

PART I

Skepticism

PROOF

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CHAPTER I

The skepticism of the First Meditation

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INTRODUCTION

Descartes seeks unshakeable certainty about truth by “the apparently opposite course” of deliberately generating uncertainty (6: 31, 1: 127). His premise is that if at some point the attempt to generate uncertainty fails, unshakeable certainty will have been found. For the project to succeed, the reasons leading Descartes to uncertainty at the outset must not be arbitrary; they must be, on the contrary, “powerful and well thought-out” (7: 22, 2: 15): the doubt must be methodic and reasonable. What it means for doubt to be methodic and reasonable rather than haphazard or gratuitous should be a central question for any interpretation of the *Meditations*. In what follows we give an account of reasonable doubt that differs from other such accounts in the literature in several important ways. First, we take the madman and evil demon objections *not* to be reasonable doubts. They are included by Descartes in the *Meditations* precisely for the purpose of contrasting them with what he takes to be reasonable doubts: the madman is contrasted with the dream argument (section I of this chapter) and the evil demon is contrasted with the deceiving God objection (section II). Getting the distinction right between reasonable and unreasonable doubt is crucial, we argue, for understanding what is unique about the particular foundation of knowledge that Descartes settles upon in Meditation Two, namely the thought or assertion that “*I am, I exist*” (section III of this chapter). As we will see, because there is no way of reasonably doubting that proposition, our knowledge of it constitutes a model for all other knowledge.

Descartes begins the *Meditations* by going “straight for the basic principles on which [his] former beliefs rested” (7: 18, 2: 12). We will present Descartes’ method of doubt as consisting of various challenges to a series of “models of knowledge” with the aim of finding one that resists every conceivable challenge. We will take M to be a model of knowledge for

some person P if (1) P knows M, and (2) for all other things X that are identical to M in some relevant respect R, P knows X. As we will see, Descartes' method of doubt leads him to the discovery that the thought or assertion, "*I am, I exist*" (referred to in the literature and by us as the "*cogito*"¹), is a model of knowledge for him because (1) Descartes knows that the *cogito* is necessarily true whenever he perceives it, and (2) everything else that is identical to the *cogito* in the relevant respect that it too is perceived clearly and distinctly is likewise known by Descartes to be necessarily true whenever he perceives it.

The first model that comes under attack is sensory experience, which is challenged on the basis of the relativity of its deliverances. In very allusive fashion, Descartes deploys the Pyrrhonian trope that what is perceived is relative to the conditions under which it is perceived and therefore lacks the objectivity that characterizes knowledge of the truth. In particular, size and distance make such a difference: the senses at least occasionally deceive us about very small or distant objects. The prospect is better with respect to proximate, medium-sized objects, especially those belonging to Descartes' own body, such as the hands before his face; but this second model fails when challenged by the possibility that the experience is only one of dreaming. However, knowledge of simpler and more universal things such as arithmetic and geometry, the third model, can still be certain and indubitable, unimpeachable by the possibility of dreaming. But such knowledge is open to doubt on the basis that God might allow deception about such apparently certain things in *all* instances, since He allows deception about them in at least *some* instances. If certainty about them is to be achieved, therefore, proof must first be found that there exists a God who would not allow such universal deception. This proof would also eliminate such other reasons for universal deception as that we come into being through some cause less perfect than God, such as chance, fate, or "some other means" (7: 21, 2: 14).

This three-stage generation of doubt is a fairly standard reading of the First Meditation and is accurate as far as it goes. But it misses two challenges that offer refinement of Descartes' argument there. One is the lunatic, the other is the evil demon. Both tend to be ignored by the literature, or to be melded into one of the other models, lunacy into the dream

¹ In following the literature in referring to this thought or assertion as the *cogito* we are not thereby taking the *cogito* to be an inference, a performative, a simple assertion, or anything else. For our purposes, we can also ignore the distinction between the *cogito* as formulated above and the assertion that Descartes cites for his model in the Third Meditation: "I am a thinking thing" (7: 35, 2: 24).

challenge, the evil demon into a deceiving God challenge.² The tendency does not necessarily lead to error, but it does foreclose certain refinements of Descartes' argument, especially concerning the methodic nature of his doubt. Although he seems to dismiss uncritically the possibility that the experience of his hands and the rest of his body is that of a madman, he does so on the basis that it would be mad to take that possibility seriously. The lunacy challenge thereby shows that Descartes' procedure of doubting is limited to what can be doubted reasonably. He is thus poised to distinguish, as he soon does, his doubt of mathematics as "not a flip-pant or ill-considered conclusion, but [one] based on powerful and well thought-out reasons" (7: 21, 2: 15).

For reasons to be discussed below, Descartes further supposes that "not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me" (7: 22, 2: 15). Is the doubt based on this supposition of an evil demon a reasonable doubt for Descartes? We think that it is not, for the doubt is immediately dispelled, at the outset of the Second Meditation, by the *cogito*: "Let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (7: 25, 2: 17). Narratively, the evil demon at this point disappears from the *Meditations*, never to be referred to again, but not before achieving what, logically, was the purpose of its introduction.³ For just as the Pyrrhonists in their search for tranquility discovered it "as if by chance" upon their suspension of judgment, so Descartes incidentally discovers in this "first cognition," *I am a thinking thing*, a general rule for truth: whatever I perceive in the way that I perceive this residue of

² This tendency is to be found even in the most thorough and sophisticated literature. Broughton treats the lunacy argument together with dreaming; both explain "how the meditator could have acquired the belief if it were false" (2002, p. 65). Newman refers to the evil genius "as a kind of mnemonic for the more general doubt about our cognitive nature." He differs from Broughton, as do we, in holding that "what underwrites the doubt is not a specific story about how I got my cognitive wiring" (2005). But we differ from his view that "it's the realization – regardless of the story – that my cognitive wiring is flawed." As we see it, our nature is not flawed, only fallible. Miles sees a distinction between the "deceiving God" and the "malicious demon," but holds that "nothing turns on it since if the malicious demon, though finite, is yet powerful enough to deceive us all the time in matters that we perceive clearly and distinctly, reason itself is in jeopardy ... Given that the finite deceiver has sufficient power to control human reason, and the prospect of delivery from doubt is as remote as that of a reasoned escape from the specter of madness" (1999, p. 140). For more bibliography on the deceiving God–evil genius distinction, see Ablondi (2007, p. 88n.18). Ablondi draws the distinction, but in a way that does not persuade us.

³ Strictly speaking, the demon survives for two additional paragraphs, since Descartes then allows that the assertion "I am a thinking thing" is immune to the demon's malicious power (7: 26–27, 2: 18). See note 1 above.

the abortive fifth challenge is true (7: 35, 2: 24).⁴ This is the model for all other knowledge whose certainty he seeks from the outset.

I

The fullest treatments of the last decade of the madman objection have been given by Janet Broughton (2002, 2005). In her book, Broughton construes the doubts of the First Meditation as a series of four “sceptical scenarios” (2002, pp. 64–67): lunacy, dreaming, God, and fate. On her account, these scenarios have two characteristics: (1) they are all *causal* explanations of how we might have our beliefs, such that (2) if the account is true, then the beliefs are false. These scenarios bear a superficial resemblance to the challenged models of our account, but we have three concerns about them. First, although it certainly is a causal account of false beliefs, Descartes summarily *dismisses* the relevance of the lunacy scenario, a feature that Broughton’s 2002 account does not notice and seemingly has no way to explain, for Broughton takes the lunacy objection to be paradigmatic of the structure of Descartes’ doubt. That lunacy is not such a paradigm is seen by considering that Descartes requires, but the lunacy challenge fails to provide, valid and considered *reasons* (*validas & meditata rationes*) for doubt. Descartes has no reason to think that he is mad, and thus to doubt on the possibility of being mad would be gratuitous and unreasonable. Second, the challenge based on an omnipotent God is not obviously a “causal story” as Broughton makes it out to be. As we learn from the Fourth Meditation, God only allows us to be deceived; He does not *cause* us to be deceived. Our deception lies with our misuse of our will, which is not invoked in the First Meditation. A third concern of ours is that Descartes *accepts* the dream scenario as consistent with truth. Even in a dream we can have a clear and distinct perception that two and three are five, due, perhaps, like the appearance of Jacob Marley to Scrooge, to a bit of uncooked potato. Deviant cause does not by itself entail falsity of belief.

In a later (2005) paper on the madman and the dream objections, Broughton discusses at greater length why Descartes invoked lunacy in Meditation One. She takes lunacy to provide Descartes with reasons for doubt about certain sensible objects, and concedes that the dream argument provides better reasons for doubting, thus leading us to the problem of why Descartes would include the madman objection at all. Broughton’s answer is

⁴ “*in hac prima cogitatione ... pro regula generalii ... statuere*”.

that that objection “keeps us honest” in a way that the dream objection does not. Her argument is that the madman objection is more jarring, disquieting, and immediately perceivable than the dream objection. To understand that I might now be dreaming invokes memory as I recall vivid, deceptive dreams and compare them to subsequent, waking experiences; to understand the madman objection I have only to look on as a lunatic declares his head to be made of glass, when it clearly is not. But as we will see, there are important differences between the dream and madman objections, such that only the former in fact provides any good reason to doubt.⁵

The most recent treatments of the madman have been given in a paper by Fred Ablondi (2007) and a reply by David Scott (2009). Ablondi largely follows the classic line of Harry Frankfurt (1970): the madman is never taken seriously because it would call into question the logical thought processes required to carry out the project of the *Meditations*, thus putting an end to the work before it had even begun. Scott argues, on the contrary, that the madness hypothesis *is* taken seriously by Descartes, and its skeptical force is subsequently incorporated into the dream argument. The reason Scott gives for why the madman objection is not sufficient on its own without the dream argument involves a point about Descartes’ methodology. Scott, following work by Hide Ishiguro, argues that in order for our doubt to be methodic we must assume that we understand the patterns of relations that hold between our beliefs, and between our beliefs and the world. In the case of madness, we do not know these patterns of relations, while in the case of dreaming, we do; hence, the dream argument is more methodic. We cannot agree, however, with either Broughton or Scott that the madman objection is similar to the dream objection or included in some way in the dream objection, for we take the madness objection to be an instance of gratuitous doubt, while dreaming is given as an instance of reasonable doubt, as we will now argue.

⁵ Still, we take Broughton to be in one sense surely on the right track. For we take Descartes, who is generally regarded as the paradigmatic internalist, to be an externalist, committed to holding that there is knowledge of *p* just in case there is belief of *p* and belief of *p* only if *p*. But this is as far as the externalism need go. For we do not see Descartes as committed to viewing the condition ‘only if’ in the usual causal terms. Even this much of the account is difficult to find explicit in the texts; in any case, the importance of it here is its ontological underpinning. The idea of the sun is in a sense non-mental, for it just is the sun itself (7: 102, 2: 75). In another sense, it certainly is mental, for Descartes immediately qualifies the sun as “existing in the intellect.” But being in the mind is only what he calls an extrinsic denomination, which might mean nothing more than that the sun is known. To put it in the terms of the Third Meditation, the objective reality in the mind of the sun that exists formally in the sky is not some double existence leading to a representationalist epistemology and a correspondence theory of truth. One just sees the truth when one sees the object, but the cause of the seeing doesn’t matter.

The madman objection extends the relativity objection against sense knowledge by considering that our beliefs that our bodies have a certain character, or even that they belong to ourselves, are reliable only to the degree that we are mentally sane (i.e. relative to our sanity). Madmen give us occasion to call into doubt the allegedly indubitable beliefs Descartes mentions (“that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands ... that these hands or this whole body are mine”) because they possess false beliefs both about their own circumstances (“they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked”) as well as about their own bodies (“or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass”). Yet this extension of the relativity objection is immediately found wanting by Descartes: “But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself” (all quotations in this paragraph: 7: 18–19, 2: 13).

The madman objection is successful in reintroducing a relativity argument in order to call immediate sense data about ourselves into doubt, but this argument does not have the cogency of the objection that called into doubt our beliefs about small and distant sensory objects. The latter doubt made us realize that *all of us, some of the time*, are deceived by the senses. Anybody reading the *Meditations* would be given reason to call some of their beliefs into doubt on account of this reflection. The madman objection, on the other hand, makes us realize only that *some of us, some of the time*, are deceived by the senses. Not all readers of the *Meditations* (in all likelihood, none of the readers) would be given a reason to doubt their beliefs on account of this argument alone. Indeed, as Descartes remarks, “I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.” In other words, a person could respond to the madman objection by claiming, “that argument serves to call the beliefs of madmen – of which you may be one, Descartes – into doubt; but as for me, I have no reason to believe that I am a madman, and so I will continue to believe that my body is flesh and bone rather than glass or earthenware.” The madmen objection does not, without further information, have universal applicability, or even applicability to any individual person.

The madman objection could be made universal, however, by supposing that *everybody* is mad some or all of the time, although most of us do not realize this about ourselves. Then the relativity argument would apply to everybody, for just as we are all sometimes in non-optimal

external circumstances for trusting our senses, so too we are all, by supposition, sometimes in a non-optimal frame of mind for trusting our senses. But Descartes never strengthens the argument in this way, nor does he have any reason to do so. To assume that every human being is insane is a gratuitous doubt. As Scott has demonstrated from a number of texts, madness is, for Descartes, a physiological imperfection (“brains so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia” [7: 19, 2: 13]) and not in any way a total lack of, or a different kind altogether of, reason. As an imperfection rather than its own nature, therefore, madness implies the existence or at least the possibility of sane minds, and those are Descartes’ audience. A world of only madmen would result only through some great accident, not because of anything inherent to rational nature itself. Sane minds are the norm; madness is the exception, by definition. Why suppose, then, that persistent vapours have got to everybody’s heads, or the head of any particular person? To suppose something so arbitrary is perhaps, as Descartes says, itself a sign of madness.

Broughton considers an account of Descartes’ dismissal of the madness objection similar to the one just sketched by us. She discusses the way in which dreaming is inherent to human nature while lunacy is not and asks whether Descartes could have dismissed the madness objection for this reason. She concludes that he could not have, given that “*nothing we know about them [madmen] and us shows us that we are constitutionally incapable of having our vapor-balance upset too*” (2005, p. 17; our emphasis). While there is a possibility that we might all be mad, or that any given person might be mad, we do not believe that this bare possibility alone provides enough of a reason to doubt one’s own sanity. The dream argument, on the other hand, does provide a reason for doubt. It is introduced to supply the relativity argument of the sort that Descartes needs to question sense knowledge about ourselves; an argument that shows readers of the *Meditations* that *all of us*, at least *some of the time*, are deceived by the senses about our very selves. It is a reasonable doubt because sleeping and dreaming form a part of everybody’s life, just as viewing small and distant objects does.

II

The concept of a God who allows me always to be deceived even in matters that seem wholly certain and evident (see 7: 35–36, 2: 24–25) and the concept of an evil demon who “has employed all his energies to deceive

me” (see 7: 22, 2: 15) are different concepts, described differently and invoked for different dialectical purposes by Descartes. By contrast to the God who is described as omnipotent, literally capable of everything (*qui omnia potest*), a characterization that underlies Descartes’ doctrine of created truth, the evil demon is described as only of the utmost power and cunning (*summe potentem & callidum*), all of whose energies are used to make our perceptions “merely the delusions of dreams that he has devised to ensnare my judgment.” An omnipotent God would not have to rely on cunning to lead us to deception, nor would he exhaust his power in doing so. An omnipotent God would at most *permit* us to be deceived by failing to create what only appears to exist as we perceive it; he would not *actively* deceive us by seducing our judgment, as an evil demon might.

The demon is introduced not for methodological but psychological reasons. Descartes finds that even with the hyperbolic doubt in play, his former, now dubious belief cannot be relinquished, and therefore he resolves, for theoretical purposes, “to turn [his] will in completely the opposite direction and deceive himself, by pretending that these former opinions are false and imaginary” (7: 22, 2: 15).⁶ And he does so with the supposition of the evil demon. As we will later remark, this act of willful self-deceit is the hallmark of unreasonable doubt. The question, therefore, is this: why is the possibility of a deceiving God, then, counted among reasonable doubts?

To reiterate, God is never said, or even hypothesized, to be a deceiver, as the evil demon is, only as *allowing* deception. That God allows deception is not removed by the proof of the existence of a veridical God that culminates in the Fifth Meditation, or by the Fourth Meditation, which absolves God of responsibility for our sins and errors by attributing them to our misapplication of the will to what the intellect does not clearly and distinctly perceive as good or true. Nonetheless, Descartes admits he is at least sometimes deceived about what he takes to be obviously good or true, which is sufficient for the hyperbolic doubt that he is always so deceived if “God has given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident” (7: 36, 2: 25).

What kind of nature would he have, always to be deceived even in the most evident matters? The hyperbolic doubt is not that God has given him a corrupted nature, i.e. one incapable of the truth, or of

⁶ It seems clear that Descartes is referring to the Pyrrhonian skeptics, who doubt not for good reasons, but willfully. When the intended result of this doubt, the possibility of an evil demon, cannot be maintained, the psychological futility of Pyrrhonism is thereby indicated.

distinguishing it from the false; for in that case God would be a deceiver in a sense which Descartes rules out right from the outset of the *Discourse on the Method* when he says that good sense (*le bon sens*), what he also calls “reason,” is part of human nature and could not be better for its task of “judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false” (6: 1–2, 1: 111). That we do not have the power of such judgment is of course possible, but to doubt that we have it would not be reasonable, for there is no reason to suspect that we do not have it. As the *Discourse* begins: “Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world: for everyone thinks himself so well endowed with it that even those who are the hardest to please in everything else do not usually desire more of it than they possess. In this it is unlikely that everyone is mistaken” (6: 1–2, 1: 111). That we do err at least sometimes is not because of a defective power of reason, but because of a (culpable) misapplication of it, the elimination of which is the aim of the method proposed in the *Discourse*. But we might always be mistaken if we are created such that although we are capable of distinguishing the true from the false, we never succeed in reaching the truth. And a reason for this is indicated in the First Meditation as the ground for the challenge that results in the hyperbolic doubt: “there is an omnipotent God who has made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me just as they do now?” (7: 21, 2: 14).⁷

The list Descartes gives of what God might fail to create is long, perhaps designed for heuristic purposes. The key item, extended thing (*res extensa*), which is later revealed as essentially comprising all the others, is only slipped in, apparently en passant. But given what is later revealed, the explanation of how mathematics could always be false for us becomes clear: God might not have created *res extensa*, which is its object; we would have what only appears to be clear and distinct perception of it. Another way to put this possibility of error is that although we are capable of the truth, we just never encounter it. Descartes’ method promises only

⁷ For the opposing view, that the hyperbolic doubt is based on “the hypothesis of a flaw in our cognitive faculties,” see Newman and Nelson (1999, esp. pp. 376–77). They provide a “canon” of seven texts in which, according to them, “it is clear that hyperbolic doubt is in every case linked to meta-level questioning of the cognitive faculties by means of which we perceive ... for all I know, my cognitive equipment is flawed” (1999, pp. 373–74). But Descartes never mentions cognitive flaw. All he says is that our nature might be such that we are deceived even in what seems most evident. On our reading, one naturally assents to what seems clearly and distinctly true, but that might always lead to error if the object that would make those perceptions true were not (created by God).

the avoidance of error, not arrival at truth, a promise that would be blasphemous.⁸ Thus it is natural for Descartes to include in this same ground for the challenge that results in the hyperbolic doubt the possibility of our having been created by fate or chance, whose imperfection would fail to guarantee that there is an object of evident perceptions.⁹

The Sixth Meditation is largely the mop-up operation of providing moral certainty about the immortality of the soul and about the practical reliability of sensory experience insofar as it passes the test of coherence. The search for unshakeable certainty ends, in the Fifth Meditation, with the completion of Descartes' argument for the existence of God, whose veracity insures that He has not created us so as to err even in what seems most evident. The conclusions drawn in the Fifth Meditation are not only that God exists, and that His existence is known as certainly as anything else, but also that the certainty of everything else *depends* on certainty of it (7: 69, 2: 47–48). How so? According to the Fourth Meditation, it is impossible to doubt a clear and distinct perception of the truth as long one has the perception. But when that perception is no longer occurrent – when, for example, attention wanders from the reasons on the basis of which it is perceived as such – other reasons might intrude and shake the certainty of it, unless blocked by knowledge of God, with the result that there would never be “true and certain knowledge about anything, but

⁸ See the subtitle of Malebranche's *Search after Truth*: “Wherein are treated the nature of Man's mind and the use that he must make of it to avoid error in the sciences.” Descartes' first rule of method in the *Discourse*, like the Fourth Meditation's prescription concerning the proper use of the will, is essentially negative, telling us what not to do in order to avoid error.

⁹ The full account of this failure would involve an account of Descartes' conception of truth as an object. Like Augustine, and unlike Malebranche, he conceives of truth as a *thing*, not as a *relation* either between ideas or between things and ideas. Thus Descartes claims that God is the total and efficient cause of even eternal truths, which we take to mean that He creates a certain object – *res extensa* – in the case of mathematics. It is this conception of truth, which Locke was later to call metaphysical truth, that leads Descartes to say in a letter to Clerselier of 23 April 1649 that “there is no distinction between truth and the thing or substance that is true” (5: 355, 3: 377). It is also why he says to Mersenne (July 1641 and 22 July 1641) that terms or propositions do equally well in expressing truth (3: 395 and 417, 3: 186 and 187). When Descartes invokes the scholastics' slogan as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, he does not mean, as the scholastics do, a correspondence between thing and intellect – a shared form, for example. Instead, he means *adaequatio* in the sense of attaining, or reaching, by equaling metaphorically in the sense of being up to the task (of perceiving the object). He seems to say just this to Mersenne: “it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word ‘truth’, in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object, but that when it is attributed to things outside thought, it means only that they can be objects of genuine thoughts [*pensées véritables*], either ours or God's” (2: 597, 3: 139; modified). The thoughts are true only in the sense indicated, namely veritable or genuine; they are not true in the sense things are true (*vraies*). As later Cartesians were to make clear, putative thoughts or ideas without objects are not ideas at all.

only shifting and changeable opinions” (7: 69, 2: 48). So knowledge of God supplies the certainty lacking to clear and distinct perceptions which are not currently attended to. It is not the memory of some previous clear and distinct perception that the knowledge of the existence of God guarantees (namely, that a recalled perception was truly clear and distinct), but the reliability of the clear and distinct perception itself, which is capable of being called into doubt only insofar as it is merely remembered. If the reasons that lead to knowledge of the existence of God are themselves questioned, then they need only be recalled, restoring the clear and distinct perception that God exists, which as such is indubitable.¹⁰

III

Notice that Descartes says, without making an exception for the *cogito*, that the certainty about *everything* else depends on his certainty of the existence of God. But the certainty of the existence of God comes no earlier than the Third Meditation. (As we see it, in fact, only in the Fifth Meditation is that certainty asserted.) How, then, can the *cogito* be asserted in the Second Meditation? To ask what might be the same question, doesn't the claim that all other certainty depends on certainty about the existence of God undo the unique privileged status of the *cogito* and thereby the whole program of the *Meditations*? We begin to answer these questions by asking still another: does Descartes in the First Meditation doubt whether he exists?

In the Third Meditation, he says that “something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry” is open to doubt on the ground that “some God [*aliquem Deum*] could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident” (7: 35–36, 2: 25). In his Objections, Bourdin took this, plausibly enough, to mean that “nothing ... absolutely nothing [is left free of doubt] until we have established for certain that God exists and cannot be a deceiver” (7: 455–56, 2: 305). Bourdin emphatically makes no exception for the *cogito*, with the result, as he saw it, that until he is certain about the existence of God, who would “curb” the evil demon, Descartes cannot be certain

¹⁰ Our Frankfurt-style view is thus an instance of what Newman and Nelson call an “on-demand reproducibility” view, which they see as removing doubt only one more step without resolving it. But as we see it, that step is sufficient to end all reasonable doubt, and ensure warranted stability. Their own view is that the ultimate bedrock of Cartesian warrant lies not in demonstration of a veridical God, but in a properly arrived-at perception of His necessary existence (1999, esp. pp. 384–85, 390–93).

that the evil demon is not tricking him, presumably even about the *cogito*. In reply, Descartes explains how Bourdin's paraphrase should be understood, reaffirming what he had said in the Fifth Meditation:

So long as we attend to a truth which we perceive very clearly, we cannot doubt it. But when, as so often happens, we are not attending to any truth in this way, even though we remember that we have perceived many things very 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. (7: 460, 2: 309)

Once again, no exception is made for the *cogito*. Descartes' reply goes on, however, to supply a useful correction in Bourdin's understanding of the universal doubt.

But my careful critic here takes "nothing" quite differently. From the fact that at one point I said that there was nothing that we might not doubt—namely in the first Meditation, in which I was supposing that I was not attending to anything that I clearly perceive—he draws the conclusion that I am unable to know anything certain, even in the following Meditations. This is to suggest that the reasons which from time to time give us cause to doubt something are not legitimate or sound unless they prove that the same thing must be permanently in doubt. (7: 460, 2: 309)

So, the *cogito* is included in the universal doubt, if not explicitly, at least implicitly. But it is included, like all else that is doubted, only because it is not clearly and distinctly perceived. So far, the *cogito* does not differ from the elements of geometry and arithmetic, which also become indubitable only when clearly and distinctly perceived. The difference between the two cases emerges from the ways in which each comes to be clearly perceived. In mathematics, clarity is achieved in the fashion of the wax analysis of the Second Meditation. But the clarity is vulnerable to the "legitimate and sound" hyperbolic doubt when only remembered. The *cogito* becomes clear when Descartes realizes that, even to be deceived by the demon, he himself must exist. Unlike mathematics, the *cogito* is not liable to any doubt, even when only remembered, for there is no legitimate and sound basis for raising doubt. I can see *now* that even *then* in order for me to be deceived I must have existed. The *cogito* must be immune in this way if permanent skepticism at the outset is to be avoided. Still, it is on certainty that God exists that certainty about the *cogito*, like all other certainty, depends. There is a sense in which dependence is more obvious for the *cogito* than for mathematical truths. For certainty is certainty about truth, and there is undeniably a time at which Descartes did not exist, and, as the Third Meditation argues, he would not exist, and would

not exist with his idea of God, unless God had created him, whereas the dependence of mathematical truth on God requires more metaphysics of a less obvious sort.

The privileged status of the *cogito* over other clearly perceived truths such as those of mathematics can be put as follows. Although certainty of its truth depends no less than theirs on the certainty of the truth of God's existence, there is no "legitimate or sound" reason, not even the hypothesis of an evil demon, for doubting it. To see this unique character of the *cogito*, we might consider what unsound and illegitimate reason there might be for doubting his own existence. Ultimately, perhaps the only reason would be that even if the *cogito* were clearly and distinctly perceived – indeed, even if the rejection of the demon hypothesis were clearly and distinctly perceived on the basis of the *cogito* – he could doubt, contrary to these good reasons for believing, just by an act of the will. This is the extreme case Descartes describes in correspondence. Although it is "hardly" possible for us to do so, "absolutely ... it is always possible for us to hold back from admitting a clearly perceived truth, provided we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will by so doing" (4: 173, 3: 245).¹¹ Epistemologically, however such doubt would be utterly gratuitous; it would amount to the willfulness of Satan.¹²

Such a doubt of the *cogito* would in fact be the doubt of the skeptics for which Descartes expresses contempt because it is a doubt for the sake of doubting. The gratuitousness of such a doubt is why Descartes allows himself the apparently cavalier dismissal of Mersenne's objection that there is no need to suppose that God is a deceiver in order for there to be deception about what is thought to be clearly known, which might instead lie just with him (7: 126, 2: 90). In reply, Descartes allows the possibility of a cleavage between what we can determine to be true by our best efforts and what is in fact true, but also states that it is irrelevant. He begins by reiterating the irresistibility of a clear and distinct perception, and concludes from it that the possibility of it being absolutely false does not detract from its affording perfect certainty. "If this conviction is so firm that it is impossible 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." To willfully doubt as the skeptic does is *unreasonable*. "Why should this 'absolute falsity' bother

¹¹ To Mesland, 9 February 1645. The text referred to here is authentic, but its date, intended recipient, and even its status as a letter, are open to question.

¹² Thus Gouhier, for whose designation of "ce Satan épistémologique" we provide more justification than he does (1962, p. 119).

us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?" (7: 144–45, 2: 103). Doubt about the *cogito* and doubt based on the cleavage between ultimately warranted assertibility and absolute truth is like doubt based on the possibility of lunacy. The possibility can never be excluded, but there is and can be no reason to believe that it is ever realized for any given subject, and hence no reason to doubt on the basis of it. This contrasts with both sensory doubt on the basis of relativity and dreaming, which are experienced by everyone, and instances of error even in what seems most obvious in mathematics, which Descartes himself admits to.

We are now in a position to offer a general characterization of a "legitimate and sound reason" for doubting, through the conversely unreasonable ground for doing so. An unreasonable ground for doubt is the willful representation of doubting as by itself a "good thing," with no other reason for doubting.¹³ All other reasons, however contrived, are legitimate and sound; they are reasonable and available in the search for certainty. To be sure, doubt about mathematics and even doubt that there is a coherence to be found among sensory perceptions turn out to be unreasonable in just this sense, that is to say, that doubt is possible only through willful representation as good. But the unreasonableness of this doubt is only *after* the existence of a veridical God has been established; previously, the doubt is perfectly reasonable for the reasons given in the First Meditation. In this distinction between what is reasonable before and after the proof of a veridical God, doubt about mathematics and doubt about the availability of sensory coherence differ from the *cogito*, which is unreasonable from the outset.

At this point, a pair of interesting, related questions intrudes upon us. First, if all knowledge depends as it does for Descartes on knowledge of the existence of a veridical God, why doesn't he begin the *Meditations* with the hyperbolic doubt, since it would comprehend the doubts based on relativity and dreaming? Why aren't the latter doubts just distractions? That is, why not immediately cut to the chase? Second, why doesn't the *cogito*, suitably directed, refute at least the hyperbolic doubt?

One obstacle to including sensory knowledge in an omnibus hyperbolic doubt is that the reason for doubt must be equilibrated to what is

¹³ This formulation captures what is needed here, though it might be tightened for other purposes. It might be required further that the doubter have been previously mistaken about what is now in doubt. Appeal to previous mistakes is made in the opening sentence of the *Meditations*: "Some years ago, I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in childhood" (7: 17, 2: 12).

being doubted. If the reason for doubt is stronger than what it calls into question, then it might be taken simply as a reason for accepting the *denial* of what is intended only to be doubted. On the other hand, a second reason for withholding the hyperbolic doubt from sensory perception is that while the hyperbolic doubt must be overcome if there is to be any certainty at all, there is a sense in which doubt about the senses is never overcome. To be sure, the conclusion of the Sixth Meditation announces that “the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake” (7: 89, 2: 61). But this confidence over the “vast difference between the two” that he has come to see does not apply to every individual perception taken in isolation, but only to the larger coherence of such perceptions. More importantly, this coherence itself, while an objective fact guaranteed by divine veracity, does not always provide a guarantee about the objective world beyond sensation. In fact it never does, and is always deceptive if taken to do so. The senses are designed for survival value, not for truth. “Sensory perception does not show us what really exists in things, but merely shows us what is beneficial or harmful to man’s composite nature” (8A: 39, 1: 224).¹⁴

The answer to the second question, as to why the *cogito* is not applied directly in response to the hyperbolic doubt, is that such application would be question-begging. Despite its unique status as discussed above, certainty about the *cogito*, like certainty about all else, depends on certainty about the existence of a veridical God. The upshot of Descartes’ *cogito* is that the evil demon cannot deceive him, which is sufficient for the derivation of his truth rule, but not that the *cogito* is somehow more certain than anything else. The truth rule, especially with its injunction to accept only what cannot be denied, is analogous to the Stoics’ criterion the satisfaction of which “grabs us by the hair” and makes us believe. But the truth rule generalized from the *cogito* is a criterion only in the sense of being a model for the apprehension of all other truth. (Accept

¹⁴ This is the title of *Principles* II.224 (CSM 1, 224). The text says that sensory perceptions are related exclusively to the mind–body connection, and inform us of the harm or benefit that other bodies might do to it, without showing us, “except occasionally and incidentally,” what external bodies are like in themselves. The exception might relate to the epistemological shot in the dark envisaged by the Fourth Meditation, when the will by chance lights upon the truth when unconstrained by the illumination of the intellect. If so, then because, according to Descartes, such lucky encounters with truth are a misuse of the will, even a chance revelation of objective truth by sensory coherence is deceptive. For more on teleology in Descartes’ account of the senses, see Simmons (2001).

only what cannot fail to be accepted in the way the *cogito* cannot fail to be accepted.) In particular, it is not an identifying label that attaches to it, as “clarity and distinctness” are usually taken to be, so that it is not liable to the skeptics’ challenge to identify the label without begging the question, arguing in a circle, or resorting to an infinite regress.¹⁵ The *cogito* construed as a truth rule or model is not liable to such challenges because there is no conceivable ground on which it can reasonably be challenged. But the inconceivability of its being false does not exempt our certainty of it from depending on the certainty of the existence of God.¹⁶

¹⁵ For the fuller account of the truth rule in these terms, see Lennon (2008, section 15).

¹⁶ Quite apart from the usual syllogistic rendering of the *cogito*, Descartes has interesting ways of illustrating the inconceivability of its being false. In the Third Meditation, after insisting that “if I do not know [that God exists and is not a deceiver] it seems that I can never be quite certain of anything else” (7: 36, 2: 25), but before proving that the veridical God exists, he says that “whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example from the fact that I am doubting 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” (7: 38, 2: 27). Also, in the Second Replies, he says, in what might be a reiteration, or continuation, of the same argument, that “we have a real faculty for recognizing the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood, as is clear merely from the fact that we have within us ideas of truth and falsehood. Hence this faculty must tend toward truth, at least when we use it correctly” (7: 144, 2: 103; see also the opening of the *Discourse on the Method*).