ABSTRACT. According to many critics, Descartes argued in a circle when he presumed to base the certainty (and thus knowledge) of propositions that fulfill his epistemic criterion of being "clearly and distinctly perceived" on the demonstration that God exists and is not a deceiver. But his critics say, that demonstration, as he presented it, presupposed the validity of the same epistemic criterion. I critically examine two major strategies to dispel the appearance of circularity, two ways of interpreting Descartes' argument.

My approach shares with the second strategy the contention that Descartes did adopt the principle that "whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived to be true is true," prior to his consideration of the God question. Moreover, his demonstration of God's existence and veracity made use of the principle. But my claim is that the knowledge of God's existence and veracity is not used to validate the principle of clear and distinct perception (that would be unnecessary). It is used rather to defeat the sceptic's argument that we cannot have any knowledge of the external, physical world.

I proceed to present and explain Descartes' argument centered around the thesis, "I cannot be certain that (r) any of my representational ideas of the external world are veridical, unless I am certain that (q), God exists and is not a deceiver." That is, I prove why, for Descartes, (q) is necessary for (r). My discussion exposes some new facets to the principle of clear and distinct per-
ception and reveals the fact that some familiar Cartesian distinctions that were not thought to be relevant to the problem of the Cartesian Circle are crucial to the solution of that problem.

Many of Descartes' critics, past and present, are convinced that his proposal for a theory of knowledge that could withstand the onslaught of the sceptics is fatally compromised by a major flaw in his arguments. That flaw is usually referred to as the Cartesian Circle. Arnauld, in his Objections on the Meditations, accused Descartes of claiming:

The only secure reason we have for believing that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true, is the fact that [a veracious] God exists. But we can be sure that [a veracious] God exists, only because we clearly and evidently perceive that; therefore prior to being certain that God exists, we should be certain that whatever we clearly and evidently perceive is true.[1]

In seeking to establish an epistemological criterion of truth necessary for knowledge, Descartes appeared to have committed himself to two propositions:

(1) I cannot be certain that (p), whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true, unless I am first certain that (q), God exists and is not a deceiver.

(2) I cannot be certain that (q), God exists and is not a deceiver, unless I am first certain that (p), whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true.

Clearly, if both (1) and (2) are true, it can never be certain that either (p) or (q) are true. Descartes, however, was absolutely explicit in claiming that he was certain of both (p) and (q).[2] Did Descartes simply blunder? Arnauld thought so.

The received wisdom among Cartesian scholars is that the illusion of circularity is due to the complexity of Descartes' argument, and that it will be dispelled once his argument is correctly understood. Two strategies stand out among the great many attempts to demonstrate the nonexistence of circularity. Basic to the differences of the two strategies are opposing views with respect to a fundamental question: "Did Descartes equate perceiving something clearly and distinctly with knowing it to be true?"

A prominent representative of the camp of those who take the negative view is Harry Frankfurt. He writes:
it will be helpful to remove an obstacle which may stand in the way of a sound understanding of Descartes' problem. This obstacle is the erroneous notion that whenever Descartes says that something is indubitable [intuited, or perceived clearly and distinctly], that is tantamount to his saying that it is true.[3]

To Frankfurt, this is clearly an error precisely because "Descartes wants to know whether the person is justified in accepting p as certainly true—whether, that is, the fact that he once intuited that p is now acceptable as conclusive evidence for p's truth." Descartes' answer, so Frankfurt contends, is that the person is not justified if he still has doubts about the existence of God or doubts about God's veracity. To eliminate this sole barrier to our accepting the proposed Cartesian criterion of truth, we must intuit or perceive clearly and distinctly that a veracious God indeed exists.[4]

The gist of this strategy then is to show that first of all Descartes was committed not to (1), but to the related,

\[(1') \text{I cannot be certain that } (p), \text{ whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true, unless I first perceive clearly and distinctly that } (q), \text{ God exists and is not a deceiver.}\]

The next step is obvious. It is to point out that Descartes was not and could not be committed to (2). It was not necessary, given this view of Descartes' problem to know with certainty that God exists. It was only necessary to give assent to what is clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from clear and distinct premises. As Frankfurt says: "what is essential in Descartes' argument is not so much the discovery of the existence of a benign deity, but the discovery that reason leads to the conclusion that such a deity exists."[5]

This interpretation of Descartes' argument faces at least three troublesome questions: (a) If no propositions are known with certainty prior to the establishment of (p), how are we to understand the cogito argument in the Second Meditation? Descartes would not have been able to claim there that he knew that he exists nor that he is a thinking being. (b) It is claimed that the certainty that we have with respect to clearly and distinctly perceived (intuited) propositions is not the certainty associated with knowledge, i.e., the assurance that what we perceived to be true is true. But what kind of certainty is associated with clear and distinct perception? The number of different answers to this question is surprising and surely a little disturbing.[6] (c) However we characterize this lesser kind of certainty (let us label it certainty*), does the certainty*
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that God exists give us the certainty that our intuitions are true? Has Descartes validated his criterion of truth, as he claimed? I think not. All that we have the right to conclude at the end of the argument is that we have increased or augmented our certainty of the truth of all those clear and distinct propositions because reason has led us to the certainty of the falsehood of the only reason for doubting those propositions. But we have not advanced to a new and higher level of certainty. If we are to accept this interpretation of Descartes, we would have to give a different account of Descartes' project.

These three problems do not arise in the case of the other well-known strategy that takes the alternative route of denying (1) and affirming (2). According to this view, Descartes, by the end of the Second Meditation, had discovered his paradigm of certainty, metaphysical certainty or the highest form of certainty, from which he derives the Cartesian criterion of truth. The starting point of this interpretation is the following passage at the very beginning of the Third Meditation.

I am certain that I am a thinking thing; but do I not therefore likewise know what is required to render me certain of a truth? In this first knowledge, doubtless, there is nothing that gives me assurance of its truth except the clear and distinct perception of what I affirm, which would not indeed be sufficient to give me assurance that what I say is true, if it could ever happen that anything I thus clearly and distinctly perceive should prove false; and accordingly it seems to me that I may now take as a general rule, that all that is very clearly and distinctly apprehended (conceived) is true. (AT VII, 35; HR I, 158)

Thus, as opposed to Frankfurt and his camp, this passage is taken literally to affirm that perceiving something clearly and distinctly is tantamount to knowing that it is true.

Descartes then, as a matter of course was committed to (2) since he had his criterion of truth in hand when he proceeded to construct his theological argument. Moreover, if his argument is sound, it would give him the certainty, i.e., the knowledge, that God exists and is not a deceiver.

What then are we to make of the following passage further on in the Third Meditation which appears to commit Descartes to (1)?

And in truth, as I have no ground for believing that Deity is deceitful, and as, indeed, I have not even considered the reasons by which the existence of a Deity of any kind is established, the
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ground of doubt that rests only on this supposition is very slight, and so to speak, metaphysical. But, that I may be able wholly to remove it, I must inquire whether he can be a deceiver; for, without the knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything. (AT VIII, 36; HR I, 158)

If we read "certain of anything" as "certain of any truths," this passage is in direct conflict with the first, and we seem to have a commitment to (1). The obvious move of this strategy is to argue that Descartes is not here talking about the uncertainty of the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions, but about the uncertainty of something else. One suggestion that is taken most seriously of what this something else is is known as the Memory Gambit. The existence of a veracious God is necessary to guarantee the accuracy of our memory and not the truth of clear and distinct perceptions at the time that we have them. There are passages that seem to support the claim that what Descartes meant was that if I remember clearly and distinctly perceiving something that I do not now clearly and distinctly perceive, I can be certain that it is true if and only if I know that God exists and is not a deceiver.[7] This is surely a peculiar theory. Given that clear and distinct perceptions are true, if it is in fact the case that I remember clearly and distinctly perceiving something, it would follow that I did clearly and distinctly perceive it and could have no doubts about its truth. On the other hand, if it is the case that I am uncertain about my memory, how could the fact or knowledge of God's existence have any affect on the uncertainty? The untenability of this interpretation of Descartes has been substantially demonstrated by several authors and I will not repeat their arguments.[8]

The Memory Gambit is a mistake, but I agree with its approach to the problem. That is, I agree with the two initial contentions: that it is Descartes' view that to say "I clearly and distinctly perceive that p" is tantamount to saying that p is true and thus to claim that I know that p is true; and that Descartes is committed to (2) as a matter of course, but not to (1). But I propose a different theory of what Descartes was intending to accomplish by his proof for the existence of a veracious God.

To begin with, it is crucial to note that the focal question in the Third Meditation (where the specter of the circle is most evident) is whether I have sufficient grounds for believing that any of my ideas represent existing objects in the world outside of my thoughts. "Of my thoughts," Descartes said, "some are like images of things [tangquam rerum imagines] to which alone the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate: as when I think of man, or Chimaera, of Heaven, or Angel, or God" (AT VII, 37; HR I, 159). His principal task now he says, "is to consider, with reference
to those that appear to come from certain objects without me, what grounds there are for thinking them like these objects" (AT VII, 38; HR I, 160). If I have insufficient grounds for believing that any of these mental objects that are tanquam rerum imaginés actually represent the things that they purport to represent, then the significant conclusion is that I cannot hope to have any knowledge of the external world. Scepticism would triumph.

I contend that the ground of doubt that rests on the supposition of a deceitful Deity is not directed toward the problem of whether we can know anything at all (that general question had been settled in the Second Meditation), but rather at the question of whether we can have any knowledge of the external world. There is no circularity in Descartes' argument in the Third Meditation if his claim there is:

(3) I cannot be certain that (r), any of my representational ideas of physical objects are veridical, unless I am certain that (q), God exists and is not a deceiver.

But why is (q) necessary for (r)?

When Descartes turned his attention to "the earth, the sky, the stars," to all the objects of the external world that he had formerly believed to be "wholly certain and manifest, which yet [he] afterwards found to be doubtful," he realized now that all that he was certain of, all that he perceived clearly and distinctly is that "the ideas and the thoughts of those objects were presented to [his] mind" (AT VII, 35; HR I, 158].[9] But at this point of the Meditations he also knows that ideas exist as modes of a real substance, a thinking thing. Furthermore, particular ideas differ with respect to their content, to their representational character. An idea of X is not the same idea in content as the idea of Y. Such differences require explanations. Any proposed explanation, according to Descartes, is subject to an important principle, a peculiar principle. Just as the existence of a physical object (a stone) or changes in the properties of a physical object (the heating of a stone) call for an explanation in terms of an efficient cause capable of producing that effect, so it is with the existence of a particular thought of an object (the idea of a stone). The principle is that in order for a cause to have the capability of producing a given idea of something, "all the reality or perfection which is in a thing is found formally or eminently in its first and total cause" (AT VII, 40; HR I, 162). By formally, he means actually. Thus if a thing is caused to have the property P by another thing which has P formally, the effect is a "copy" of the cause with respect to P. But surely an effect need not be a copy of its cause, it need not have any property in common with its cause. In such cases, Descartes would say that the
properties of a thing are found eminently in the cause. We shall take this to mean that a property P produced in a thing is not actually in the cause, but some other property Q is the cause that has the power to bring about P.

Now in the case where the effect is the idea of X, Descartes explains:

... in order that an idea may contain this objective reality rather than that, it must doubtless derive it from some cause in which is found at least as much formal reality as the idea contains of objective; for, if we suppose that there is found in an idea anything which was not in its cause, it must of course derive this from nothing. But however imperfect may be the mode of its existence by a thing is objectively [or by representation] in the understanding by its idea, we certainly cannot, for all that, allege that this mode of existence is nothing, not, consequently, that the idea owes its origin to nothing. (AT VII, 41; HR I 163)

An idea of a blue book whose cause is an actual blue book does not itself have the property blueness, but it is like an image or copy of a blue book. The idea is a representation of a blue book. Because the cause of this idea is the actual object represented in the idea, Descartes would say that the cause of an idea has exactly as much formal reality as the idea contains of objective reality. In the case of a distorted perception of an object or a hallucination, the objective cause (to which the idea "imperfectly refers" or fails completely to refer) necessarily has a degree of reality according to some implicit ontological scale at least as great as the object in the idea, i.e., the object that is present to the mind.

Although an idea(s) may give rise to another idea, there must be a starting point that is an "original" or archetypal idea whose source is not another idea, but the extra-mental thing to which all the ideas in the series refer. Thus, given the nature of the mind and the ideas of the mind and realizing the truth of the causal axiom that nothing can come from nothing, Descartes confidently concludes:

I am thus clearly taught by the natural light that ideas exist in me as pictures or images, which may in truth readily fall short of the objects from which they are taken, but can never contain anything greater or more perfect. (AT VII, 41; HR I, 163)

At this point, Descartes knows for certain that the source or cause of any original idea must have a metaphysical reality capable of explaining the kind of cognitive rep-
resentations that exist in our minds. But he is not absolutely certain that such causes are what we instinctively (or as we are "taught by nature") think they are. He contends that we cannot be absolutely certain that our ideas do represent objects in the external world. There is still the possibility that the cause of our ideas is something entirely different and unexpected. What is the basis of this uncertainty?

"All ideas," Descartes said, "being as it were images, there can be none that does not seem to us to represent some object." But we have found in some of our ideas a certain "material falsity." We have found on occasion that certain qualities that we perceive are not positive qualities, but privations of some other positive quality. For example, "the idea which represents cold as something real and positive will not improperly be called false, if it be correct to say that cold is nothing but a privation of heat" (AT VII, 43-44; HR I, 164).[10] In such cases, cold and heat cannot both be positive qualities, either one or the other is the privation of its opposite; and we cannot tell which it is. A materially false idea then represents nothing real of "a non thing" (nullas res). Descartes' point is that this category of perceived qualities--light, colors, sound, odors (traditionally labelled, secondary qualities)--are "thought with so much obscurity and confusion," that one cannot tell whether any of them are real qualities of things in the external world. He comes to the conclusion later on that none of them are. It is sufficient for his present argument to conclude:

It is not necessary that I should assign [to such ideas] any author besides myself: for if they are false, that is, represent objects that are unreal, the natural light teaches me that they proceed from nothing; in other words, that they are in me only because something is wanting to the perfection of my nature; but if these ideas are true, yet because they exhibit to me so little reality that I cannot even distinguish the object represented from non-being, I do not see why I should not be the author of them. (AT VII, 44; HR I, 164)

His analysis shows that we have no grounds for thinking that the cause of these ideas of secondary properties is anything but ourselves. Even if some of these ideas are materially true, they are of such an obscure nature to us that we will never know that they actually represent properties of external objects. Thus we cannot preclude the possibility that all such ideas are factitious, that they are in some sense all "made by us."

The existence in us of these sensory ideas of light, color, sound, odor does not justify the belief that the
cause of such ideas are extra-mental physical substances. But what about our other ideas of corporeal things—general ideas like substance, duration, number and other particular ideas like extension, figure, situation, and motion?

In the case of the former. Descartes argues that the existence of such ideas can be readily explained without assuming the existence of anything but ourselves. Despite the fact that unlike the ideas of color, sound, etc., these are clear and distinct, nevertheless, he says, "[they] might have been taken from the idea I have of myself." They are common notions, common to both corporeal and spiritual things. He explains that,

... when I think of myself as now existing, and recollect besides that I existed some time ago, and when I am conscious of various thoughts whose number I know, I then acquire the ideas of duration and number, which I can afterwards transfer to as many objects as I please. (AT VII, 45; HR I, 165)

In the case of the latter, even though extension, figure, situation, and motion are not common notions, but notions that pertain only to corporeal objects and thus cannot be "taken from the idea I have of myself," they too he insists can be explained without assuming the existence of any corporeal objects. He argues:

It is true that they are not formally in me [as was the case with the common notions], since I am merely a thinking being; but because they are only certain modes of substances, and because I myself am a substance, it seems possible that they may be contained in me eminently. (AT VII, 45; HR I, 165)

This is improbable, but nevertheless a possibility that cannot yet be ruled out since a substance has more reality than modes (whatever they are modes of) and a cause need only have as much reality as its effect. (Descartes is not here offering an explanation, but proposing grounds of doubt.)

The end result of Descartes' analysis is significant: He cannot be certain that any of his ideas of corporeal objects actually refer to such objects because he found that it is theoretically possible none of them are caused by or originate from corporeal objects. Recall again his challenge:

If the objective reality of any one of my ideas be such as clearly to convince me, that this same reality exists in me neither formally nor eminently, as if, as follows from this, I myself cannot be the cause of it, it is a necessary consequence that I am not alone in the world, but that there is besides myself some other being who exists as the cause of that idea; while, on the contrary, if
no such idea be found in my mind, I shall have no sufficient ground of assurance of the existence of any other being besides myself; for, after a most careful search, I have up to this moment been unable to discover any other ground. (AT VII, 42; HR I, 163)

Of all the ideas that purport to represent external objects (God, corporeal and inanimate things, angels, animals, and men like himself), he proceeded to demonstrate that only one satisfied his criterion of objectivity. That of course is the idea of God. The results of his investigations in the Third Meditation gives him the right to claim: (i) He perceives clearly and distinctly (and thus knows with certainty) that God exists, (ii) his distinctive methodology of proceeding from the "first person knowledge of his own ideas" to determine what is true of the external world has been partially vindicated. I say partially because his ultimate aim was to discover a firm foundation for the sciences and this must mean having the certainty that knowledge of the external world is possible. Given that the basis for such knowledge is our first-person experience of ideas, to have the certainty that such knowledge is possible is to have the certainty that our ideas of corporeal objects actually refer to those objects. And to know with certainty that the latter is the case (that our sensory experience is trustworthy) is to know that our ideas of corporeal things are not caused by some formal or eminent property of the thinking subject. Descartes contends that we do not know that until we know that God exists and is not a deceiver. Why again is that the case?

The last piece of the puzzle is found appropriately in the last Meditation, where he takes up the question of the existence of material things. The heart of the argument is the following:

But as God is no deceiver, it is manifest that he does not of himself and immediately communicate those ideas to me, nor even by the intervention of any creature in which their objective reality is not formally, but only eminently contained. For as he has given me no faculty whereby I can discover this to be the case, but, on the contrary, a very strong inclination to believe that those ideas arise from corporeal objects, I do not see how he could be vindicated from the charge of deceit, if in truth they proceeded from any other source, or were produced by other causes than corporeal things; and accordingly it must be concluded, that corporeal objects exist. (AT VII, 79-80; HR I, 191)

The first thing to note is that Descartes is talking about our ideas of primary qualities (extension, figure, situa-
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tion, and motion). The first sentence above makes that clear. It is important to recall that Descartes had early in the Meditations asserted that physical nature possesses only mechanical properties. He claimed to perceive clearly and distinctly the distinction between mental and material substance and that the essence of the latter is extension. The complete argument then goes as follows:

Given the fact that,

(a) Corporeal objects, if they exist, have properties of motion, extension, location, and figure. (The basic attribute being extension.)

(b) Our ideas of these corporeal properties can arise from three sources: God, thinking subjects, corporeal substances.

(c) If these ideas arise from within the thinking subject, such properties are contained in the subject eminently and not formally.

(d) We have a very strong inclination or natural tendency to believe that these ideas arise from the corporeal objects that they represent, and that the properties represented in the ideas are formally in the corporeal objects.

We must acknowledge that,

(e) It is still possible, contrary to our strong inclination to believe otherwise, that ideas of corporeal properties arise from within the thinking subject.

But it is also the case that,

(f) We have no understanding, no conception of how the thinking subject could bring about our experience of corporeal objects. (God has given me no faculty to discover that the objective reality of such ideas is eminently contained in me.)

Thus,

(g) If it were the case that we are the cause of our ideas of corporeal objects, it would be that we are being deceived by God or some unkind supernatural being.

Fortunately,

(h) We now know with certainty that God exists and
is not a deceiver (and that there is no super-natural being greater than God who would be allowed to deceive me).

Therefore,

(i) We have the certainty that all that we clearly and distinctly perceive to be the properties of corporeal objects arise from those objects.

This then is the explanation for Descartes' contention,

(3) I cannot be certain that (r), any of my representational ideas of physical objects are veridical, unless I am certain that (q), God exists and is not a deceiver.

There is clearly no circularity in this argument. The indubitability of God's existence and His honesty is derived from propositions that are clearly and distinctly true independent of the presupposition that anything exists in the world except ourselves. Recall what Descartes said in the Principles:

I distinguish all the objects of our knowledge into two kinds: first, things which have existence; second, eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought. . . .When we apprehend that it is impossible that anything should be formed of nothing, the proposition "ex nihilo nihil fit" is not to be considered as an existing thing, or the mode of a thing, but as a certain eternal truth which has its seat in our mind, and is a common notion or axiom. (AT VIII, 23-24; HR I, 238-239)

The general rule, that all that is very clearly and distinctly perceived to be true is true applied initially to these eternal truths that "have no existence outside our thought." Descartes can claim that he cannot be deceived with respect to these truths because of the absolute certainty of his own existence. These truths arise from within himself.

But it is a more complicated matter when it comes to our knowledge of things that exist outside of our minds. The "new ways of ideas", the method of examining what is present to our minds, leads only to the certainty that God exists and not to the certainty that any physical object exists. It is still a possibility that our conception of an extended physical world that exists independently of our thoughts has its origin within our mind and that no such world truly exists. But it is Descartes' contention that this possibility is remote ("the ground of doubt that rests only on this supposition is very slight, and, so to speak,
metaphysical") and would entail that God or some supernatural being is deceiving us. Once we know that that cannot be the case, there is no further reason to doubt that our clear and distinct idea of an extended nature is veridical, and we have the assurance at least that our beliefs about the external world have an objective reference and that scientific knowledge is possible.

FOOTNOTES

*I wish to thank my colleagues in the department for their helpful comments in a discussion of this paper. I particularly want to thank Peter French for his thorough reading of an earlier draft of the paper and his criticisms that lead to a much improved product.

1. AT VII, 214 (Latin); AT IX, 166 (French); HR II, 92. 'AT' refers to the eleven volume standard edition of the works of Descartes edited by Charles Adams and Paul Tannery. 'HR' refers to the most comprehensive English translation of Descartes' writings by E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, in two volumes (Cambridge, 1911, corrected 1934). Hereafter, reference to these works will be made within the text.


4. Frankfurt portrays Descartes' project as one of attempting to validate reason. But "vindicate" is the more accurate term. Frankfurt claims: "Descartes' argument is thus to be understood as an attempt to show that there are no good reasons for believing that reason is unreliable. Its purpose is to reveal that the hypothesis which provides a basis for mistrusting reason is not one which reason supports, and that the mistrust of reason must accordingly be regarded as irrational. If reason is properly employed—that is, if we give assent only to what is intuited—we are not led to doubt that reason is reliable. On the contrary, we are led to assent to the proposition that God exists and that He guarantees the reliability of reason." (Ibid., 155) Reason is validated if God guarantees that reason is reliable, but does that conclusion follow from Frankfurt's construction of the Cartesian argument? I think not. All that we are justified in concluding is that it would be irrational not to accept the Cartesian criterion of truth. It would be incorrect to say that we know that the criterion of truth is true.

Alan Gewirth makes the same point in "The Cartesian Circle," Philosophical Review, 50 (1941), 389-390. "The ground upon which the clear and
distinct perception of God's existence and veracity is regarded by Descartes is overthrowing the metaphysical doubt then, is that the rationality of the former reveals the 'reasons' of the latter to be irrational."

5. Ibid. 155.


7. For example, to the theologians and to Arnauld who made mention of the problem of circularity, Descartes replies: "I announced in express terms that I referred only to the knowledge (scientia) of those conclusions, the memory of which can recur when we are no longer attending to the reasons from which we deduced them" (2nd Replies: AT VII, 140; HR II, 38). And, "I distinguished those matters that in actual truth we clearly perceive from those we remember that we formerly perceived. For first we are sure that God exists because we are attending to the proofs that establish this fact; but afterwards it is enough for us to remember that we have perceived something clearly, in order to be certain that it is true; but this would not suffice, unless we knew that God existed and did not deceive us." (AT VII, 246; HR II, 115)


9. So Descartes is now asking, "Do I clearly and distinctly perceive that there exist objects in the external world?" Or, more simply, "Is it certain that there is an external world?" The first stage of his search for knowledge had given him a number of truths: the existence of a thinking being and all that is part of that being (all the ideas that are modes of his being), and the so-called "eternal truths," formal propositions and principles. In the Principles, he says: "I distinguish all the objects of our knowledge into two kinds: first, things which have existence; second, eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought. . . . When we apprehend that it is impossible that anything should be formed of nothing, the proposition "ex nihilo nihil fit" is not to be considered as an existing thing, or the mode of a thing, but as a certain eternal truth which has its seat in our mind, and is a common notion or axiom." (AT VIII, 23-24; HR I, 238-239) The truths of the latter kind constitute the basis for his search for truths of the former kind.

10. It is not clear how in Descartes' scheme of things the perceiver can discover the material falsity of an idea. But it is sufficient for his argument to say that in theory either heat is the privation of cold or cold is the privation of heat. Thus both cannot be positive qualities. See Margaret Wilson, Descartes (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 101-119, for an analysis of Descartes' argument.