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The Cartesian Circle

Dugald Murdoch

At the beginning of Meditation Three, Descartes puts forward the proposition that whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. He observes, however, that so long as he does not know whether there is a deceiving God, he has reason to doubt the proposition. Later in Meditation Three, he purports to prove that there is no deceiving God. The difficulty, as Arnauld pointed out, is to see how Descartes avoids reasoning in a circle or begging the question here, for if he can be certain that there is no deceiving God only because he clearly and distinctly perceives this, then he must already be certain that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true.[1]

Descartes himself repeatedly denied that he was begging the question, though his attempts to defend himself against the charge were not very successful. Others have attempted to defend him, some with great ingenuity and skill, but none, it seems, with generally acknowledged success. Most who attempt such a defense do so under the guidance of some leading idea or angle on the problem, which they regard as being crucial to its solution, and which others have underestimated or overlooked. In attempting a further defense, I have been guided by the fact that in the *Meditations* Descartes presents his thoughts according to the analytic method, and not the synthetic. In light of this, scrupulous attention needs to be paid to the order in which he presents his thoughts and to their highly dynamic character; what he says at one stage ought not, without more ado, to be assumed to hold at some other stage. The importance of grasping the proper order of his thoughts was a point to which Descartes himself drew his reader's attention

For very helpful comments on this paper I am indebted to two of the editors and a referee for this journal.

[1]See fourth "Objections," *Oeuvres de Descartes,* rev. ed., ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (henceforth abbreviated as "AT") (Paris: Vrin and CNRS, 1964–76), 7:214, translated in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (henceforth abbreviated as "CSM") (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2:150. Longer quotations from Descartes's writings are taken from CSM; in the body of the text I occasionally employ a different term from that in CSM.

(AT 7:9/CSM 2:8). Taking this advice to heart, I try to show how, even on the assumption of the most radical sort of doubt, he avoids begging the question.

If Descartes was not begging the question, then it should be possible to show this largely on the basis of what he writes in the *Meditations*. For this reason I have deliberately refrained from calling upon his earlier and later books to support my interpretation, and I have been sparing in references to his correspondence. I do not discuss the attempts that others have made to defend him; to have done this adequately would have made the paper inordinately long.

1. Descartes's Doubt in Meditation Three

In the second paragraph of Meditation Three, Descartes reflects on his newly won certainty that he is a thinking thing, and asks what it is that makes him certain of this. All he is aware of is that his perception of the judgment in question is clear and distinct. On the strength of this, he takes clarity and distinctness of perception to be necessary for certainty. He recognizes that this would not also be sufficient if it could ever come about (*contingere*) that something which he clearly and distinctly perceived was false. He then postulates that this could never come about, or as he puts it, "I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (AT 7:35/CSM 2:24). Thus, there can be no certainty without truth.

He hesitates at once over the postulate, for he recalls the reason for doubt about very simple judgments in arithmetic and geometry that occurred to him in Meditation One. Since what he says here is so important, it will be useful to have the entire passage at hand (I shall refer to it as *passage 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 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. 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 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. 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 about anything else. (AT 7:35f./CSM 2:25)

The main drift of the passage is clear. On the one hand, whenever Descartes attends to a judgment that he perceives very clearly, he is completely convinced of its truth. On the other hand, whenever he thinks of the supreme power of God, he recognizes that he could be deceived in what he thus perceives. He is contrasting the sense of conviction he feels when he clearly and distinctly perceives something with the sense of doubt he has about what he perceives when he thinks of the supreme power of God. The thought that some God can have given him a nature such that he is deceived in what he clearly and distinctly perceives is a reason, however slight, to doubt that whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. In order to dispel this bothersome thought, he needs to know that God cannot be a deceiver.

What is not so clear in passage *A* is what Descartes takes the scope of the said reason for doubt to be. According to what I shall call "the conservative interpretation," he holds that the thought that some God can have given him a nature such that he is deceived in what he clearly and distinctly perceives (the doubt-insinuating thought, for short) is a reason for him to doubt only *some* of the things he clearly and distinctly perceives. According to what I shall call "the radical interpretation," he holds that the doubt-insinuating thought is a reason for him to doubt *anything* he clearly and distinctly perceives.

On the conservative interpretation, Descartes does not take the doubt-insinuating thought to be a reason to doubt a judgment whose negation he perceives to contain a manifest contradiction,

such as the judgments "What is done cannot be undone" and "So long as I am thinking, I exist," which are implicit in the middle of passage *A*. The sort of judgments that he takes the doubt-insinuating thought to be a reason to doubt are those that he makes only on the basis of *inference* from other judgments that he clearly and distinctly perceives. Theorems of mathematics are examples of the sort.[2]

But is not the judgment "I exist" of the sort that Descartes perceives only by inference? Yes, it is. When Descartes arrives at this judgment in Meditation Two, he does not perceive the negation of it to contain a *manifest* contradiction; what he perceives to contain a manifest contradiction are the judgment "I am deceived in thinking that I exist" and the judgment "I am thinking but I do not exist" (AT 7:25/CSM 2:17). But if the judgment "I exist" is perceived only by inference, is not the doubt-insinuating thought a reason to doubt it? No, for the doubt-insinuating thought *entails* the judgment "I exist", and a reason for doubt cannot entail the judgment for which it is a reason for doubt. The judgment "I exist" is a special case.

On the radical interpretation, Descartes is considering in passage *A* that the doubt-insinuating thought is a reason for him to doubt *any* clear and distinct perception. As some commentators have argued, what lies behind Descartes's worry here is the conception of the eternal truths that he expressed sporadically in his correspondence from the 1630s onwards and that he appears never to have abandoned.[3] Views differ about what exactly the conception involves, and what sorts of judgments Descartes considered to fall under the heading of "eternal truth," but rather than go into this question, I shall simply state the matter in summary fashion as I understand it.[4]

First, judgments that are eternal truths, such as "What is done

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[2]For versions of the conservative interpretation see John Morris, "Descartes' Natural Light," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 11 (1973): 169–87, and Peter A. Schouls, "Descartes and the Autonomy of Reason," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 10 (1972): 307–22.

[3]For a good account of the radical interpretation see Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), chap. 3.

[4]For a good discussion of this question see Lilli Alanen, "Descartes, conceivability and logical modality," in *Thought Experiments in Science and Philosophy,* ed. Tamara Horowitz and Gerald J. Massey, (Savage, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 65–84.

cannot be undone" and "If I am thinking, then I exist," are true only because God determined them to be true, and in so determining them, he was completely free. If instead God's will had been determined by the eternal truths, then there would be a limit to his power. But there is no limit to his power—he could have determined that contradictories can be true together.[5]

Second, God has given us human beings a nature such that we are not capable of understanding how God could have determined that contradictories can be true together.[6] Descartes understands *that* God could make a contradiction true, though he cannot understand *how* God could do this, or *what* it would be like if God should have done (or should do) this.

Third, although God could determine otherwise, he has in fact determined that the eternal truths be true for all eternity.[7] Indeed, the necessity of such truths consists simply in the fact that God has determined them to be true for all eternity. Since God's understanding has no limit, he has no reason to alter what he has already determined; hence his determination is irrevocable.

On the radical interpretation, what lies behind Descartes's worry in passage *A* is not the full-blown conception of the eternal truths just described, but an abstraction from that conception, namely, the thought that God could have made true (or could make true) the negation of any eternal truth. This abstraction corresponds to the abstracted conception of God that Descartes is employing in passage *A*. In the light of this abstraction, he is recognizing that any judgment that he clearly and distinctly perceives could be (or could come to be) false, because God could have made (or could make) it false, and hence the fact that he perceives the negation

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[5]See letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644 (AT 4:118), translated in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3: *The Correspondence* by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (henceforth abbreviated as "CSMK") (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 235. See also fifth "Replies" (AT 7:380/CSM 2:261); sixth "Replies" (AT 7:432, 435f./CSM 2:291, 293f.). See also the letters to Mersenne of 15 April and 6 May 1630 (AT 1:146, 149: CSMK, 23, 24, respectively). For examples of eternal truths see *The Principles of Philosophy* (AT 8a:23/CSM 1:209).

[6]See sixth "Replies," AT 7:435f./CSM 2:294; letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644, AT 4:118/CSMK, 235.

[7]See letter to Mersenne of 15 April 1630, AT 1:145f./CSMK, 23.

of the judgment to contain a manifest contradiction does not exempt it from doubt (as it does on the conservative interpretation).

But, one might wonder, how *can* Descartes think that he has reason after all to doubt the judgment "I exist"? As was pointed out above, the doubt-insinuating thought entails that he exists. The answer is that he now recognizes that when he judged in Meditation Two that he exists, his judgment was based upon his perception that the negation of the judgment "If I am thinking, then I exist" contains a manifest contradiction, and hence his judgment that he exists was based on the tacit assumption that a contradiction cannot be true. Thus, he had been tacitly exempting from doubt one of "the basic principles" on which all his former beliefs rested, namely, the principle of noncontradiction (AT 7:18/CSM 2:12). The judgment "I exist," he now recognizes, is not after all the "firm and immovable" Archimedean point which in Meditation Two he had taken it to be (AT 7:24/CSM 2:16).

Each of the two interpretations has something to be said for it and something to be said against it. As for the conservative interpretation, this appears to have the endorsement of Descartes himself. In the second "Replies" he avows that when he said that he cannot be certain of anything until he knows that God exists, he had in mind not knowledge (*notitia*) of first principles but knowledge (*scientia*) of conclusions of arguments, and his knowledge that he is a thinking thing is knowledge of the former sort (evidently he takes the negation of the judgment "I am a thinking thing" to contain a manifest contradiction) (AT 7:140/CSM 2:100). At first glance this avowal appears to confirm the conservative interpretation. But this is not so clear at second glance; for Descartes is referring here not to passage *A* but to a passage towards the end of Meditation Five, where he says once more that the certainty of all other things depends on his certainty of the existence of God (AT 7:69/CSM 2:48). In the latter passage he does indeed appear to be concerned only with knowledge of the conclusions of arguments; but it will not do to infer from this that he was concerned only with the conclusions of arguments also in passage *A* (to make that inference would be to overlook the dynamic character of his thought in the *Meditations*).

Against the conservative interpretation stands the fact that in passage *A* Descartes does appear to be concerned primarily if not exclusively with judgments in the negations of which he perceives

a manifest contradiction. The examples he gives there, or that are implied in what he says, are of that sort; and as he says in the last sentence of the passage, he is concerned that he could be deceived in *anything* (*de ulla alia*) he clearly and distinctly perceives.

As for the radical interpretation, this makes better sense of passage *A*. Moreover, it is in keeping with Descartes's resolution in Meditation One to try to undermine the foundations of his former beliefs. In the first two Meditations he had tried to undermine one of the two foundations, namely, the principle that the senses are a reliable source of knowledge; in Meditation Three he is trying to undermine the other, the principle of noncontradiction.

On the debit side, the radical interpretation is not corroborated by any statement in the *Meditations* or in the "Replies." This is not very surprising, however, because the stage in his reflection to which the interpretation applies is transitory (indeed, it is unique, occurring only "once in the course" of his life). Nevertheless, there is a statement in the sixth "Replies" that appears to contradict the interpretation. Speaking of God's ability to have brought it about for all eternity that it is not true that twice four is eight, which is unintelligible to us, he says:

> And therefore it would be irrational for us to doubt what we do understand correctly just because there is something which we do not understand and which, so far as we can see, there is no reason why we should understand. (AT 7:436/CSM 2:294)

But this statement cannot safely be taken to disprove the radical interpretation, for it is made in a context where the full-blown conception of God is taken for granted, and in the light of that conception, doubt of the sort in question *is* irrational.

Each of the two rival interpretations, then, has something to be said in its favor. All things considered, I am inclined more towards the radical interpretation. But my purpose in this paper is not to try to settle the question which of the two interpretations is correct, but rather to consider, from the standpoint of each, whether Descartes is begging the question.

2. The First Suspicion of Begging the Question

Descartes holds that if he is to be justified in taking clear and distinct perception as the criterion of truth, then he has to get to know whether God can be a deceiver. After passage *A* he goes on

to investigate this question, and in the course of his inquiry he lays down various judgments such as "There must be at least as much in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause" (AT 7:40/CSM 2:28). On the basis of these he goes on to infer that God exists and cannot be a deceiver. What is it that entitles him to make these judgments?

On the conservative interpretation, there appears to be no difficulty here, because the judgments in question are of a sort he did not consider he had reason to doubt in the first place. The suspicion of begging the question does not arise until later in Meditation Three, when he comes to infer that God exists and cannot be a deceiver.

On the radical interpretation, by contrast, the difficulty is obvious, for the judgments in question are of a sort he considered he had reason to doubt. If he cannot be certain about anything else before he knows whether God can be a deceiver, then he cannot be certain of the judgments on the basis of which he purports to acquire this knowledge. For all he knows, he could be deceived in making these judgments. Clearly, *before* he lays down these judgments, he has to give reasons for thinking that the clear and distinct perception on the basis of which he makes them is of a sort that does not admit of any deception. Are there any signs that he gives, or tries to give, such reasons? I shall argue that there are.

The first thing to notice is that he does not say in passage *A* that he cannot be certain of anything else before he knows whether God can be a deceiver. What he says is much more cautious, namely, that he does not *see* (*non video*) that he can be certain of anything else (the translation "it seems" in CSM is a shade too positive). At the end of passage *A* he does not see this, but he came to see it before long.

Not long after passage *A*, and before he begins to investigate whether there is a God, Descartes distinguishes between two different sources of belief, natural impulse and the natural light. If, on the one hand, he believes something because he is impelled by natural impulse, and is thereby led astray, then he may be able to discover the error by means of another faculty. For example, when he is suffering from dropsy, thirst can lead him to drink, thereby exacerbating his illness. If, on the other hand, he believes something because he clearly and distinctly perceives it by the natural light (believes it through the natural light, for short), and what he

believes is not true, then he has no means whatever of detecting the error. He writes (*passage B*):

> When I say 'Nature taught me to think this', all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. 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. (AT 7:38/CSM 2:26f.)[8]

The phrase "not in any way open to doubt" (*nullo modo dubia*) is an echo of the word "doubtful" (*dubia*) in the previous paragraph and of the corresponding phrase (*aliquo modo dubias*) in Meditation One (AT 7:22/CSM 2:15). It is clear from these references that in passage *B* Descartes does not mean that he is not *able* to doubt what he perceives by the natural light, but that what he thus perceives is not susceptible of doubt, that is, he cannot have any *reason* to doubt it.

From the point of view of the radical interpretation, Descartes is doing in passage *B* exactly what he is expected to do, namely, to give reason for thinking that he cannot be deceived in what he perceives by the natural light, and to do this *before* he lays down the judgments on the basis of which he goes on to infer that God cannot be a deceiver. The references to truth in passage *B* are unmistakable. They are also indispensable; for, if Descartes cannot be certain about what he perceives by the natural light, then he cannot be certain about what he infers from what he thus perceives, namely, that God cannot be a deceiver. Thus, he has now come to see what he was not able to see at the end of passage *A*.

From the point of view of the conservative interpretation, by contrast, Descartes is not doing in passage *B* what he is expected to do, for in passage *A* he did not think that he could be deceived in what he perceives by the natural light. This is not to say that passage *B* is wholly superfluous on this interpretation. For in passage *A* he had merely taken for granted that he could not be deceived in what he perceives by the natural light. Perceiving now that he ought not to take this for granted, he gives his reason for

[8]For a thorough discussion of natural impulse see Meditation Six.

it. But if that is the case, then the reason he gives is surprising. For we should expect him to say that he cannot be deceived in what he perceives by the natural light because the negation of a judgment he thus perceived would contain a manifest contradiction, and a contradiction cannot be true. But we should not expect this reason on the radical interpretation, for on that interpretation it would not be legitimate to appeal to the principle of noncontradiction.

Whichever interpretation is correct, in passage *B* Descartes gives reason for thinking that what he perceives by the natural light is true, and hence, when he lays down the judgments on the basis of which he goes on to infer that God exists, he is not on the face of it begging the question. In order to consider whether he is tacitly begging the question, we need to look more closely at passage *B*.

3. The Argument of Passage *B*

The reason Descartes gives in passage *B* is too briefly expressed to be satisfactory as it stands. He does not explain why there cannot be another faculty that he trusts as much as the natural light and that could show him that something he perceived by the natural light was not true (CSM's translation "as trustworthy as" of *aeque fidam* in passage *B* is very misleading (AT 7:38/CSM 2:27)). Moreover, the impossibility of there being another such faculty does not entail without more ado that what he perceives by the natural light is true.

Descartes's reason for thinking that there cannot be another faculty that he trusts as much as the natural light and that could show him that something he perceived by the natural light was not true (the incorrigibility thesis, for short) is, I suggest, that if he could be deceived in what he perceived by the natural light, then he could be deceived in what he perceived by this other faculty. No matter what the other faculty was, God might bring it about that what he perceived by that faculty was not true. This would be the case even if he trusted the other faculty more than he trusts the natural light (if that were possible). It goes without saying that he could not discover by the natural light that something he perceived by the natural light was not true, for if he cannot trust one perception by the natural light, then he cannot trust any. Thus, if he cannot trust the natural light, then he cannot trust *any* faculty

(from a very different angle, Wittgenstein was to say similar things).[9]

But, however plausible the incorrigibility thesis is, it does not entail without further ado that what Descartes perceives by the natural light is true. What further ado might there be? Something along the lines of the following argument, I suggest.

1. If Descartes perceives something by the natural light, then there cannot be another faculty by which he could discover that what he perceives is not true.
2. If there cannot be another faculty by which he could discover that what he perceives is not true, then what he perceives is true.
3. Therefore, if Descartes perceives something by the natural light, then what he perceives is true.

Is there any indication that Descartes accepted premise 2? An indication is perhaps to be found in an important remark on error or falsity that Descartes makes in Meditation Four. Error, he observes, is not a mere negation but a deprivation (AT 7:55/ CSM 2:38). By this he means that error is not merely the lack of something but the lack of something to which he has a proper claim, namely, the truth; to be in error is to be deprived of the truth. But in that case, if there can be no other faculty that would enable Descartes to discover that something he perceives is not true, then he cannot be deprived of the truth, for he can be deprived of the truth only if he can discover the truth (he can be deprived only of what he ought to have, and he ought to have only what he is capable of receiving). If he cannot be deprived of the truth in this case, then he cannot be in error. Since Descartes's remark on error is made in a context in which he takes it as established that God is not a deceiver, we must be cautious in taking the remark as indicating that Descartes accepted premise 2. This point acknowledged, the remark may express something basic in Descartes's conception of error, and that does not depend upon his knowledge of God. A further statement may be relevant here. Commenting on Gassendi's objection that error arises in the intellect, not the will, Descartes writes:

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[9]See *On Certainty by Ludwig Wittgenstein,* ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), paragraphs 301–4, 507, 672.

> I would also like to know what is your conception of the nature of falsity, and how you think it can be an object of the intellect. My own view is this. Since I understand falsity to be merely a privation of the truth, I am convinced that there would be a total contradiction involved in the intellect's apprehending falsity under the guise of truth; but this would have to be the case if the intellect were ever to determine the will to embrace what is false. (Fifth "Replies," AT 7:378/ CSM 2:260)

What is the contradiction that Descartes has in mind here? What he says literally is "I am convinced that it would be completely contradictory that the intellect should apprehend a falsehood under the guise of truth." It is possible that he means by this that if the intellect should apprehend a falsehood as if it were a truth then this would contradict the goodness of God; in that case the quotation is not relevant. But he may mean, rather, that if the intellect were to grasp a falsehood as if it were a truth, then we could have no faculty for recognizing this falsehood for what it is, and hence the supposed falsehood would not be a privation of the truth, contrary to the nature of falsehood.

Given the radical interpretation, Descartes cannot accept premise 2 without more ado, because on that interpretation something that he perceives may not be true even though he cannot discover that it is not true, for God may have made true the negation of that which he perceives. He can justifiably uphold both premise 2 and the said view about God's ability only if he holds that the sort of truth at issue in the said ability of God is not the same as the sort of truth at issue in the above argument (sentences 1 to 3): whereas truth of the former sort does not depend upon the possibility of Descartes's recognizing it (it is transcendent), truth of the latter sort does so depend. It is truth of the latter sort that is at issue where certainty is concerned, and where truth in the everyday sense is concerned. A judgment is true in this sense only if by some faculty Descartes could recognize it as true. A judgment may be true in this sense even though it is not transcendently true. Truth for Descartes is essentially something worthy of pursuit and hence is pursuable; a truth that we are totally incapable of reaching is not intelligibly pursuable.

It might be thought that if Descartes conceived of truth in this cognitive way, then there ought to be more textual evidence of this. But this is not necessarily the case; for once he takes himself

to have attained the sought-for knowledge of God (in the full-blown sense of "God"), he takes himself to know that what he perceives by the natural light is not only true but also not transcendently false; for he takes himself to know that what he perceives by the natural light has been laid down by God as true once and for all (when he attains this full-blown knowledge, his knowledge *about* what he perceives by the natural light is thereby increased, but his certainty *of* what he thus perceives is not thereby increased). In the light of that purported knowledge, the need to note the cognitive conception of truth thus falls away.

It is clear from the analysis of the argument of passage *B* that Descartes is not tacitly begging the question. He argues that what he perceives by the natural light is true, and his argument does not presuppose that God cannot be a deceiver.

4. Deception and Certainty in the Second "Replies"

Descartes discusses the present topic at some length in the second "Replies." Asked how he can be certain that he is not deceived in matters that he thinks he knows clearly and distinctly, he begins his answer in the same vein as in passage *B*.[10] In the case of judgments that he makes through natural instinct, he can be deceived; but in the case of his clearest and most careful judgments, he cannot be deceived. He writes (*passage C*):

> In the case of our clearest and most careful judgements, however, this kind of explanation would not be possible, for if such judgements were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgements or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived. (AT 7:143f./CSM 2:102f.)

The reasoning here is essentially the same as that of passage *B*, the main difference being that he makes explicit the point that, so far as his clearest judgments are concerned, he cannot be *deceived*. Unfortunately, he continues immediately as follows:

> Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood.

If this statement is intended as a reason for holding that he cannot

[10]See second "Objections," AT 7:126/CSM 2:90.

be deceived in matters that he thinks he knows clearly and distinctly, then it will not do, because the goodness of God is just such a matter. He recognizes this, however, for he goes on to say that since his addressee appears to be stuck fast in the doubts of Meditation One, he will answer the question for a second time (AT 7:144/CSM 2:103).

Not surprisingly, Descartes makes no appeal to the goodness of God in his second answer. But, contrary to what we should expect, he does not try to explain how, from the fact that his clearest judgments are incorrigible, it follows that he cannot be deceived in making them. Instead, he introduces a new argument, which is not to be found in Meditation Three. This argument is based on the idea of a conviction which is so firm that it is impossible for him ever to have any cause (*causam*) to doubt it, and which is quite incapable of being destroyed. This firm and immutable conviction is, he says, clearly the same as the most perfect certainty (AT 7:144/CSM 2:103). He has this conviction in the case of those perceptions that are so transparently clear and simple that he cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. Concerning these he writes (*passage D*):

> 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 7:145f./CSM 2:104)

The transparently clear perceptions he is talking of here are those that spring from the natural light (as he says a few paragraphs later, they are due either to the natural light or to divine grace (AT 7:148/CSM 2:105)). (I have not adhered strictly to the order in which Descartes presents the second argument, because he does not employ the analytic method in the second "Replies".)

Descartes's second answer is an afterthought, and as is sometimes the case with afterthoughts, it is not an improvement on the argument of passage *B*. The argument of the second answer can be reconstructed along the lines of the argument of passage *B* as follows:

(i) If Descartes perceives something by the natural light, then he cannot ever doubt what he perceives.

(ii) If Descartes cannot ever doubt what he perceives, then what he perceives is true.
(iii) Therefore, if Descartes perceives something by the natural light, then what he perceives is true.

It might be considered that the second answer shows that the radical interpretation cannot be correct. For if Descartes cannot ever doubt what he perceives by the natural light, then he cannot have been doubting such perceptions in passage *A*. But the point of the radical interpretation is not that in passage *A* Descartes thinks he can *doubt* any clear and distinct perception, but that he thinks he has *reason* to doubt any such perception. Besides, the thought that he cannot ever doubt what he perceives by the natural light has its origin in a thought that first becomes clear only in Meditation Five, namely, that Descartes's nature is such that so long as he is clearly and distinctly perceiving something, he cannot but believe it to be true (there is a presage of this thought in Meditation Four).[11] To suppose that Descartes recognized in passage *A* that he is never able to doubt what he perceives by the natural light would be to project onto an earlier stage of his thinking a recognition that belongs only to a later stage.

Against the second answer it can be objected that firm and immutable conviction is not *clearly* the same as the most perfect certainty. From the supposed fact that Descartes is immutably convinced of what he perceives by the natural light and cannot ever doubt it, it does not follow without further ado that what he thus perceives is true. Descartes himself is aware of this objection, as the following passage indicates (*passage E*):

> 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 7:145/CSM 2:103)

Evidently, Descartes thinks that he ought not to be troubled by the thought that what he perceives by the natural light may appear

[11] Meditation Five, AT 7:65, 69/CSM 2:45, 48. See also Meditation Four, AT 7:58f./CSM 2:41.

false to God and hence be false absolutely speaking. But exactly why he thinks this is not clear. His reason, I suggest, is not that he holds that what he perceives by the natural light could not appear false to God, and hence be false absolutely speaking (after all, that is not what he says). The reason is, rather, that if what he thus perceives should appear false to God and hence be false absolutely speaking, then this falsity would be transcendent, and hence would not be of the sort that is incompatible with certainty. It is for this reason that he says that utterly incorrigible conviction is the same as the most perfect certainty. That this is what he has in mind is indicated, I suggest, by the words with which he introduces the second answer, namely, "I shall now expound for a second time the basis on which it seems to me all human certainty can be founded" (AT 7:144/CSM 2:103). The certainty whose basis he is undertaking to explain in the second answer is the certainty that is possible for a *human* being, not that which is possible for God or an angel.

5. The Second Suspicion of Begging the Question

Descartes is acquitted of the charge of begging the question before he infers that God exists and is not a deceiver. But when he makes that inference, the suspicion of begging the question arises for a second time.

If Descartes purported to perceive by the natural light that God exists and is not a deceiver, then the suspicion of begging the question would simply not arise, since he has already argued that what he perceives by the natural light is true. He held in fact that it is possible to perceive by the natural light that God exists. At the end of the second "Replies" he states that if we reflect on the idea of God, we can recognize without argument that God exists; given such reflection, this fact becomes as self-evident as the fact that the number two is even (AT 7:163/CSM 2:115).[12] Yet this view is of no help in removing the suspicion that he is begging the question in Meditation Three, for there he purports to arrive at the knowledge that God exists not through the natural light but through inference. He infers that God exists in two places in Meditation Three, saying in each of them "it has to be concluded," thus marking the

[12]See also Meditation Five, AT 7:69/CSM 2:47.

fact that the judgment is made through perception by inference (AT 7:45, 51/CSM 2:31, 35).

To perceive a judgment clearly and distinctly by the natural light is not the same as to perceive a judgment clearly and distinctly by inference (perceive by inference, for short). In the former case, one perceives the judgment clearly and distinctly merely by thinking of it; in the latter case, one comes to perceive the judgment clearly and distinctly only as a result of having perceived other judgments by the natural light. In view of this difference, Descartes is not entitled to infer that God exists simply on the grounds that he is entitled to believe what he perceives by the natural light; he needs to explain why he is thus entitled. Yet he makes no attempt to do this in Meditation Three.

Moreover, later on, towards the end of Meditation Five, Descartes himself recognizes that he can have reason to doubt what he perceives by inference. He says that so long as he is clearly and distinctly perceiving something, he cannot but believe it to be true, but as soon as he ceases to attend to the argument that led him to believe it, other arguments can be brought forward that may lead him to doubt it. For example, when he attends to the argument, he cannot but believe that the three angles of a right-angled triangle are equal to two right angles, but when he ceases to attend to the argument and merely remembers having perceived it very clearly, he is then able to doubt the conclusion; and if he does not have knowledge of God, he may doubt it if the thought occurs to him that his nature is such that he sometimes goes wrong in what he perceives very clearly (AT 7:69f./CSM 2:48). Thus, Descartes recognizes that although this thought, in effect the doubt-insinuating thought, has been dispelled as a reason to doubt what he perceives by the natural light, it has not been dispelled as a reason to doubt what he perceives by inference.

Could not Descartes dispel the doubt-insinuating thought for a second time in Meditation Three simply by re-running the argument of passage *B* with the term "inference" in place of "the natural light"? Not quite; for the first premise of the argument in this case—"If Descartes perceives something by inference, then he cannot by any faculty discover that what he perceives is not true"—would not be so plausible as the first premise of the argument of passage *B,* for the former premise appears to conflict with his remembered experience: he recalls that on numerous occasions in

the past he has gone wrong.[13] These errors cannot have had to do with perception by the natural light, for he has just argued that this is free of error. They must have had to do with perception by inference. While there is nothing he can do that might reveal that he was deceived in something he perceived by the natural light, there appears to be something he can do that might reveal that he was deceived in something he perceived by inference—namely, attend carefully to the premises once again. Perception by inference, unlike perception by the natural light, appears to be open to correction.

Thus, in order to dispel the doubt-insinuating thought as a reason to doubt what he clearly and distinctly perceives by inference, Descartes thinks that he needs to have knowledge of God. But how can he acquire this knowledge if it is to be obtained through perception by inference? If he can have reason to doubt what he perceives by inference, can he not have reason to doubt what he perceives about God by inference? Evidently Descartes did not think so. He appears to have believed that the conclusion "God exists" is a special case, an exception to the rule that what he perceives by inference is open to doubt. In his reply to Arnauld he states that he is certain that God exists to begin with because he attends to the arguments that prove this, and later on it is sufficient for him to remember that he clearly perceived something earlier in order to be certain that it is true (AT 7:246/CSM 2:171). What he has in mind here becomes clearer in the light of his remarks in Meditation Five. He says there that when he is merely remembering that he clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and is no deceiver, and he is no longer attending to the arguments that led him to perceive this, no counter-argument (*ratio contraria*) can be adduced to make him doubt it (AT 7:70/CSM 2:48). He makes the same point in a letter to Regius of 24 May 1640, which was written shortly after he completed the *Meditations*:

> But a man who has once clearly understood the reasons which convince us that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided he remembers the conclusion 'God is not a deceiver' whether or not he continues to attend to the reasons for it, will continue to possess not only conviction, but real knowledge of this and all other conclusions the reasons

[13]See Meditation Four, AT 7:54/CSM 2:38, and Meditation Five, AT 7:70/CSM 2:48.

> for which he remembers he once clearly perceived. (AT 3:65/CSMK, 147)[14]

Descartes's point, then, is that so long as he remembers having clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and cannot be a deceiver, he cannot be led to doubt this for *any* reason; for what he remembers having clearly and distinctly perceived puts to flight the thought that he is deceived in this perception.

Whatever the merits of the above line of thought, it can be objected that it is beside the point. For what matters in the present context is not whether Descartes can be led to doubt his conclusion that God exists *after* he has drawn it, but whether, *before* he draws it, he can be led to doubt his entitlement to draw it in the first place. Before drawing that conclusion, he ought to have asked himself whether some God could have given him a nature such that if he were to draw that conclusion, he would be deceived. If Descartes had asked himself that question, what would his answer have been?

Before he infers that God exists, he uses the word "God" not as a proper name but as a general term. He speaks for example of "a supreme God [*summum aliquem Deum*] as being eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him" (AT 7:40/CSM 2:28). A little later he says that by the word "God" he means "a substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists" (AT 7:45/CSM 2:31). When he comes to infer that God exists, therefore, what he is inferring, strictly speaking, is that some God, a substance of the defined sort, exists. Hence, if he had asked, before making the inference, whether some God can have given him a nature such that if he were to infer that some God exists he would be deceived in inferring this, he would immediately have perceived by the natural light that it is not the case that some God can have given him such a nature. He would have perceived that the question contains a manifest contradiction.

It might be objected that when he actually makes the inference that God exists, he is no longer using the word "God" as a general term but as the proper name of the substance that is supremely powerful and that created both Descartes and everything else. Even

[14]See also second "Replies," AT 7:146/CSM 2:104.

so, if before making that inference he had asked whether God can have given him a nature such that were he to infer that God exists he would be deceived in so inferring, he would have perceived by the natural light that this question contains a manifest contradiction (it contains a manifest contradiction even on the assumption that God is a deceiver). Thus, the conclusion "God exists," like the conclusion "I exist," is a special case.

The doubt-insinuating thought, then, is no obstacle to Descartes's going on to infer that God exists. But it does not follow from this that the conclusion is not open to doubt, for he may have other reasons to doubt it. In passage *A* he does not mention any other reason, and he says that when he doubted very simple judgments in arithmetic and geometry earlier (Meditation One), his only reason for doing so was the doubt-insinuating thought (AT 7:36/CSM 2:25).[15] But he is mistaken here; for in Meditation One, after introducing the doubt-insinuating thought, he adds that there may be some who would deny the existence of a God and hold that he has arrived at his present state through fate or chance or a continuous chain of events or some other cause, in which case the less powerful they suppose the author of his being (*originis meae authorem*), the more likely it is that he is so imperfect as to be deceived all the time (AT 7:21/CSM 2:14). Thus, he recognized there that even if he were somehow convinced that there was no God, this thought about the author of his being would be a reason for doubt (the term "author" here refers to these other possible causes of his being). Again, one of the three reasons for doubt he mentions in Meditation Six is the reason that is based on his ignorance of the author of his being; the expression "author" here (*authorem meae originis*) is intended to refer to the cause of his being whatever it may be (AT 7:77/CSM 2:53). He uses the same expression in exactly this general sense later in Meditation Three (AT 7:48/CSM 2:33). Moreover, when he mentions the doubt-insinuating thought towards the end of Meditation Five, he gives it this more general formulation, namely, "I have been so made by nature that I go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be" (CSM's "I have a natural disposition" for *a natura factum* obscures the point in question) (AT 7:70/CSM 2:48).

[15]See also Meditation One, AT 7:21/CSM 2:14.

Thus, Descartes appears to have a further reason to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists, namely, the thought that some cause other than God can have given him a nature such that he goes wrong in what he perceives by inference. In the light of this further thought, he ought to have asked whether some cause other than God can have given him a nature such that if he were to infer that God exists, he would be mistaken. If he had asked that question, the negative answer would not have sprung so readily to mind as it did in the case of the corresponding question suggested by the doubt-insinuating thought as formulated in passage *A*. But, although Descartes did not explicitly ask this question in Meditation Three, he did in effect answer it there, for he judges that there can be *no* cause of his existence other than God. After concluding for the first time that God exists, he goes on to ask whether he could exist if God did not exist, and whether he could have derived his existence "from some other beings less perfect than God" (AT 7:48/CSM 2:33). He investigates the question by considering in turn all other causes of his existence of which he can conceive. He rules out each of them in turn, and is left with the thought that the cause of his existence is God. Moreover, it is by means of the natural light that he rules out the other possible causes of his existence. This is indicated by his repeatedly using the words *manifestum* (two occurrences), *perspicuum* (two occurrences), and *apertum* (one occurrence) in his treatment of this question, and these are the words he uses throughout Meditation Three to signal perception by the natural light. Hence, if he had asked the question whether some cause other than God can have given him a nature such that if he were to infer that God exists he would be mistaken, he would have answered no, and would have backed up his answer with exactly the line of thought that leads him to rule out the other possible causes of his existence. This line of thought, the second argument for the existence of God, removes the further reason for doubt about his entitlement to infer that God exists.

It might be objected that Descartes has a further reason still to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists, namely, the thought that some malicious demon, as powerful as he is cunning, may be employing all his energies to deceive him; in the light of this thought, he ought to have asked whether, if he were to infer that God exists, he might be deceived.

The idea of a malicious demon, however, was not something

Descartes considered even for a moment as the basis of a reason for doubt. He does not mention it among the reasons for doubt that he recounts in Meditation Six (see above, p. 240), or anywhere else for that matter. He introduces the idea at the end of Meditation One, *after* the reasons for doubt have been presented, and he introduces it not as an additional reason for doubt, but as a pretense, a figment of the imagination designed to reinforce his resolution to treat his former beliefs about the external world as if they were obvious falsehoods. He does not ask whether he might be deceived by some malicious demon, but rather pretends that some malicious demon is deceiving him (AT 7:22/CSM 2:15).[16]

But is not the idea of a malicious demon the basis of a reason to doubt his inference that God exists even though Descartes does not himself treat it as such? This question raises the further question, What sort of thoughts does Descartes consider to constiiute a reason for doubt (the sort of doubt, that is, which he intends)? When we look at his avowed reasons for doubt, we see that they are all based upon possible causes of deception or error, such as sensory illusion, dreaming, the power of God, and the cause of his nature whatever it may be. This suggests that he considers that, to be a reason for doubt, a thought must specify some possible cause of deception or error. But the malicious demon is a possible cause of deception. Yes, but there is a difference between the malicious demon and these other possible causes of deception: the latter are items that he believes or formerly believed to occur or exist, whereas the malicious demon is not something that he believes or ever believed to exist. This suggests that he considers that an item is the basis of a reason for doubt only if he believes or formerly believed that the item in question occurs or exists; it is not enough that he can imagine or conceive of it as occurring or existing. As Descartes recognized, in order to have a reason for doubt, he has temporarily to withhold some of his previous beliefs from doubt (in order to try to demolish the building of his former beliefs, so to speak, there is nowhere else he can look for the explosives than

[16]The present interpretation of the malicious demon goes back to Henri Gouhier, *Essais sur Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1937), 163. In "Exclusion and Abstraction in Descartes' Metaphysics," *Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 38–57, I argue that the malicious demon is a metaphor for exclusion, and hence plays not merely a fortifying role in Descartes's reasoning but also a heuristic role.

within the existing building).[17] What makes Descartes's doubt "exaggerated," as he calls it, is not that it is grounded in merely imaginary items, but that it is grounded on supposedly existing items that are not ordinarily recognized as possible causes of wholesale deception or error.[18] The malicious demon is not a supposedly existing item, and hence is not the basis of a reason for Descartes to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists.

In sum, not only is the doubt-insinuating thought not a reason for Descartes to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists, but also he has no other reason to doubt this.

Nevertheless, even if Descartes has no reason to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists, there remains the question of his entitlement to infer that God cannot be a deceiver. He makes this inference almost at the end of Meditation Three (AT 7:52/CSM 2:35). What entitles him to make it? Can God not have given Descartes a nature such that he is deceived in inferring that God cannot be a deceiver? If God is a deceiver, he might have done just that. Before he made this inference, the objection is, Descartes ought to have asked himself whether, if he were to make this inference, he could be deceived in making it.

When we look more closely at how Descartes comes to infer that God cannot be a deceiver, we find that after inferring for the first time that God exists, he goes on to judge that God is a supremely perfect being, and he purports to perceive this by the natural light (AT 7:47/CSM 2:32). Hence, when he infers for the second time that God exists, it is this supremely perfect being that he infers to exist (AT 7:51/CSM 2:35). On the basis of this inference, he goes on to infer that God cannot be a deceiver. He reasons as follows:

> By 'God' I mean the very being the idea of whom is within me, that is, the possessor of all the perfections which I cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in my thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever. It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect. (AT 7:52/CSM 2:35)

It is plain from this passage that if, just before inferring that God cannot be a deceiver, Descartes had asked himself whether God

[17]See Appendix to the fifth "Replies," AT 9a:205/CSM 2:270.

[18]For the term "exaggerated doubt" see Meditation Six, AT 7:89/CSM 2:61, and seventh "Replies," AT 7:460/CSM 2:308.

could have given him a nature such that were he to infer that God cannot be a deceiver, he would be deceived, he would immediately have perceived by the natural light that it is not the case that God could have given him such a nature, for he would have perceived that the thought that God, the supremely perfect being, should do such a thing contains a manifest contradiction.[19] But might not something other than God have given Descartes a nature such that he might be deceived in inferring that God cannot be a deceiver? No, because he has been given his nature by God.

Thus, when the order in which Descartes develops his thoughts in Meditation Three is taken into account, it becomes clear that he has no reason to doubt his entitlement to infer that God exists and cannot be a deceiver. Perhaps he did submit to doubt the entitlement in question, as his deliberate procedure required, but he did not do this explicitly, and thereby exposed himself to the suspicion of begging the question. In neglecting to do this, he was guilty of an oversight, but not of begging the question.

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[19]See third "Replies," AT 7:195/CSM 2:136f.