. For on other occasions, when we do pay attention to the truths themselves, even though we may not know God exists, we cannot be in any doubt about them; otherwise, we could not prove that God exists [*nam alias non possemus demonstrare Deum esse*]. (AT 5:178, CSMK 353)

Burman says:

It seems there is a circle. For in the Third Meditation the author uses axioms to prove the existence of God, even though he is not yet certain of not being deceived about these.

To which Descartes replies:

He does use such axioms in the proof, but he knows [*scit*] that he is not deceived with regard to them, since he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain [*certus*] that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to give his assent to them. (AT 5:148, CSMK 334)

The above are the pivotal texts that I believe clearly demonstrate that Descartes endorsed the view that currently clear and distinct perceptions are normatively certain, true, and completely immune to doubt, even prior to proving that God exists. Let us now turn to the philosophical merit of the normative interpretation.

### III

One of the major advantages of the normative interpretation is, I believe, that it provides the most effective way (both from interpretative and philosophical point of view) to show that Descartes is not guilty of circularity.<sup>11</sup> The charge of circularity—the so-called Cartesian Circle—has a long history. Generally, the weight of this charge rests on the assumption that in Descartes' epistemology, in order to know anything for certain (even propositions that are currently perceived clearly and distinctly), one must first know that God exists and is not a deceiver. Here is how Antoine Arnauld puts it in the Fourth Objections:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. (AT 7:214, CSM 2:150)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I do not intend to claim here that the psychological interpretation makes it impossible to find a solution to the problem of the Cartesian Circle. Gewirth, a proponent of the psychological interpretation, argues that "Descartes's argument is not circular, for, while it is by the *psychological* certainty of clear and distinct perceptions that God's existence is proved, what God guarantees is the *metaphysical* certainty of such perceptions" (1941, 386). I am convinced, however, that the normative interpretation does a better job in this respect than the alternative psychological interpretation. For a nice review of various ways of avoiding the Cartesian Circle, see Gary Hatfield's article "The Cartesian Circle" (2006).

<sup>12</sup> Here is how the authors of the Second Objections put it: "you are not yet certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God." It follows from this that you do not yet clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since,

Within the normative interpretation, however, we can demonstrate that the charge of circularity misses the mark, because it ignores the fact that for Descartes the certainty of at least some propositions does not, in fact, require the knowledge of God's existence and veracity. According to the normative interpretation, propositions currently perceived clearly and distinctly are absolutely certain—normatively certain—even before the issue of the existence and veracity of God is resolved. From that, it follows that Descartes could start off with the current clear and distinct propositions and, without the danger of circularity, first prove the existence of God (the Third and Fifth Meditations), and then to argue for a full and final support for the Rule of Truth (the Fourth and Fifth Meditations), according to which whatever we perceive “clearly and distinctly is of necessity true” (AT 7:70, CSM 2:48).

Therefore, within the normative interpretation, the proof of God's existence is a necessary condition only with respect to those propositions which we do not currently clearly and distinctly perceive. In order to know that they are certainly true, we need to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver. Conversely, this is not necessary for propositions that are currently perceived clearly and distinctly. These are absolutely true and certain in and of themselves. They do not need any additional support or any external guarantee. Our complete confidence in truth of those propositions stems from the fact that the reasons in their support are perceived clearly and distinctly. As long as we currently perceive a proposition  $p$  clearly and distinctly, or—to put it differently—if we are attending to the reasons that prove the proposition  $p$ , then our certainty of  $p$  does not need any further support or external guarantee. In other words, according to the normative interpretation, Descartes claimed that there are propositions that are epistemically privileged, the truth of which is given as something self-evident.<sup>13</sup> This means that it is not the case that in Descartes' epistemology, one can come to know that a proposition is certainly true only if one first knows that God exists and is not a deceiver.<sup>14</sup> Below,

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on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are” (AT 7:125, CSM 2:89).

<sup>13</sup> To put it differently, Descartes believed that when we currently perceive a proposition clearly and distinctly, we a) access its content directly, b) fully, and c) in such a way that nothing else can be added to it that would strengthen our certainty about the proposition's truth. Hence, the proposition is self-sufficient epistemically and requires no further argument.

<sup>14</sup> The same can be said regarding the rule of truth. According to the normative interpretation, the knowledge of a particular proposition that is currently clearly and distinctly perceived does not require us to prove beforehand the general truth rule that everything we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.

I present two excerpts supporting my claim; the first is from Descartes' response to Arnauld's charge and the second comes from the Second Replies:

Lastly, as to the fact that I was not guilty of circularity when I said that the only reason we have for being sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true is the fact that God exists, but that we are sure that God exists only because we perceive this clearly: I have already given an adequate explanation of this point in my reply to the Second Objections, under the headings *Thirdly* and *Fourthly*, where I made a distinction between what we in fact perceive clearly and what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion. To begin with, we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver. (AT 7:245–46, CSM 2:171)

Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perceptions of the intellect and nowhere else.

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence, we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them. (AT 7:145/146, CSM 2:104)

Some further explanations are due here.

A: The above citations may suggest that the proof of God's existence is needed to validate the reliability of our memories of clear and distinct perceptions. Some authors indeed claim this to be the case (Doney 1955, 1970). They believe that the proof of God's existence is a guarantee that we are not mistaken when we uphold that the propositions we merely remember having clearly and distinctly perceived are still true now. My opinion is that this is not an entirely correct interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Granted, it is true that Descartes' words may suggest that the proof of God's veracity is to guarantee the accuracy of memory (AT 7:40, CSM 2:100). However, when one considers other elements of Descartes' epistemology, such a conclusion loses ground. First and foremost, it needs to be kept in mind

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<sup>15</sup> H. Frankfurt in his article "Memory and the Cartesian Circle" makes a convincing case that the so-called "memory interpretation" is unacceptable. First, it is at odds with many of Descartes' statements. And second, it is not satisfactory from a philosophical point of view. On this point, I share Frankfurt's view. See also VAN CLEVE (1998).

that for Descartes, absolute certainty of currently, clearly and distinctly perceived propositions is a matter of attending to what the mind presents to us. That is why we know that they are true and we know that there is no room for doubt about them. Second, certainty of current clear and distinct propositions presupposes, in Descartes' view, that the mind focuses on and attends to what is currently being known.<sup>16</sup> Further, it needs to be kept in mind as well that—as Cottingham rightly notes—for Descartes, the certainty of current clear and distinct perceptions is never “timeless but always temporally indexed” (Cottingham 1986, 77; see also Williams 1978/2005, 186). Hence, when we are no longer attending to the reasons by means of which we gave assent to the proposition  $p$  which the mind presented to us, we can no longer be certain of  $p$ 's truth. For, in such a case, we cannot preclude the possibility that we are mistaken (either due to some other arguments that might dissuade us, or simply because of inattention), even though we believe that the proposition was perceived by us clearly and distinctly at some time in the past.

From the above we can extract at least two ways in which the opposition between that which is currently perceived clearly and distinctly, and that which is no longer perceived in such a way is drawn within Descartes' program: a) it is the difference between the mind attending to the truth, which is perceived clearly and distinctly, and the mind no longer attending to it (AT 10:368); and b) it is the difference between the mind attentive and engaged, and the mind inattentive and disengaged (AT 7:31, CSM 2:20; AT 8A:17, CSM 1:203).

I believe the above comments show that the role of God in Descartes' system is not to guarantee the reliability of our memories. The knowledge of God's existence and veracity is necessary for one to know that propositions that we have once perceived clearly and distinctly are still true, even though we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we assented to them. This is what Descartes says at the end of Fifth Meditation:

Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it,

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<sup>16</sup> By Descartes' lights, this operation of the intellect consists of pure understanding or intuitive cognition, and it can be epistemically successful without any sense data being involved. Among other things, it is this isolation of the intellect's operation from the senses and imagination that makes it possible for the former to make judgments with certainty (PF I art. 45, AT 8A:22, CSM 1:207). This is reflected in Descartes' definition of intuition presented in *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Rule Three (AT 10:368, CSM 1:14).

there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on. (AT 7:70, CSM 2:48)

**B:** The above explanation should make it clear why the charge of circularity against Descartes is misplaced. It is still an open question, however, whether the proof of God's existence that Descartes constructed can be carried out without falling back on propositions that are not currently perceived clearly and distinctly. In other words, the above solution to the problem of the Cartesian Circle requires that each of Descartes' proofs for God's existence should be entirely graspable within a single clear and distinct intellectual perception, without recourse to the propositions which are no longer clearly and distinctly perceived.

There are points at which Descartes seems to recognize this. In *Conversation with Burman*, he states that in his proofs of God's existence, he did not rely on propositions that were not clearly and distinctly perceived. Everything used in each of those proofs he claims to have been able to grasp at once in a single clear and distinct perception. Admittedly, the perception extended in time, and was divided into stages, but it was still one perception as far as its nature is concerned. Descartes argued that despite what is sometimes claimed, the human mind is capable of knowing many things at the same time. Thanks to that, the mind can perceive more than one thought as part of the same perception, and so there is no *a priori* obstacle to perceiving all the premises necessary for proving God's existence as part of one single perception. Here is a relevant fragment from *Conversation with Burman*:

[Burman] But our mind can think of only one thing at a time, whereas the proof in question is a fairly long one involving several axioms. Then again, every thought occurs instantaneously, and there are many thoughts which come to mind in the proof. So one will not be able to keep the attention on all the axioms, since any one thought will get in the way of another.

[Descartes] Firstly, it is just not true that the mind can think of only one thing at a time. It is true that it cannot think of a large number of things at the same time, but it can still think of more than one thing. For example, I am now aware and have the thought that I am talking and that I am eating; and both these thoughts occur at the same time. Then, secondly, it is false that thought occurs instantaneously; for all my acts take up time, and I can be said to be continuing and carrying on with the same thought during a period of time.

[Burman] But on that showing, our thought will be extended and divisible.

[Descartes] Not at all. Thought will indeed be extended and divisible with respect to its duration, since its duration can be divided into parts. But it is not extended and

divisible with respect to its nature, since its nature remains unextended. It is just the same with God: we can divide his duration into an infinite number of parts, even though God himself is not therefore divisible... Accordingly, since our thought is able to grasp more than one item in this way, and since it does not occur instantaneously, it is clear that we are able to grasp the proof of God's existence in its entirety. As long as we are engaged in this process, we are certain that we are not being deceived, and every difficulty is thus removed. (AT 5:148/9, CSMK 334/5)

The above remarks might not be the clearest, but it is still possible to discern what Descartes meant by them. He seems to be claiming that in each of his proofs of God's existence from the Third and Fifth Meditations, the link between the conclusion and the premises is perceived by one single act of thought, and so it is not a case of deductive reasoning, which would require appealing to propositions to which we are no longer attending. There is no inference involved: the proof of God's existence does not proceed by retrieving premises from memory and drawing conclusions. Rather, the premises and the conclusions are seen "all at once" through a pure intellectual perception and therefore we cannot fail to know what is actually present to us (AT 10:407–8, CSM 1:37). In such a way, the mind "grasp[s] the proof of God's existence in its entirety," and as long as it is "engaged in this process, we are certain that we are not being deceived, and every difficulty is thus removed."

#### IV

Apart from being a solution to the problem of the Cartesian Circle, the normative interpretation of current clear and distinct perceptions has, I think, another advantage. Namely, it allows us to refute common charges against Descartes' method of doubt; it shows that their source is predominantly the wrong reading of Descartes' claims as to the scope and nature of his method of doubt.

The most notable criticism of the Cartesian doubt was offered by Hume and has been reiterated many times by other authors since then. In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume argues that the Cartesian doubt is the most radical kind of skepticism: it questions at the outset not only the truth of all of our previous beliefs, but also the very reliability of our human cognitive faculties, including the intellect or reason. Hume states that "the Cartesian doubt, therefore, were it ever possible to be attained by any human creature (as it plainly is not) would be entirely incurable; and no reasoning could ever bring us to a state of assurance and conviction upon any subject" (Hume 2000, 112).



It should be clear by now that given the normative interpretation of current clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes certainly did not espouse such a radical skepticism as Hume attributes to him. Current clear and distinct perceptions are for Descartes, in my view, absolutely true, normatively certain, and utterly immune to doubt. Hume is naturally right in that the kind of skepticism that undermines the trustworthiness of all our previous knowledge, together with our cognitive faculties, is not only insurmountable, but unrealizable. If we assumed that Descartes indeed endorsed such skepticism, then we would have to acknowledge that his whole epistemological project was inevitably doomed to failure. It is difficult to judge how well Descartes was aware of this danger. However, considering everything that has been discussed so far, and also his words in the letter to Claude Clerselier of 12 January 1646 (AT 9A:204), I think it is safe to say that the method of doubt designed by Descartes to search for secure foundations of knowledge, although universal, does have a clearly delineated boundary. The doubt surely does not apply to truths that are currently perceived with clarity and distinctness through the use of intellect. Moreover, his views on current clear and distinct perceptions make it evident that he did not impugn the reliability of the faculty of reason or intellect. Indeed, it would be—to put it mildly—rather irrational on Descartes' part to, on the one hand, adopt the doctrine of utterly boundless skepticism, and, on the other, to claim that current clear and distinct perceptions are certain and indubitable. Thus, it seems highly unlikely that he would do so and that Hume was right in his attribution of such a radical skepticism to him.

To wit, seen from the perspective of the normative interpretation, when Descartes says that “one must doubt everything,” he does not mean to call into doubt the reliability of the faculty of human reason. Rather, he wants us to challenge all our previous beliefs and opinions that are based, for the most part, on the deliverances of the senses and the authority of the Aristotelian tradition. Accordingly, the Cartesian doubt, despite its attack on all of our previous knowledge, remains bounded in its scope, as no doubt can be raised about current clear and distinct perceptions.<sup>17</sup> That is why, I think, we need to stop interpreting Descartes as someone who embroiled himself in a both heroic and quixotic project to prove the reliability of human reason by reference to reason. Once we do this, we will

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<sup>17</sup> Good evidence for the view that Descartes does not endorse the doctrine of utterly boundless skepticism can be found in his Replies to the Seventh Objections. He contrasts his view on current clear and distinct perceptions with the position of skepticism. He argues that if sceptics perceived anything clearly and distinctly, then, by the same token, they would cease “to doubt it, and so ceased to be sceptics” (AT 7:477, CSM 2:321).

see why the pursuit of pure intellectual perceptions became a crucial part of Descartes' search for the secure foundations of knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Another piece of criticism against Descartes' method of doubt comes from Peirce's famous article of 1868, titled "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities." Its objective is to demonstrate that Descartes' scientific vision of philosophy and its development is absolutely untenable. Centrally to the discussion at hand, Peirce claims that the basic flaw in the Cartesian doubt is that it rests on an arbitrarily adopted rule to call into question all of our previous knowledge about the nature of the universe and everything within it, without any consideration for whether there are in fact any sufficient grounds for doubting its reliability (CP 5:265). Similarly to Hume, I think Peirce misreads Descartes' claims. The Cartesian doubt is neither doubt for the sake of doubting, nor is its purpose to "demolish everything completely." As Descartes explicitly states in the first Meditation, in order to doubt something, one needs to have "powerful and well thought-out reasons" (AT 7:22, CSM 2:15; AT 7:460, CSM 2:308). Thus, Descartes narrows down the scope of doubt and distances himself from the radical skepticism that puts into question absolutely everything. Descartes' doubt is indeed universal in that it applies to everything that can be doubted, but it is also rational in that positive reasons for doubting are always required (see Hatfield 2003, 85). Clearly, he does not endorse unrestrained questioning.

What makes Descartes' method of doubt radical (and which is perhaps what Peirce had in mind when criticizing Descartes as too radical) is rather that the reason for doubting can derive not only from an actual discrepancy between results, as in two inconsistent sensory perceptions, but also hypothetical scenarios, as in the case of the dream argument or the deceiving God hypothesis. Descartes did recognize that such hypothetical scenarios provide a weaker reason for doubt than actual cognitive mistakes do. He was convinced, however, that in the search for the secure foundations of knowledge, no reason for doubt can be overlooked, even one that comes from a hypothetical conjecture. What matters is not the character of a particular reason for doubt—actual or hypothetical—but whether it measures up to what is being doubted. If the dream argument or the deceiving God hypothesis seem to imply that the world and everything in it is a mere illusion, then one needs to ask whether there is such knowing that escapes the scope of these reasons for doubting. The claim that such hypothetical scenarios *should not* be examined is dogmatic: it arbitrarily excludes from consideration everything that cannot be reconciled with common sense or accepted for practical purposes.

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<sup>18</sup> Here I am in agreement with COTTINGHAM (2008, 82–84), HATFIELD (2003), and RAGLAND (2016).

Ultimately, Descartes claimed that one should refuse accepting not only such propositions that are “patently false,” but also those that give us even the slightest reason to doubt them. Within the context of searching for knowledge that is certain, neither of the above should be accepted.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, Peirce claimed that the Cartesian doubt fails to duly problematize knowledge because it assumes an absolute and arbitrary rule. This attack is echoed in today’s criticism as well. However, if my claims above are correct, the criticism is entirely misplaced.

The above discussion presented the advantages of the normative interpretation of current clear and distinct perceptions. It is clear that they are central to the discussion on the coherence and merit of Descartes’ epistemology. However, as has been mentioned at the beginning of the text, the interpretation is not entirely free from difficulties. Now I turn to those difficulties. I begin with an analysis of texts that seem to conflict with the normative interpretation.

## V

Let us start with the passages from Descartes’ works that cause problems for the normative interpretation. The passages seem to go against the claim that current clear and distinct perceptions are immune to doubt, including doubt that derives from the deceiving God hypothesis. One of these passages is the notorious fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation, a paragraph that has been long recognized as one of the most puzzling in the whole *Meditations*. I split the paragraph into sections to make my analysis more comprehensible:

[A] But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would

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<sup>19</sup> It is of interest that there are three formulations of the rule that needs to be followed here: “Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false” (AT 7:18, CSM 2:17). “So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty” (AT 7:22, CSM 2:15). “Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false” (AT 7:24, CSM 2:15).

be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye. **[B]** Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. **[C]** And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one. But in order to remove even this slight 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 quite certain [*plane certus*] about anything else. (Med. 3 AT 7:35–6, CSM 2:25)

In **A**, Descartes concedes that since God can create what He wants (his omnipotence is unbounded), we cannot rule out the possibility that He has created us with minds that are defective, from which it would follow that we can be mistaken even about those matters which seem most evident to us. In **B**, on the other hand, Descartes claims that every single time we attend to the things that we currently perceive clearly and distinctly, they appear to be certain to such an extent that they cannot be subjected to any doubt, even to doubt that follows from the deceiving God hypothesis, which he discussed in **A**. There is a clear problem here in that **A** and **B** do not seem to be reconcilable: Accepting **A** forces one to reject **B**, and vice versa—accepting **B** forces rejection of **A**.

Can this inconsistency be resolved? I believe it can. A solution to the apparent inconsistency between **A** and **B** can be offered by distinguishing between direct and indirect doubt.<sup>20</sup> Direct doubt about a proposition *p* that is perceived and attended to clearly and distinctly is impossible. However, *p* can be doubted indirectly; that is, when it is no longer being attended to. The reason for indirect doubt in *p* stems from the deceiving God hypothesis. Since it is possible, as this hypothesis implies, that God is a deceiver, then we cannot rule out the possibility

<sup>20</sup> A similar view is espoused by others, e.g., NEWMAN (2014) and RAGLAND (2016). For an interesting alternative resolution of the tension between section A and B, see VAN CLEVE (1998), who suggests that the appearance of inconsistency between sections A and B can be removed “if we see Descartes as being uncertain not of particular propositions that he clearly and distinctly perceives, but only of the general connection between clear and distinct perception and truth” (1998, 111–12). According to Van Cleve, what Descartes shows in the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation is that at this stage in the *Meditations* we are certain of particular propositions which we clearly and distinctly perceive, but not of the general “rule of clearness and distinctness.”

that this God made us with inherently defective minds that produce flawed results even about matters that previously seemed most evident to us. What is central is that the reason for the indirect doubt in  $p$  is not  $p$  in itself (the doubt is not about  $p$  as such), but the deceiving God hypothesis which leaves open the possibility that God made our minds inherently defective. If we have a defective cognitive nature, then we can be systematically in error even about what we previously perceived clearly and distinctly.

I believe that the above solution enables us to make sense of the first two sections of the puzzling fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation. But more importantly, it shows us why Descartes did not see any inconsistency between the two statements: (1) that when we are attending to  $p$  which we currently perceive clearly and distinctly, we cannot be in any doubt about  $p$ ; and (2) that when we are no longer attending to  $p$ , then even though we recall that we have previously perceived  $p$  clearly and distinctly, nevertheless we can doubt  $p$  on the grounds of the deceiving God hypothesis. The inconsistency between (1) and (2) would be the case—as I suppose Descartes believed—only if doubt about  $p$  was taken to come from  $p$  itself. Then, section **A** of the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation would indeed contradict section **B**. But if Descartes did not hold that, then there is no reason to conclude that his claim that the deceiving God hypothesis puts in doubt those propositions which we think we perceived clearly and distinctly falls into conflict with his claim that *currently* clearly and distinctly perceived propositions are utterly immune to doubt. Here is how Descartes puts this view in the Second Replies:

Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we manifestly possess this kind of certainty. For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them. (AT 7:146, CSM 2:104)

What about section **C** of the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation? Does it not imply—in contrast to what the normative interpretation upholds—that according to Descartes, until we know that God exists and is not a deceiver, we cannot be normatively certain of anything? The point of view expressed in **C** is reflected in other parts of the *Meditations* as well. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes writes:

Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all knowledge [*omnis scientia certitudinem & veritatem*] depends uniquely on my awareness [*cognitione*] of the true God, to such an extent that I was incapable of perfect knowledge [*perfecte scire*] about anything else until I became aware [*nossem*] of him. And now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge [*plane nota & certa*] of countless matters, both concerning God himself and other things whose nature is intellectual, and also concerning that corporeal nature which is the subject-matter of pure mathematics. (AT 7:71, CSM 2.49)

Taken literally, the above passage, as well as section C, can suggest that Descartes indeed held that no proposition is normatively certain until God's existence and veracity is proven. Such literal reading is nicely illustrated by the position of Edwin Curley, who writes:

When I first read this passage (AT 7:35–36) as a graduate student, I was astonished by it. Surely, I thought, he is not taking back the results of Meditation II. He is not telling us that he cannot be certain of *anything at all, including his own existence*. But by the time I published Curley (1978), I had decided, partly as a result of reading the work of Alan Gewirth (Gewirth 1941), that Descartes means precisely what he says. (Curley 2006, 40)

I disagree with Curley's reading, and I am not alone in that; not only because such a literal reading of Descartes here is at odds with the normative interpretation, which I endorse, but primarily because if true, Curley's exegesis would undercut the credibility of the whole of Descartes' epistemological project—it would mean that he indeed committed the error of circularity.<sup>21</sup>

First, one needs to consider the fact that Descartes distinguished between two kinds of genuine knowledge: *cognitio, certus, or scire* vs. *scientia, plane certus, or perfect scire*. The former he used to denote fragmentary knowledge of single truths or particular propositions; the latter was reserved for perfect knowledge of a unified system (Carriero 2011, 303; Nolan 2016, 424). The difference between

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<sup>21</sup> It needs to be noted that Curley acknowledges the consequences of his reading of part C: "this is not a happy conclusion," he admits. He believes, however, that the Cartesian Circle can be avoided by introducing "the idea of an assent-compelling argument. By an assent-compelling argument, I mean one whose premises are assent-compelling, and whose inferential moves are assent-compelling. Suppose we have an assent-compelling argument from a premise, p, to a conclusion, r, via an intermediate conclusion, q; p must be assent-compelling in its own right, and q will become assent-compelling when we recognize that p is assent-compelling, and that the connection between p and q is also assent-compelling; similarly, r will become assent-compelling once we have recognized that q is assent-compelling, and that the connection between q and r is assent-compelling. I claim that what Descartes is trying to do in the Meditations is to construct an assent-compelling argument to the conclusion that God exists and cannot be a deceiver" (CURLEY 2006, 42).

the two is nuanced and difficult to analyze briefly. For the present purposes, the central point is that *scientia* or perfect knowledge is according to Descartes the fullest realization of knowledge about reality that the human being can attain. In contrast to fragmentary knowledge, *scientia* is systematic and spans all the objects of human cognition. Thus, *scientia* includes not only those propositions that are being perceived clearly and distinctly at the moment, but all the true propositions discovered either through intuition or deduction. Moreover, perfect knowledge as a system of truths, in contrast to fragmentary knowledge, is immune to any kind of doubt, including indirect doubt. The reason for that is that *scientia* or perfect knowledge contains according to Descartes a complete set of metaphysical underpinnings (i.e. God exists, whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true): firstly, they fend off the danger that we were created with a cognitive defect, which is posed by the deceiving God hypothesis. And secondly, they explain why clear and distinct ideas that are innate and that we discover in the mind are true of the things to which they refer. The difference between perfect knowledge (*scientia*) and fragmentary knowledge (*cognitio*) is illustrated in the Second Replies, where Descartes discusses the kind of knowledge that an atheist has available:

The fact that an atheist can be “clearly aware [*clare cognoscere*] that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles” is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge [*veram scientiam*], since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge [*scientia*]. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists. (AT 7: 141, CSM 2:101)

The above considerations lead us to the following conclusion: when Descartes concedes that nothing can ever be perfectly known (*perfect scire*) prior to knowing that God exists, he has only *scientia* in mind, not *cognitio*. It is the former that can only be attained once we know that God exists. This is because only an individual who knows that he or she came into existence not “by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events” but through a perfect entity (God) can know both the thing which he or she is currently focusing his mind’s attention on, *and* that which he or she is not paying attention to any longer. The latter is made possible by the fact that he or she can effectively exclude the possibility of having a defective cognitive nature (AT 7:70, CSM 2:35).

The conclusion is supported by several other passages where Descartes contends that although the human mind is capable of knowing of truths immune to doubt,

it is at the same time finite and limited especially when it comes to concentration. The nature of the human mind is such that it cannot fix, according to Descartes, its attention constantly on one and only one thing so as to perceive it clearly and distinctly. When we have no knowledge of God, once the mind relaxes its concentration and fails to attend to a proposition, other arguments might be adduced which would readily undermine the truth of once clear and distinct perceptions.

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made 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 opinion, if I were unaware of God: and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. 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; and 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. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely when I remember that there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false. (AT 7:69/70, CSM 2:48)

It seems that a similar interpretation should be given to all other “problematic” passages from Descartes’ works, which appear to indicate that no certain knowledge in a normative sense is attainable before the existence and veracity of God are proven. One passage from the First Meditation, however, is particularly difficult in this respect. There, Descartes seems to maintain that even though mathematical propositions such as “two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides” are transparent truths (it seems impossible that they would be subject to doubt), one cannot—by virtue of the deceiving God hypothesis—exclude the possibility of being wrong about them (AT 7:20/21, CSM 2:14). I grant that this passage might, at least *prima facie*, seem tricky for the normative interpretation of current clear and distinct perceptions. It can be construed as suggesting that, for Descartes, even current clear and distinct perceptions remain vulnerable to doubt occasioned by the deceiving God hypothesis. However, considering my analysis above, there is, I think, a way of reading this passage from the first Meditation that is in line with the normative interpretation. It should be noted that Descartes has meant his skeptical arguments of the First Meditation to be targeted at our



preconceived opinions that we had accepted as true in the past (AT 7:17, CSM 2:212). This is made evident in his response to Bourdin's objections in the Seventh Replies, as well as in his comments on Gassendi's *Disquisitio Metaphysica*, where he says that reasons for doubting are strong so long as there are no other countervailing reasons "which produce certainty by removing the doubt" (AT 7:474, CSM 2:319). I believe that Descartes' view here is that once we recognize that we cannot help but assent to what we currently perceive clearly and distinctly, we will have produced countervailing reasons that prove that there is no room for doubt about current clear and distinct perceptions. Consequently, when Descartes maintains in the First Meditation that, taking into account the deceiving God hypothesis, it is possible to doubt even mathematical propositions, we can assume that he means by that only propositions "which we have continued to accept as a result of previous judgements that we have made" (CSM 2:270; see AT 7:473, CSM 2:318). If this is what Descartes had in mind in the first Meditation, then, I think, we are entitled to say that normative interpretation is able to accommodate the "problematic" passage from the First Meditation, which seemingly suggests that current clear and distinct perceptions are subject to doubt raised by the deceiving God hypothesis.

## VI

Let us now turn to the so-called philosophical challenges that the normative interpretation must face if it is to be accepted as an essential component of Descartes' program in epistemology.

The first challenge I would like to address has to do with the role of the *cogito* in Descartes' project of founding the edifice of knowledge. It can be argued that the normative interpretation is in conflict with the standard reading of the Cartesian epistemology. In brief, within the normative interpretation, the famous Cartesian *cogito* seems to lose its privileged position. Since all current clear and distinct perceptions are immune to doubt, then the *cogito*, the first indubitable discovery, becomes one of the many certain propositions that can serve as the point of departure for Descartes' epistemology.

Does the normative interpretation really play down the pivotal place of the *cogito* in Descartes' epistemology? To answer this question, one needs to answer a more basic one: what exactly was the epistemic role of the *cogito* in Descartes' construction of the edifice of knowledge? It is naturally impossible to discuss the issue in full in this short text. For that reason, I will focus only on several points and attempt to demonstrate that the normative interpretation does not challenge the

*cogito*'s special position, provided that we understand in the right way the basic task Descartes assigns to the *cogito* in his search for secure foundations of knowledge.

First and foremost, according to Descartes, the primacy of the *cogito* is not absolute. It is naturally the first proposition that asserts the existence of something; so much is not contestable. However, as Descartes noted on a number of occasions, comprehension of the *cogito* is possible only with the involvement of other ideas—the so-called “very simple notions”—which are included in the human mind (AT 6:2, CSM 1:111). Each of the simple notions has its own content; together, they make up the basic elements out “of which all our thoughts are composed” (AT 8A:22, CSM 1:208).<sup>22</sup> They are therefore indispensable for one to attain an accurate understanding of the *cogito*, even though they do not by themselves presuppose the existence of anything. Here is how Descartes expresses this view in Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*:

And when I said that the proposition *I am thinking therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it is impossible that that which thinks should not exist, and so forth. But because these are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think they needed to be listed. (AT 8A:8, CSM 1:196)

Another important issue is that the *cogito* should not be viewed as a proposition asserting the single truth that everyone who thinks can be certain of their own existence. The epistemological role of the *cogito* goes beyond that. First, the *cogito* is for Descartes the basis for making sense of such concepts as *clarity* and *distinctness*, which are necessary for an effective employment of the “rule of truth” (AT 7:35, CSM 2:24). Second, the *cogito* is the yardstick for the selection of the “means of cognition” necessary for achieving certain knowledge. It is through reference to the *cogito* that we can explain why intuition and deduction are the two most basic sources of knowledge (AT 10:368, CSM 1:14). And finally, and perhaps most centrally, Descartes relies on the *cogito* as he argues that only pure intellectual inquiry, entirely detached from the senses, can discover fully reliable principia, with which one can achieve knowledge understood as *scientia*, which

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<sup>22</sup> The question of simple notions permeates Descartes' work. In his earlier texts (*Rules for the Direction of the Mind*), he refers to them as “simple natures”: “these simple natures are all self-evident and never contain any falsity” (AT 10:420, CSM 1:45; “it is not possible for us ever to understand anything beyond those simple nature and a certain mixture or compounding of one with another” (AT 10:422, CSM 1:46).

spans the whole of nature, i.e., minds, God, and bodies. Below I present one of the many statements where Descartes voices the above claim:

I see that without any effort I have now finally got back to where I wanted. I now know that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood; and in view of this I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else. (AT 7:34, CSM 2:22/23)

It is my belief that even these short remarks make clear that the normative interpretation does not stand in opposition to the privileged role of the *cogito* in Descartes' system.

A second issue I would like to discuss is whether Descartes really held the view that all current clear and distinct perceptions are normatively certain. According to my preferred interpretation, Descartes endorses the claim that every single proposition that is currently perceived clearly and distinctly is absolutely immune to the skeptical argumentation in the First Meditation and is thereby normatively certain. As I have pointed out earlier, this interpretation is shared by some interpreters of Descartes' epistemology. However, among these researchers, there is a view that only some, but not all propositions that are currently perceived clearly and distinctly are absolutely certain before one reaches the conclusion that God exists and is not a deceiver. The position comes in a number of more specific versions.

According to Gouhier, the privileged class of propositions includes those that concern our own existence, our mental states and God's existence. Only such propositions are absolutely certain and epistemically independent. In contrast, propositions about the physical world and mathematical truths are not epistemically self-sufficient: they need the proof of God's existence to be considered absolutely true. Gouhier argues that the difference between these two groups of clear and distinct propositions lies in their objects. In propositions about one's own existence and mental states, the object of knowing is identical to the knower. As for God's existence, there is also inseparable connection between the idea and the reality it refers to. It is impossible to think about God without asserting His existence. ("I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists" [AT 7:67]). Things are different with mathematical truths and propositions about material reality. Their objects are transcendent to the knower and—importantly—wholly dependent on God's will.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Gouhier believes that Descartes did not use the criteria of clarity and distinctness, but some other criteria when discussing propositions about one's own existence.

A similar perspective is adopted by Markie, but for slightly different reasons. He also argues that “not all clear and distinct perceptions produce certainty, only a proper subset of them do” (Markie 1992, 44). Apart from the *cogito*, he includes in that privileged subset metaphysical axioms (common notions) such as those that Descartes lists in the geometrical exposition of the Second Replies (AT 7:164–67, CSM 2:116–17).

Perhaps the fullest and most interesting version of the view has been formulated by Broughton (2002). For her, the special subset of clear and distinct propositions is made up by those that constitute the necessary conditions of the doubts Descartes raised in the First Meditation. These are such ideas as “I exist,” “I am doubting,” “I desire to know more,” “I seem to see a light,” “I have an idea of God,” and “something cannot come from nothing” (Broughton 2002, 181). They are claimed to be indubitable and absolutely certain because “in some way their truth makes doubt possible”. All the other propositions—including mathematical truths—“are not among the favored few, despite their clarity and distinctness” (181) and thus need the proof of God’s existence in order to be certain. Consider the passage below:

Descartes then shows that some of the claims entail that God exists and is not a deceiver, which in turn entails that our clear and distinct ideas are true. Thus, in the first three Meditations he will have argued that the truth of my clear and distinct ideas is a necessary condition of the possibility of raising the doubts of the First Meditation. Only at that point can Descartes claim he is absolutely certain about the truth of all his clear and distinct ideas, even those, like “Two and three equals five,” whose truth is not an immediate condition of methodic doubt. So, before this point Descartes can claim to be absolutely certain about the truth of clear and distinct ideas that are conditions of the doubt, but not about any other clear and distinct ideas. The truth of those other clear and distinct ideas is called into doubt by the deceiving God argument. I think it is fair to say that Descartes’s arguments are something like transcendental arguments... (1999, 7)

I disagree with the above views for a number of reasons. One passage I cited earlier clearly contradicts them: in the third paragraph of the Third Meditation, Descartes explicitly claims that the *cogito* as well as simple mathematical truths are entirely immune to doubt at the moment of perceiving them clearly and distinctly. This means that Descartes classified both the *cogito* and mathematical truths as belonging to the same epistemic group. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the cited excerpts from the *Conversation with Burman*, where Descartes claims that all clear and distinct propositions that we currently perceive are immune to doubt and thus certain. There does not seem to be any passages in Descartes’ work that

would bear out the claim that he split current clear and distinct perceptions into two groups, only one of which is absolutely certain and indubitable.<sup>24</sup>

Another problem with the view endorsed by Gouhier, Markie, and Broughton is that it severely limits the number of propositions normatively certain prior to knowing of God's existence, and thus radically narrows down the set of propositions we are entitled to use for building the foundations of knowledge. This in turn raises the question of how such a small number of propositions can serve the function that Descartes attributed to them. That is, with such a limited number of foundational propositions, it seems impossible to infer all the other true propositions—a task that Descartes claimed needs to be achieved with his epistemological foundations. Gouhier, Markie and Broughton's position therefore puts in danger Descartes' whole epistemological program, as it seems impossible to build the edifice of knowledge with the propositions that they grant certainty to.

## VII

Can Descartes' current clear and distinct perceptions really serve as a sufficient epistemic base for constructing scientific knowledge that is certain and objectively true? Considering the normative interpretation and arguments advanced in its support, I think we may answer this question in the affirmative. The current clear and distinct perceptions on this interpretation seem to have everything that is needed to serve as a reliable base for all of human knowledge. They are the kind of immediate and purely intellectual cognition, and, what is more, the mind at that moment in which these perceptions occur is attentive and engaged. To wit, current clear and distinct perceptions supply propositions that can be characterized by these four points: (1) they are entirely certain, and thus have the highest epistemic value; (2) they are primitive—that is, capable of being known without knowledge of other matters and do not have to be derived from anything; (3) they are foundational—knowledge of other things depends on them; and finally, (4) there are enough of them so that they are a sufficient beginning for arriving at the knowledge of mind, God and the physical world.

My conclusions will surely not be accepted by everyone. The opponents will probably argue that despite its merit, the normative interpretation has its gaps and limitations. It enables us to show how Descartes utilizes current clear and distinct perceptions to circumvent the problem of circularity and to drive away the threat of skepticism. It is an open question, however, whether the normative interpreta-

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<sup>24</sup> NEWMAN (2004) presents an interesting and detailed critique of Broughton's interpretation.

tion allows Descartes to refute another significant criticism leveled against his epistemology—the charge of dogmatism or arbitrariness. A critic of the normative interpretation could argue that it forces the view that Descartes took reliability of our cognitive faculties simply on trust, without giving systematic and proper support for it. This, in turn, seems to run up—at least to some extent—against his own promise of building the knowledge “right from the foundations.” Moreover, one could reason that current clear and distinct perceptions, even though immediate, are still theoretically implicated in certain concepts, which could suggest a possibility of being arbitrary. These, and no doubt more, questions can be raised against the normative interpretation of current clear and distinct perceptions. I do not intend to downplay their import; there are undoubtedly serious problems that Descartes’ epistemology faces. It needs to be pointed out, however, that such difficulties arise not only for Descartes’ project, but any foundational system that searches for an absolutely certain point of departure. It might as well be that it is impossible to build knowledge on an absolutely certain base, without making any provisional assumptions. What is the most central thing to keep in mind about the normative interpretation is that assenting to currently clearly and distinctly perceived propositions is based on strong reasons: we are attending directly to those propositions and that is why we believe them to be certain and absolutely true. There are no arbitrary assumptions in such a position.

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## THE EPISTEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CURRENT CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTIONS IN DESCARTES' EPISTEMOLOGY

## Summary

In this article, I discuss the epistemic role that Descartes believed was played in knowledge construction by current clear and distinct perceptions (the ideas or propositions which appear most evident to us when we are attending to them). In recent literature, we can find two interpretations about the epistemic status and function of current clear and distinct perceptions in Descartes' epistemology. The first may be called the psychological, the second normative. The latter states that current clear and distinct perceptions are utterly immune to all doubt, even before God's existence is proven and the general rule of truth is established. Thus, their certainty is for Descartes not merely psychological, but normative. I endorse the normative interpretation for a number of what I believe to be cogent reasons. However, there are also some difficulties with it. Therefore, after presenting positive arguments for the interpretation (sections I–IV) I discuss the difficulties of textual and substantive nature that the normative interpretation needs to address if it is to be upheld (sections V–VI).

**Keywords:** current clear and distinct perceptions; knowledge; Cartesian Circle.

ZNACZENIE EPISTEMICZNE AKTUALNIE JASNYCH I WYRAŹNYCH UJĘĆ  
W EPISTEMOLOGII KARTEZJUSZA

## Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule omawiam kwestię dotyczącą roli, jaką Kartezjusz wyznaczył w budowie gmachu wiedzy pewnej temu, co można określić mianem aktualnie jasnych i wyraźnych ujęć (sądów poznawanych obecnie jasno i wyraźnie). Powyższa kwestia jest od dawna przedmiotem ożywionej dyskusji wśród komentatorów epistemologii Kartezjusza. W współczesnej literaturze historyczno-filozoficznej spotkać można dwie zasadnicze interpretacje na temat funkcji jaką pełnią w systemie Kartezjusza aktualnie jasne i wyraźne ujęcia. Pierwszą można nazwać interpretacją psychologiczną, drugą zaś normatywną. Ta ostatnia głosi, że aktualnie jasne i wyraźne ujęcia są całkowicie odporne na wątplenie zanim jeszcze dowiedzie się istnienia Boga i ustali ogólną regułę prawdy. Z tego względu ich pewność nie ogranicza się u Kartezjusza jedynie do pewności psychologicznej, lecz ma charakter normatywny. Opowiadam się za interpretacją normatywną. Przemawiają za nią – moim zdaniem – liczne racje. Ale rodzi ona także pewne trudności. Dlatego po przedstawieniu argumentów przemawiających na jej rzecz i niewątpliwych zalet wynikających z jej przyjęcia, omawiam szczegółowo pewne trudności zarówno tekstowe, jak i merytoryczne, którym musi sprostać ta interpretacja, jeśli mamy ją utrzymać.

**Słowa kluczowe:** jasne i wyraźne ujęcia; wiedza; Kartezjańskie koło.