5. SEXTUS EMPIRICUS CONTRA RENÉ DESCARTES

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ABSTRACT. It has become a veritable industry to defend Descartes against the charge of circularity and, to a lesser extent, to argue that he successfully responds to the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus. Since one of Sextus’ main skeptical ploys is to press the charge of circularity against any view, and because Descartes does reply to Sextus, it is worthwhile to criticize these efforts in the same paper. I argue that Descartes did not successfully respond to Sextus’ skeptical arguments. I argue that he is guilty of not one but of five distinct circularities in his defense of empirical knowledge, that clearing him of such charges can only be had by rendering him naively dogmatic, and that he fails to respond to a Pyrrhonian contraposition argument. One circle concerns divine logical voluntarism. Another concerns the semantic component of innate ideas. A third arises from his natural inability to disbelieve whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives. A fourth circularity arises in Descartes’ proof that he cannot have generated his idea of God. A final circularity concerns Descartes’ attempt to verify the reliability of his thinking nature by employing that very same thinking nature. To substantiate these claims I review the principles of Sextus’ arguments briefly and I reexamine Descartes’ texts and doctrines in detail. I also take occasion to reflect on why Descartes’ foundationalist program must have failed.

I. INTRODUCTION

Descartes quite consciously set out to defend not only the objectivity but even the "metaphysical" certainty of knowledge against classical skepticism, claiming that the ancient doubts about mathematics would have been allayed had the ancients done what they could well have done, namely to recognize the existence of God. Though he doesn’t explicitly identify classical skepticism as his target in the Meditations, in the Replies and elsewhere he refers not only to "skeptics" but also to "Pyrrhonians" and he describes his injunction to rely only on clear and distinct ideas not only as a rule for searching after truth but also as a "criterion" of truth. These remarks are not just afterthoughts, for the Cartesian program does respond to Sextus’ challenges—even if it cannot, as I shall argue, meet them. Sextus’ challenges come roughly to
three: that positive knowledge claims cannot avoid the dilemma of being either circular or dogmatic; that for any positive claim made, an equipoised incompatible alternative is available; and that once a distinction between appearance and reality is made, there is no legitimate way of discriminating between veridical and non-veridical appearances.

Although it has become a veritable industry among commentators to clear Descartes of the charge of circularity, I will argue that taken at his philosophically most penetrating Descartes is guilty not just of one, but of five distinct circularities; that clearing him of this charge can only be achieved at the expense of desiccating the interest of his epistemology (for he is rendered naively dogmatic); and that he fails to elude the Pyrrhonist equiposition of a counterposed view. The result will be to show that the classic rationalist-foundationalist attempt to defend empirical knowledge fails, so that some other approach to this task is required, and also to provide an occasion to reflect on why the Cartesian program must have failed. Though the general outlines of "the" Cartesian circle are familiar, many defenses of Descartes ignore particular details of his views, so to correct this and to substantiate my claim that there are five circles will require reexamining Descartes' texts in some detail. The writings of Sextus Empiricus are not as familiar as they might be, and so I begin with a brief overview of his skepticism. For the sake of compactness, I restrict much of my discussion of the secondary literature to the notes.

II. SOME PRINCIPLES OF PYRRHONIAN SKEPTICISM

A. SOME DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN APPEARANCE AND REALITY.

All of Sextus' arguments presuppose a distinction between appearance and reality. This contrast has such a varied history that it requires some consideration. There are several different distinctions between appearance and reality at issue in Sextus' writings. One of these is a roughly Platonic distinction between the appearances of things and the reality of the eternal forms in which they participate. Another is a materialist distinction between the molar characteristics of common objects and the fundamental reality of their physical microstructure. A third is a distinction between the apparent qualities of things and the qualities they really have by nature. A fourth distinction between appearance and reality is one involved in any (broadly construed) representational theory of perception between the sensory qualities a perceived object produces in us and the qualities that object has independent of its being perceived. (These distinctions concern different kinds of issues and should not be conflated.)

Sextus' skepticism aims to convince us (or at least his contemporaries) of three general points. First, that there is no adequate Platonic or atomistic explanation of the world as it appears to us, so there is no point in engaging in interminable dispute about the realities postulated by such theories. Second, that there is no way of legitimately attributing characteristics of things apparent to us to the "real nature" of those things, and so there is no point in disputing which characteristics of things apparent to us are ones that they really have. Finally, that there is no way of insuring that sense impressions present the actual characteristics of things to us, so that there is no point in engaging in interminable dispute about the real (as opposed to the
merely apparent) characteristics of the world. Being convinced of these views does not, however, preclude Sextus or any other (classical) skeptic from having opinions about everyday objects and events. The opinions Sextus expresses are those he is compelled to have, not ones that he rationally justifies. Sextus shares the opinions of his fellows, even opinions about how things are, with two qualifications. Sextus doesn't take his opinions about how things are in any sense of "are" that contrasts with a philosopher's sense of "mere appearance" and so makes claims about how things really are and he doesn't take his being compelled by nature to believe certain things as any sort of evidence that those beliefs might be true.

Another distinction important to Sextus' skepticism is one between what is evident and what is non-evident. The distinction might be rendered in ordinary English as one between what is obvious and what is obscure, where what is obvious is known non-inferentially and without relying on signs or any mediating indicator. The dogmatic effort to make knowledge claims about what is real involves two claims: that something's being evident involves knowledge of that thing and that knowledge of such things can ground arguments that support knowledge of non-evident or obscure things. Sextus' skepticism attacks the canons of inference used in mounting such arguments and it attacks the thesis that something's being evident involves knowledge of that thing. What is obvious or evident on Sextus' view are things as they appear to us, but their appearing to us in certain ways does not license claims about what things really are like. With these points in mind, some of Sextus' central arguments may be considered.

B. THE DILEMMA OF THE CRITERION.

In his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Sextus poses the following dilemma:

[1]In order to decide the dispute which has arisen about the criterion [of truth], we must possess an accepted criterion by which we shall be able to judge the dispute; and in order to possess an accepted criterion, the dispute about the criterion must first be decided. And when the argument thus reduces itself to a form of circular reasoning the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow [those who make knowledge claims] to adopt a criterion by assumption, while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress ad infinitum. And furthermore, since demonstration requires a demonstrated criterion, while the criterion requires an approved demonstration, they are forced into circular reasoning.

The problem cited is one of settling disputes—disputes about the principles appropriate for settling disputes; more specifically, for settling disputes about appropriate criteria for assessing knowledge claims. Though this type of dispute is a meta-level dispute, insofar as the claims at issue concern what knowledge is, it seems plain that such meta-level dispute could quickly develop from disputes about first-order claims to empirical knowledge—or so it would seem from the variety of epistemological positions developed by philosophers in their concern over establishing first-order knowledge claims. Insofar as establishing first-order knowledge claims involves demonstrating that those claims
are warranted, epistemological claims about what knowledge is and how to distinguish it from error would be invoked. Of course these epistemological claims, too, require warrants. Thus the problem of adjudicating among different claims to first-order knowledge recurs on a higher level as a problem of adjudicating among differing claims to second order "epistemological" knowledge. At this point, when what is called for are coordinated warrants for three types of claims (first-order claims, second-order epistemological claims about the principles warranting those first-order claims, and claims warranting these epistemological claims), the problem can look insoluble even if (perhaps) not infinitely regressive. The threat of an infinite regress is not the main problem. That threat is only a way of emphasizing the fact that the problem of dogmatism and the question of a claim's justification arises any time a claim is made, even, or especially, when those claims are about what empirical knowledge is. Sextus can well seem the wiser for having been compelled to suspend judgment by the multitude of divergent first principles propounded by various philosophies.11

C. THE PROBLEM OF REGRESS AND CIRCULARITY.

In addition to the dilemma of the criterion, Sextus deploys some seventeen modes of argument in three groups in order to confute various claims to knowledge. The second group of five modes is of particular interest here for it contains a classical formulation of the regress argument and two associated alternatives. Sextus states:

The [second] Mode based upon regress ad infinitum is that whereby we assert that the thing adduced as a proof of the matter proposed needs a further proof, and this again another, and so on ad infinitum, so that the consequence is suspension, as we possess no starting-point for our argument . . . . We have the [fourth] Mode based on hypothesis when the Dogmatists, being forced to recede ad infinitum, take as their starting-point something which they do not establish by argument but claim to assume as granted simply and without demonstration. The [fifth] Mode of circular reasoning is the form used when the proof itself which ought to establish the matter of inquiry requires confirmation derived from that matter; in this case, being unable to assume either in order to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both.12

Please note that the regress argument and its adjuncts concerning circularity and mere assumption plainly concern demonstrating that knowledge claims are true.

D. CONTRAPOSITION ARGUMENTS.

In actually attacking the claims made by others Sextus does not focus simply on the putative inadequacy of their proofs, he also offers arguments or claims opposed to and equiplausible with the arguments or claims made by an opponent.13 The point of such equipoised counter-arguments is not the establishment of some other position, but rather to induce a suspension of judgment in the face of an apparently undecidable pair of alternatives. This is perhaps Sextus' favored method, a
method typical of classical skepticism although almost lost to the modern, and certainly to the contemporary, period.¹⁴

E. SKEPTICISM AND REPRESENTATIONAL THEORIES OF PERCEPTION.

Stoic epistemology developed a variety of doctrines analogous to the "modern way of ideas" and Sextus challenged these doctrines on two fundamental counts. The comparison between classical, modern, and contemporary philosophy of mind is a delicate affair, but Sextus' challenges are so fundamental that they survive translation into these different contexts. Thus the details of the differences between the philosophies of mind current in these periods need not be a hindrance.¹⁵ The terms Bury translates as "sense impressions" or "affections of the senses", "mental states", and "mental conceptions" are, in most cases, phantassiai, pathē, and ennoiai, respectively. The sense of phantasia varies from thinker to thinker, but when not used to designate a faculty (i.e., the imagination) it generally connotes a sensory or imaginary presentation, often one that can be affirmed or denied. Pathē are literally passions or affections of the mind, including pains, pleasures, grief, and perhaps all moods and emotions. Ennoiai are general discursive conceptions. Associating these latter two with our sense of "mental" is troublesome, because "mental" is currently too Cartesian.¹⁶ These points should be borne in mind during the subsequent discussion.

One of Sextus' challenges to the epistemic reliability of "ideas" or (re)presentations is that there is no way to determine whether or not such states are similar to their putative objects. The problem Sextus poses for sensory affections is quite general:

Nor, again, is it possible to assert that the soul apprehends external realities by means of the affections of sense owing to the similarity of the affections of the senses to the external real objects. For how is the intellect to know whether the affections of the senses are similar to the objects of sense when it has not itself encountered the external objects, and the senses do not inform it about their real nature but only about their own affections...?²⁷

It is worth pointing out that Sextus' claim that the senses do not inform the intellect about the real nature of objects, but rather about the states of the senses, contains a confusion often found in the modern period: the shift from claiming that there are sensory states which represent outer objects to claiming that our representations represent those sensory states.²⁸ This point aside, Sextus has fingered a real difficulty for any theory undertaking the establishment of the resemblance or representational reliability of the senses, namely, proving that sensory states are reliable when there can be no independent access to the relation between those states and their putative objects.²⁹

Sextus also points out that sensory presentations cannot all be accepted because there are apparent inconsistencies among them.³⁰ The problem is that it is then difficult to determine on what basis to accept them piecemeal:

[I]f we are to believe some [presentations], how shall we decide that it is proper to believe these and disbelieve those?
... if [those who make knowledge claims] say "by aid of presentation", how will they select the presentation which they are adopting for the purpose of judging all the other presentations? Once again they will need a second presentation to judge the first, and a third to judge the second, and so on ad infinitum. But it is impossible to judge an infinite series ... .

The need indicated here, once again, is for a criterion by application of which one might distinguish between reliable and unreliable sensory states, and with this we return to the dilemma of the criterion.

F. KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH, AND CHANGELESSNESS.

It is important to note that Sextus shares with his dogmatic opponents the Platonic notion that there is a truth about things and that knowledge of it would be knowledge of something constant and self-consistent. He is quite explicit in his rejection of any sort of Protagorean identification of things with their various appearances. This needn't be viewed as a careless bit of dogmatism on his part, for the Greek notion of truth involved not only a propositional sense of truth but also a sense found in calling someone a true friend: something's being true involves its being constant and thus being dependable. His point is only that, by any account of knowledge and nature that he's seen yet, knowledge of the changeless truth of things is not humanly attainable. Unlike the Academic skeptics, who claim that we actually cannot know anything, Sextus patiently goes on looking. The skeptical way of life is to follow "appearances" dispassionately and to avoid making pointlessly contentious claims about "reality". Sextus states:

Concerning matters of dispute which admit of no decision it is impossible to make an assertion.

Non-assertion, then, is avoidance of assertion in the general sense in which it is said to include both affirmation and negation, so that non-assertion is a mental condition of ours because of which we refuse either to affirm or to deny anything. Hence it is plain that we adopt non-assertion also not as though things are in reality of such a kind as wholly to induce non-assertion, but as indicating that we now, at the time of uttering it, are in this condition regarding the problems before us now. ... we yield to those things which move us emotionally and drive us compulsorily to assent.

In view of his closing remark about compulsory assertion, one wonders what Sextus might say about a causal-reliability account of knowledge. Whatever he might say to that, it is plain that it does not appear to him that compulsory assent involves any sort of knowledge, at least not of how things really are.
III. DESCARTES' PROBLEMATIC

A. CLARITY AND DISTINCTNESS AS A RULE OF TRUTH.

Descartes' attempt to defend the reliability of clear and distinct ideas as conveyors of truth begins from the moment he introduces the notion of clear and distinct ideas in the third Meditation. It is important to examine this passage carefully, because it undercuts a number of defenses of Descartes, including his own. The relevant passage occurs in the second paragraph of the third Meditation, after Descartes sums up the knowledge gained in the second Meditation and as he begins to reflect on that knowledge and its status:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter, if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So now I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. 28

The "first instance of knowing" is, of course, the cogito, which gives Descartes the knowledge that he exists and that he is a thinking thing. What is important to note is, first, that these insights concern particular propositions, that Descartes himself (of whom there is only one—especially so far as he knows!) exists and that he is a thinking thing. Second, note that Descartes worries that these particular claims might not be reliable—as he would admit to be the case if anything else that he perceived "so clearly and distinctly" were false. 29 Third, his apparently wild induction, to have postulated the general rule that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true on the basis of one instance of such "perception", is based on some Cartesian philosophy of mind which plays a crucial if unannounced role in his defense of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas. It is Descartes' view, namely, that "it is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones". 30 The fundamental question Descartes poses is how reliable his "nature" is when it comes to matters of truth, 31 and indeed whether his nature can demonstrate its own reliability.

B. DESCARTES' DILEMMA.

The dilemma generating Descartes' "metaphysical" doubt stems from his own nature as a thinking being, for when he considers the idea of an omnipotent being he "cannot but admit" that such a being could have given him a nature such that he might be deceived "even in matters which seemed most evident" 31—such as the cogito. Yet on the other hand, when he attends directly to those things that he perceives clearly and distinctly he is "so entirely persuaded by those things" that he cannot but believe them to be true. It is worth quoting his own statement of this dilemma:

[W]henever 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 in 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 anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction.33

The issue Descartes poses is whether or not he could be in error about what is most clear and distinct, even while attending to it, and the issue is complicated by the fact that his nature is such that he cannot disbelieve that which he clearly and distinctly perceives.34 This circumstance, it should be noted, gives Descartes good grounds to doubt even singular clear and distinct claims.

Before considering how Descartes proposes to extricate himself from this problem two points need to be made. First, although Descartes introduces his metaphysical doubt by use of the demon hypothesis, namely that an omnipotent being could have made him to be epistemically unreliable even those “perceptions” which are clear and distinct, he holds that this problem arises for atheists as well. This is because atheists have to attribute their being to a lesser cause, and so their nature, too, may not be so perfect as to avoid error even in clear and distinct perceptions.35 This claim recalls Descartes’ comment on how the later Greeks could only have been skeptics insofar as they did not recognize the existence of God.

Second, although Descartes does not directly discuss the relation between the “light of nature” and that which is “clear and distinct”, it may be assumed for present purposes that those things known by the former are a subclass of the latter. The range of the clear and distinct extends to truths known by syllogism, whereas “the light of nature” provides non-sylologistic, non-inferential, immediate knowledge of common notions, and, at least in the case of the cogito, of the object to which these notions apply. Though this relation between the two cannot be established here, it is sound and it is helpful in trying Descartes’ argument together.36

C. DESCARTES’ ARGUMENT FOR THE TRUTH OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS.

Descartes proceeds by arraying a variety of claims concerning ideas and their causes, each of which is alleged to be known clearly and distinctly by the light of nature. Among these he isolates an idea of an all-perfect being and argues that only a being instantiating all the perfections represented in that idea could be the cause of that idea. He further argues that he himself could not be the cause of the content or “objective reality” of that idea, and concludes therefore that an all-perfect being does exist, did create Descartes, and could not be a deceiver. Such a being would be a deceiver were it the case that Descartes’ nature is such that he cannot disbelieve what he clearly and distinctly perceives while that which he clearly and distinctly perceives is false, so Descartes concludes that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true.
More exactly, his argument is this:

(1) An idea cannot have more objective reality than its cause actually has formally. (premise)

(2) Descartes has an idea of God, that is, of an infinite independent substance, omnipotent and creator of everything. (premise)

(3) Descartes knows that he cannot have created this idea. (premise; defended by a sub-argument)

Therefore:

(4) A being actually exists which is other than Descartes and contains as much formal reality as Descartes' idea of an omnipotent being contains objectively.

(5) An independent, omnipotent being—having that perfection—would have all other perfections as well. (premise)

Therefore:

(6) An all-perfect being, creator of everything, (namely God) exists.

and

(7) Descartes is dependent on this being in all respects for his existence and nature.

Therefore:

(8) The nature and contents of Descartes' understanding are due to God.

(9) Descartes' understanding perceives some things clearly and distinctly. (premise)

(10) If x is clearly and distinctly perceived, then x is something. (premise)

(11) If x is something, then God authored x. (from (6))

(12) Deception can only stem from imperfection. (premise)

Therefore:

(13) God is not a deceiver. (from (6), (12))

Therefore:

(14) If x is clearly and distinctly perceived, then x is true.
D. THE PROBLEM OF CIRCULARITY.

The problem of circularity, briefly, is this. If to have innate ideas is to have as part of the nature of one's mind the capacity to represent certain conceptions, how can one rely on such capacities to infer that there must be things in the world corresponding to any of those representations? The most one could show are the logical relations between the conceptions represented, that is, one could show (perhaps) that and how the represented conceptions mutually imply one another, but how could any of this show that there are extant things corresponding to any of these conceptions? Now this way of stating the problem is a bit too strong, in that Descartes can plausibly escape the circle of his ideas at least in the case of the cogito. But beyond that he absolutely needs the causal principle that relates the objective order of ideas to the formal order of their causes in order to take any of his ideas as representing truths. Even if it is part of Descartes' nature to have an innate idea which represents this causal principle, this does not suffice to show that this principle is true: Descartes could have this idea innately without this idea's being true—and similarly in the case of each of his putative ideas of simple natures. To see that Descartes faces a crippling difficulty at each step of his argument, and to see what this problem is, requires closer consideration of four central Cartesian doctrines.

E. FOUR CARTESIAN DOCTRINES.

1. REPRESENTATIONALISM.

One of Descartes' philosophical innovations is his representationalism, his view that "we cannot have any knowledge of things except by the ideas we have of them". This doctrine, that ideas are needed in any and all cases of knowledge, is part of what makes him Descartes, and no longer an orthodox Augustinian. The Augustinian view is that for a range of eternal truths, we have direct intuitive access to a realm of abstract eternal objects. L.J. Beck cites Descartes' replacement of this view by his own doctrine of clear and distinct ideas as one of the main developments of his mature thought. Thus Descartes holds that our knowledge of eternal truths requires having ideas of them.

Innate ideas, like all ideas according to Descartes, are representational. Ideas are the direct objects of thought or awareness; the objects represented by those ideas are only indirectly objects of thought or of awareness. In Descartes' own words, an idea is the thing which is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. Hence the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect—not of course formally, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect.

In this passage from the first Replies, Descartes states affirmatively that ideas do represent their ideata. However, the problem posed by the evil demon is whether or not the objects represented by Descartes' ideas (the indirect objects of thought that exist actually or "formally") are as his ideas of them represent them to be. This is the problem he must solve.
Descartes’ confidence in the representational character of innate ideas broaches the problem of the status of unicorns and the like, on which he takes a bold stand:

Everything in a chimera that can be clearly and distinctly conceived is a true entity. It is not fictitious, since it has a true and immutable essence . . .58

The tricky case is that of an imagined machine, for this is pretty plainly a constructed idea ("fictitious", as Descartes calls them), so that it represents no "eternal truth" or "immutable essence".59 These two examples point out why Descartes needs to be as concerned as he is to determine which of his ideas are fictitious and which are innate, for only the latter could represent eternal truths.60 Mounting an argument for the existence of God (or anything else) using fictitious ideas would beg the question.61

Descartes says some apparently incompatible things about just what ideas of eternal truths are ideas of.62 However, it is not necessary for present purposes to adopt a particular position on this issue, which is fortunate given how little Descartes says about it.63 A second point of Cartesian doctrine provides a workable solution to this quandary.

2. THE DIVINE CREATION OF ETERNAL TRUTHS.

Descartes holds that the truths represented by innate ideas are created, one and all, by God’s having thought-and-willed them.64 (I write this with hyphens, for Descartes held that these are one simple action of the deity.65) This point is important here, for it provides a univocal sense in which innate ideas are representational, whether these ideas represent objects or not. For in the case of logical or metaphysical truths, one could resist an objectual interpretation of these truths while recognizing that these "truths" or principles are ones God ordained, and that Descartes' innate ideas represent these divine ordinations.66 Indeed, it is Descartes’ view that his innate ideas—the capacities he has to represent certain putative eternal truths clearly and distinctly—are part of his thinking nature because God has given him that nature, a nature allowing him to represent the divinely ordained truths, or at least those truths God designs for us to know.67 To call attention to the representational function of Descartes’ ideas, I will speak below of, e.g., his idea of the causal principle.

3. DENOTATIVE AND CONNOTATIVE ASPECTS OF IDEAS.

There are two components to the "representational" character of ideas, analogous to the familiar Fregean distinction between sense and reference.68 An idea’s having objective reality involves its having a content or "sense"—a connotative or descriptive component—but this is not all. Ideas also have causes, and in many cases ideas represent or refer to those causes.69 (An idea may not represent its cause if that cause contains the objective reality of the idea "eminently" rather than "formally",70 or if an error is made.) There is thus a denotative aspect of ideas concerning the reference of ideas to their referents, that is, to what those ideas are ideas of.71 The referential or semantic aspect of the representational character of innate ideas enters in Descartes' problematic in this way. To take an example, Descartes has an innate idea of
the causal principle formulated in the first premise of his argument (as I have presented it) for the reliability of clear and distinct ideas. Now this principle, that an idea cannot have any more objective reality than its cause actually has formally, will not serve Descartes' purposes if it is simply a nifty principle he's innately disposed to think up. This principle is only of service if it applies to or holds true of ideas, both itself and others. For example, if this principle does not hold true of Descartes' idea of God, he can make no argument for the existence of God at all. Descartes needs the referential or semantic component of the representational character of his ideas in order to carry his argument through.

4. LOGICAL VOLUNTARISM.

A fourth important element of Descartes' problematic is his logical voluntarism. Holding that a being would only be omnipotent if it were the creator of everything, that the independence of anything from a being would entail that that being wasn't omnipotent, Descartes held that eternal truths, whether mathematical, logical, or metaphysical, are not independent of an omnipotent creator. Rather, any and all of these principles are true only because the creator thought-and-willed them. Indeed, if an omnipotent creator thought-and-willed it, even contradictions could be true, although we couldn't comprehend such truths. This is a radical doctrine finding frequent expression in Descartes' writings, and though it is only obliquely indicated in the Meditations as doubts about mathematical truths, it appears in his Replies to the Objections. This view is not a simple misologic. Rather, Descartes holds that human thinking must conform to the law of non-contradiction, but he recognizes the possibility that what holds good of human thought may not, at least for that reason alone, hold true of the objects created by God and denoted by human ideas; they might be self-contradictory, at least by our lights. Of course Descartes also held that God did not, as a matter of fact, make contradictions true.

IV. FIVE CIRCULARITIES IN DESCARTES' ARGUMENT.

The question emerging from these four points is not whether Descartes is guilty of circularity, but rather, How many circles are there in his argument? I now argue that there are five distinct circularities in Descartes' argument. One of these concerns divine logical voluntarism. Another concerns the semantic component of innate ideas. A third arises from his natural inability to disbelieve whatever he clearly and distinctively perceives. A fourth circularity arises in Descartes' proof that he cannot have generated his idea of God. A final circularity concerns Descartes' attempt to verify the reliability of his thinking nature by employing that very same thinking nature.

A. CIRCULARITY AND LOGICAL VOLUNTARISM.

The problem emerging from the doctrine of logical voluntarism is this. Descartes grants that an omnipotent being could make contradictions true. Yet he also introduces several key premises, especially the causal principle (premise 1), on the basis of their denials being self-contradictory. If both of these are true, however, then his appeal to the putative truth of that the negation of which is a manifest contradiction
can carry no justificatory weight. If an omnipotent being could make contradictions true, then the fact that the denial of an alleged eternal truth is a manifest contradiction does not entail that the principle in question is in fact true. Nonetheless, Descartes appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to the falsehood of the denial of each putative clear and distinct idea in the Meditations because its denial is alleged to be a manifest contradiction. The real deceiver hypothesis, on these grounds, is that an omnipotent creator did make some "manifest" contradictions true (or at least some clear and distinct ideas false), but gave Descartes the very same nature as he actually had. In such a situation Descartes would ineluctably believe all the same principles—all of his innate ideas would have the same contents—but none of them (with the possible exception of his thoughts of his existence and of his thinking) would be true—none of them would have their putative referents or ranges of application. Hence Descartes' upbraiding of the narrator of the Meditations for entertaining a contradiction when supposing that an absolutely powerful being could be bent on deceiving him can carry no weight, and similarly when he claims in the second set of Replies that "it is self-contradictory that men should be deceived by God" (cf. premise 13). Were Descartes to reply to this criticism by appealing to the premise that a being having one perfection must have them all (premise 5), this would be no help. Its denial is, to Descartes' mind, a manifest contradiction. But that is Descartes' problem, not ours. For by his own principles, manifest contradictions are not limits on the competence of an omnipotent being. Hence an omnipotent being could be malicious—indeed, precisely by giving Descartes an innate disposition to think that a being having one perfection (such as omnipotence) must have all perfections (including not being a deceiver). Having removed what is (to Descartes) manifestly contradictory as a limit on what an omnipotent being can do, he has likewise removed "manifest contradiction" as a limit on what is possible. In adopting divine logical voluntarism, Descartes has undermined any possibility of proving anything, and yet he claims to proceed analytically. If that which Descartes is incapable of conceiving to be true can nevertheless be true, then none of Descartes' premises can be accepted merely on the ground that they express what Descartes cannot but conceive to be the case. (This affects premises 1, 3, 5, and 12 especially.) It is because he cannot rule out this hypothesis that Descartes fails to meet the contraposition argument offered by a Cartesian skeptic, at least not one who has understood Pyrrhonism: Descartes' certainties are explained just as well by the revamped demon hypothesis just offered. (For convenient reference I dub this revamped demon hypothesis the "severe demon hypothesis"). That he cannot withhold affirmation from clear and distinct ideas only worsens his dialectical plight (see §C below).

One might try to extract Descartes from this quandary by kindly ignoring his logical voluntarism and granting him a realist position on the status of logical truths. One could even do this without having to countenance "limiting" the competence of an omnipotent being by arguing that contradictory descriptions describe no states of affairs, possible or otherwise, so there is nothing described by self-contradictory descriptions for an omnipotent being to be barred from doing. However this favor is worked out, it would require revising Descartes' notion of "manifest contradiction" and it would disturb the parity status of logical, mathematical, and metaphysical principles Descartes effected by adopting divine voluntarism. The problem facing this reconstruction is that some of the causal principles essential to Descartes' argument do
not have contradictory denials. Hume is right that it is not a self-contradiction for something to just pop into existence.\(^6\) It wouldn't be caused, we could have no knowledge of how this could or did happen, but our not being able to understand this event does not make it logically impossible. Without his causal principles (especially premises 1 and 3), Descartes cannot know that his idea of God did not just pop into his mind, and so he could not mount his argument for the existence of God. Again, the denial of premise (5), that a being having one perfection would have all perfections, is not a logical self-contradiction. But without this premise, Descartes cannot argue for God's veracity. The loss of either of these premises, of course, destroys Descartes' argument for the truth of clear and distinct ideas.

B. CIRCULARITY AND THE DENOTATION OF IDEAS.

Some of Descartes' critics charged that his argument was impossible because it presupposed knowledge of what thinking, existence, and other simple universals are.\(^6\) In defense against this charge Descartes claimed that such knowledge was so obvious and noncontroversial that it was not worth mentioning.\(^6\) It was obvious because it is prereflectively available to anyone and can be made explicit upon reflection\(^6\) and it was noncontroversial insofar as such knowledge does not involve knowledge of the existence of anything.\(^6\) The common notions thus known all fall into the range of things known "without affirmation or denial".\(^6\) It is in this way that Descartes distinguishes, in effect, between second-order "epistemological" knowledge about what knowledge is, and first-order empirical knowledge of how the world is. Contemplating his ideas about ideas, judgments, and causes informs him of what knowledge is, but he has no first-order empirical knowledge until he judges that one or another of his ideas is correctly referred to some extramental existent.\(^2\)

This view leads to a circle based on the semantic aspect of innate ideas alone, a circle involved in affirming the existence of things to which Descartes' ideas correspond. Having progressively retreated to knowledge solely of the content of his ideas through the first Meditation doubts, and having found in the cogito two claims involving knowledge of the existence of something, namely his own existence and his being a thinker, it is then Descartes' project to muster certain notions which are themselves known without affirmation or denial into a sound argument for God's existence, an argument allowing him to affirm God's existence. Now each premise of his argument is introduced as being undeniable, although several of the premises require each other for support. The plan is to construct an argument which can be intuited as a whole so that no single premise need be introduced prior to any other.\(^2\) Taking the argument in a single intuition avoids problems of memory and also the problem of needing to defend any one premise prior to another. The whole set of premises must then be either affirmed or denied in toto. The problem, however, is that the fact that these premises mutually support one another (by mutual implication) doesn't show that any of them correspond to the way the world is. His idea of God's veracity must be true of God Himself in order to infer the correspondence of his idea of the causal principle to actual causal relations, and his idea of the causal principle must be true of causality itself in order to infer the correspondence of his idea of God to an actual being. That these two ideas imply each other does nothing to show that they are ei-
ther individually or collectively true. Of course, the individual premises in Descartes’ argument do hang together and reinforce each other—but this only reaches as far as their contents, and Descartes needs their denotative component in order to mount a proof of God’s existence and veracity. The semantic aspect of innate ideas thus leads to another circle. Descartes needs it to be true that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true in order to be able to place any epistemic weight on any of his premises; but unless and until the whole set is referentially in order he cannot rule out the severe demon hypothesis formulated above. For this reason, too, Descartes cannot rule out the possibility of a truly malicious omnipotent deceiver, and so cannot meet the contraposition argument offered by a Cartesian cum Pyrrhonian skeptic. The real problem with the Cartesian circle is that logically there is no way of breaking into it; no premise in the argument can serve as a starting point for introducing or inferring any of the others.

C. CIRCULARITY AND DESCARTES’ INABILITY TO DISBELIEVE WHAT IS CLEAR AND DISTINCT.

One might object to the construal of the task of Descartes’ argument just given, since Descartes cannot withhold his assent from the premises of his argument once he understands each of them; that’s what it is to be taught by the light of nature. As Descartes emphasizes to Burman, when one pays attention to clear and distinct truths, even in the absence of knowledge of the existence of God, one cannot be in any doubt about these truths. This suggestion leads to a circle stemming solely from Descartes’ doctrine of indubitability. Not being in any doubt about these clear and distinct ideas is insufficient evidence of their truth, given that it is Descartes’ nature not to be able to withhold assent from that which he clearly and distinctly perceives. The fact that he cannot but affirm the concatenation of clear and distinct ideas constituting the argument for the existence of God, given that he cannot but affirm each of the premises severally, does nothing to show that any of the premises, concatenated or not, are true. The aim of the argument is to show that such ideas must be true because they come from God. It is an explanatory argument, but a divine origin is hardly the only possible explanation of these ideas. His inability to doubt his premises while conceiving of them in no way alleviates the question of their being true, once he has introduced the possibility of an omnipotent deceiver who might give him indubitable, though false, ideas. His inability to disbelieve his clear and distinct ideas certainly entails that he would believe these ideas to be true, but this does not entail that those ideas are true, at least not without begging the question. Descartes’ problem is in fact worse than I presented it in the preceding section (§5). It does not suffice that Descartes’ idea of God’s veracity be true of God Himself in order for him to infer the correspondence of his idea of the causal principle to actual causal relations. It also does not suffice that his idea of the causal principle be true of causality itself in order for him to infer the correspondence of his idea of God to an actual being. For Descartes to make these crucial inferences he must know that his ideas are true of their putative objects in order to employ his claims in a sound argument, that is, in an argument whose premises are known to be true. But he cannot know that his ideas are true of their objects simply on the basis of their being clearly and distinctly perceived, because he has recognized in the very dilemma he attempts to resolve that his inability to disbelieve clear and distinct
ideas is insufficient evidence of their truth. In brief, he must assume the truth of his conclusion in order to infer the truth of his conclusion.

D. CIRCULARITY AND THE TRANSPARENCY OF DESCARTES' SELF-KNOWLEDGE.

One might try to defend the introduction of some of Descartes' premises by pointing out that they are introduced on the basis of knowledge of an existing entity, namely himself. For example, the crucial claim that he cannot be the cause of his idea of God (premise 3) is based on an inspection of his own nature which reveals that he is not an infinite substance. Hence he cannot be the cause of an idea of an infinite substance (by premise 1). More fully, the reasons Descartes gives to defend the third premise of his argument are these:

(a) Descartes, being a finite substance, cannot be the formal cause of an idea of an infinite substance.97

(b) It is only in contrast to his idea of infinitude that Descartes can notice his own finitude.98

(c) Descartes' very doubts and ignorance shows that he is less than perfect.99

(d) Descartes is a dependent being, having no power to conserve his own existence.100

Two remarks are called for. First, this defense can do nothing to support the crucial causal principle itself. On the contrary, this defense presupposes it, for it is only on the basis of this principle that Descartes can infer from his own finitude that he cannot be the cause of his idea of God. Second, this defense only adds another epicycle to the circularity of Descartes' argument, one involved in the doctrine of self-transparency. This is because Descartes' claims to self-knowledge, and in particular to negative claims about himself, presuppose the reliability of clear and distinct ideas. In order to infer that he has no unknown, hidden faculty which might in some unknown way produce his idea of God,101 Descartes must be perfectly transparent to himself—or at least transparent enough not to make mistakes of this magnitude. The problem is that his defense of the thesis of self-transparency ultimately rests on supposing that God is not a deceiver. As Descartes himself states:

I do not deny that there can be in the soul or the body many properties of which I have no ideas; I only deny that there are any which are inconsistent with the ideas that I do have, including the idea that I have of their distinctness; for otherwise God would be a deceiver and we would have no rule to make us certain of the truth.102

Thus Descartes needs to know that clear and distinct ideas are reliable (line 14) in order to be able to inspect himself and determine that he cannot be the cause of his idea of God (premise 3), and so to be able to argue that God exists (premise 6); yet he also needs to know that God exists (premise 6) in order to know that the clear and distinct ideas he needs for self-inspection are reliable (line 14), and so argue that he cannot be the cause of his idea of God (premise 3).
E. CIRCULARITY AND THE SELF-VERIFICATION OF DESCARTES' THINKING NATURE.

Annette Baier has quite plausibly suggested that Descartes' ground for the causal principle relating objective and formal reality (premise 1) lies in the particular match found in the cogito between the objective reality of his idea of his existence and the formal reality of him as an extant meditating thinker. On this basis, Descartes forms a general principle, that in no case does the formal reality of the cause of an idea exceed the objective reality represented by the idea. This generalization is another instance of the generalizing ability of his thinking nature, first explicitly exemplified in his generalization from the clarity and distinctness of the cogito to the general rule that clear and distinct ideas are true.103 Baier's suggestion is, I think, of considerable merit, but it raises what may well be the most fatal circularity of all. Descartes attempts to demonstrate that his thinking nature is reliable, at least when used properly, that is, when he relies solely on clear and distinct ideas. To demonstrate that his thinking nature is reliable, he must make the generalization Baier indicates, from the single instance of the match between formal and objective reality in the case of the cogito to the general causal principle (premise 1), and he must apply this general principle to the whole range of his clear and distinct ideas. Furthermore, if his demonstration is to prove the conclusion he draws, then his generalization must be true, and (since his proof must be sound) he must know that his generalization is true. This is to say, he must already know that his conclusion (line 14) is true in order to infer the truth of the causal principle (premise 1) and in order to infer the truth of his premises concerning the dependence of the contents and reliability of his thinking nature on God (premises 7-13, plus line 14).

The problem of Descartes' validating the reliability of his own thinking nature by using that very nature after having cast that reliability into radical doubt affects more than just the causal principle just discussed; it is quite general. For as premise (8) indicates, all of Descartes' clear and distinct common notions are alleged to be due to God, and he relies on these notions throughout his argument to prove that they are due to God and so are reliable. (Such ideas are used in premises 1, 2, 5, 9, 12, and in his defense of 3.) But his having called the truth of clearly and distinctly perceived common notions into doubt entails that he cannot rely on the veracity of his own thinking nature for arguing his way out of this radical doubt. This point is only reinforced once the question of Descartes' ability to draw inferences is raised.

V. SOME DEFENSES OF DESCARTES.

A. DOUBT, CIRCULARITY, AND MEMORY.

In his own defense Descartes frequently claims that the only range of doubt about clear and distinct ideas which he would either countenance or attempt to argue against concerns the reliability of our memory of such ideas and their deductions.104 He does indeed discuss memory in the fifth Meditation,105 but it has always seemed that this defense was disingenuous: he had clearly posed a much larger problem than simply that of memory. His frequent insistence that one is certain
that one is not deceived so long as one is attending to clear and distinct ideas is simply an insufficient response in the face of his own contention that we cannot refrain from believing that clear and distinct ideas are true. Indeed, it flatly denies the very problem that officially motivated him to inquire into the existence of God. As noted above, Descartes first poses the problem of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas in connection with the cogito. Hence his later claims only to have doubted memory are misleading. Memory is introduced only because he can call particular clear and distinct perceptions—including the cogito—into question only after the fact, due to his inability to disbelieve those perceptions while having them. The question of memory is a red herring; Descartes knows full well that he had clearly and distinctly perceived, say, the cogito, and that this involved no syllogism. Hence his retrospective attempt to connect the doubt to be dispelled with memory through doubts about syllogism (or vice versa) is simply a misstatement of the problem.

Furthermore, these attempts to delimit the range of doubt to memory are counterposed by several repetitions of the offending circularity. One such passage comes from the second Replies:

In the case of our clearest and most careful judgments, however, this kind of explanation would not be possible, for if such judgments were false they could not be corrected by any clearer judgments or by means of any other natural faculty. In such cases I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived. 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. Now everything real which is in us must have been bestowed upon us by God (this was proved when his existence was proved); moreover, 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 towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly (that is, by assenting only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive, for no other correct method for employing this faculty can be imagined). For if it did not so tend then, since God gave it to us, he would rightly have to be regarded as a deceiver.

Following very closely after contending that he had addressed and handled the problem of memory, this statement testifies to Descartes' conviction of his dependence upon a benevolent God, but in this form his argument clearly falls to the severe demon hypothesis formulated above.

B. THE DIDACTIC AIM OF THE MEDITATIONS.

Another possible recasting of the argument would suggest that, on Descartes' view, that which is clear and distinct is true, but the narrator of the Meditations, like their audience, doesn't initially know this. Thus the project of the Meditations is to rid its readers of prejudice and to enable them to learn, either about any particular clear and distinct idea or about clear and distinct ideas generally, that they are capable of having such ideas and that they are true. If this is Des-
cartes' real aim, then his "argument" has only a pedagogical or didactic function, namely, to lead us away from intellectual dependence on the senses to the point where we, too, will be blessed by "the great illumination" of the neo-Augustinian truth as Descartes conceives it. In this regard, Descartes' program is sensitive to a point made by William Alston, that if there is to be immediate justification at all, it must be first-person. An important epistemological reason for Descartes writing meditations is that by meditating each reader can come to have his or her own set of clear and distinct ideas. Such a recasting of the project cannot, however, save the argument from the charge of circularity. Descartes, as narrator of the Meditations, claims not to admit anything "that is not necessarily true". His use of this phrase shows that what it requires is that no claim can be allowed unless it survives the demon hypothesis. In effect, this hypothesis commits Descartes to the thesis that one knows that \(x\) only if one knows that one knows that \(x\) (the "K-K" thesis), for only a demonstrative proof that a claim is true could repulse the demon hypothesis, and such a proof would generate the knowledge that one knew the claim in question to be true. Given this stricture, however, Descartes cannot rely on the putative semantic grip that clear and distinct ideas have on their objects (and so on the truth) in order to construct an argument which shows that they have such a grip. For the only way that clear and distinct ideas can form an argument that is known to be sound is if they are known to have at least enough range of application so as to be applicable to one another. Hence no amount of juggling clear and distinct ideas which are as a matter of unknown fact true can add up to a proof that is known to be sound; strict analogues of the problems pointed out above recur here as well. Discussion of a further point of Descartes' program makes this clear.

C. THE ABSURDITY OF QUESTIONING ONE'S HIGHEST COGNITIVE FACULTY.

Another possible rejoinder is to cite Descartes' claims that the "light of nature" is the highest faculty we have, so we must rely on it and we cannot call it into question. Now given his claims about our not being able to disbelieve what we clearly and distinctly perceive, on this construal of the Meditations Descartes propounds a simple dogmatism, for there is no independent effort to demonstrate that what one cannot disbelieve (due to its clarity and distinctness) is also true, and none is attempted. Indeed, Descartes gives evidence of just such a dogmatism, insofar as he constantly charges those who misunderstand or disagree with him with prejudice, which he attributes to one or another source. By the time one compiles all of his remarks about prejudice and what is manifest to an unprejudiced mind, it becomes apparent that the only people whom Descartes would consider to be unprejudiced are neo-Augustinians. In any event, this construal of Descartes' program makes his putative response to skepticism a sham from the start; one can hardly imagine the scorn Sextus Empiricus would coolly though sanguinely have poured on the whole undertaking. On a didactic construal of the Meditations, Descartes raises the problem of whether clear and distinct ideas correspond to reality only to go on to ignore this problem and to implore us to trust clear and distinct ideas anyway.
VI. SOME INHERENT LIMITS OF THE CARTESIAN PROGRAM

Seeing that Descartes’ strategy for defending the objectivity of knowledge goes awry does not amount to seeing why it would have to fail. Three remarks on this point may be offered here.

A. REPRESENTATIONALISM AND SKEPTICISM

It is a feature of Descartes’ representationalism that the direct objects of awareness are mental events (ideas) and that the indirect objects of awareness are extant objects which cause or occasion those ideas. This feature of the “modern way of ideas” is shared by many empiricist and sense-data theories, and the semantic difficulty plaguing Descartes plagues them as well. Retreating from knowledge of the world to knowledge of representations of the world is doomed to failure for just the reason Sextus gives. Once the semantic or causal relation (or both) between the world and one’s representations of it is broken, there is no way to reestablish it. Conjoining this kind of representationalism with the “K-K” thesis and a serious worry about skepticism must break the relation between representations and the world. If one’s only cognitive relation to anything external is by means of representations of which alone one is directly aware, one cannot observe or apprehend the relation between any or all of one’s representations and the world putatively causing them or denoted by them. However, on these principles, only if one can apprehend this relation can the relation be legitimately reestablished. Descartes has failed to meet two of Sextus’ fundamental challenges to representationalism, namely, to prove that the direct objects of our awareness (our ideas) accurately represent the putative indirect objects of our awareness (e.g., worldly objects), and to establish a criterion for sorting reliable from unreliable representations. The philosophical moral is simple: to defend the thesis that empirical knowledge is possible requires concerning oneself with the world, not retreating from it in order to attempt to climb out of a hermetic circle of representations.

B. THE PAUCITY OF SELF-EVIDENT FOUNDATIONS.

Descartes’ strategy for halting the skeptical regress without shirking questions of legitimizing each claim is to propose a realm of basic claims such that to know them at all is to know that one knows them. If one had knowledge of such a claim, no further claims would be needed in order to justify that claim. One trouble with this strategy is that there are extraordinarily few claims meeting these specifications. One claim that does meet these specifications is the cogito. There is, however, a very special reason that the claim that one exists is infallibly true, namely, one has to exist in order to make the claim at all. Thus the condition of the truth of the claim is among the conditions for the possibility of making the claim. Thus making the claim at all entails that one’s claim is true. Unfortunately for Descartes, this same very strong condition is not satisfied by any other of the premises and principles to which he appeals in assembling his argument for the reliability of clear and distinct ideas. In this regard, Descartes is wrong to claim that the only thing guaranteeing the truth of the cogito is “simply a clear and distinct perception” of his assertion.117 There is this reflexive element that insures the truth of the cogito, and which distinguishes it
from all of the other ideas that Descartes claims to perceive clearly and distinctly.¹¹⁸

One range of claims that might be infallible and indubitable are claims made about certain abstract principles. In the case of abstract principles, one might well grant the reliability of the clear and distinct perception of those principles the denials of which are contradictory. However, this range of principles includes at best only logical and mathematical principles, and the validity of empirical knowledge doesn’t follow from those principles alone. One needs some further, substantive claims to establish the validity of empirical knowledge (where substantive claims are claims that do not have contradictory denials). The problem with Descartes' substantive principles (e.g. his causal principles [premise 1] and his claims to have certain ideas of God [premises 2 and 5] and of the contents of his thought [premises 8 and 10]) is that they have virtually no plausibility in absence of a divine origin. This is especially true of his general rule that whatever is clear and distinct is true. Clarity and distinctness may be necessary conditions for truth, but they certainly are not sufficient conditions in absence of a divine guarantee of their connection. The criteria of truth of substantive principles will have to rely heavily, not on alleged antecedent "self-evidence", but on consequent explanatory power.¹¹⁹

A standard sort of substantive claim adduced in foundationalist attempts to validate empirical knowledge is a claim about how ordinary objects appear to be, where such appearances might be analyzed as sensory ideas (in a "strict sense" of "seeming to sense"¹²⁰), impressions of sense, sense data, or the "phenomena" reported in terminating judgments. The trouble confronting this kind of foundationalism is twofold. On the one hand, physical objects cannot be analyzed without remainder into sets of appearances, and the spatial and temporal framework required for referring to and reporting on such appearances cannot itself be analyzed without remainder into relation among appearances.¹²¹ On the other hand, appearances and reports about them do not imply much of anything about the future course of events (experienced or not), whereas physical objects and reports about them do, and no set of reports about something’s seeming to be an object entails that it is an object. The substantive premises of phenomenalist ontologies, sense-data, or Cartesian sensing "strictly speaking", lack explanatory power because they lack implications for empirical knowledge.

C. THE UNTENABILITY OF "SELF-EVIDENCE"

A further part of the problem with a doctrine of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas or of the infallibility of reports of "immediate" sensory experience is that one needs to be able to distinguish systematically between the following two possibilities:

Apprehending the object of a claim and on that basis being certain that the claim is true.

Being 'certain' that a claim is true and on that basis believing that the object of that claim must have existed.

Without a means of systematically distinguishing between these two epistemically quite different kinds of episode, any content or claim might be
seized upon. The problem facing any epistemology that bases empirical knowledge on some sort of basic self-validating kind of claims is to render the distinction between these two kinds of episode unequivocally decidable and yet to have strong enough claims to actually ground empirical knowledge.

Having pursued Descartes this far in his own terminology, it is permissible to introduce some other terminology useful for formulating this fundamental difficulty with his program. One may distinguish between indubitability, infallibility, and incorrigibility as follows. That which is indubitable is incapable of being doubted; that which is infallible is incapable of being mistaken; and that which is incorrigible is incapable of being corrected. Descartes attempts to demonstrate his infallibility (at least in the domain of the clear and distinct) by building on what is (to him) indubitable, aspiring to have them be identical, both episodically and logically. Descartes' reply to Sextus is to postulate a set of self-verifying cognitive states. However, he mistook the validity of most of his claims, thereby revealing his failure systematically to distinguish the two kinds of cognitive episode stated above.

Alan Gewirth has offered a careful attempt to show how Descartes moves from a "methodological" moment, in which the clarity and distinctness of Descartes' ideas psychologically compel belief, to a "metaphysical" moment, in which clarity and distinctness of ideas involve their truth. He explicitly addresses the question of "how a metaphysical certainty [involving truth and infallibility] can emerge from propositions whose certainty, at the point at which they occur in the demonstration, is only psychological [involving indubitability]." Unfortunately, the "logical impossibility" of metaphysical doubt—doubt about the truth of clear and distinct ideas—that he goes on to demonstrate occurs within the "methodological" moment, and so can involve only psychological certainty, that is, indubitability. This may show that Descartes cannot doubt his proof of God's existence and veracity, but it does not entail the truth of those conclusions. As van Cleve has argued, the "metaphysical certainty" Gewirth develops is one that can be defined solely in terms of Gewirth's premises concerning adequate grounds of doubt, but these grounds are defined solely in the psychological or methodological "moment". The resulting "metaphysical certainty" is only an extension of psychological certainty, and not a guarantor of truth. In the terms I have used above, infallibility has not been shown to follow from indubitability. This regrettable result is an expectable consequence of the point Gewirth recognizes, names, that "there can be clearness and distinctness without truth".

The way out of the logical circle of justification is not to postulate states or situations in which the apprehension and the justification of a claim or belief occur together but (as Pierce remarked in response to this problem) to temporalize the distinction. Even if one's explicit criteria of evaluation remain the same over time, alterations in contexts of use can ground the possibility of self-critical revision of these explicit criteria. This points epistemology away from the foundationalist ideal of certainty toward the idea of fallibilism, away from incorrigibility toward self-critical revision of knowledge and its standards. Emphasizing explanatory power over alleged self-evidence allows for the possibility of revising high-order principles.
To follow this line a bit further, it is worth noting that the logical independence which Descartes attributes to (completely conceived) common notions is not an accidental feature of their privileged epistemic status. If the simple notions were not logically independent, then they would have implications bearing on one another. Were any of these implications inconsistent, the notions bearing those implications would be put into question. Now it might be plausible to suppose that such a set of common notions, if there were one, would have to be self-consistent. The interesting point, however, is that so long as such notions have implications bearing on one another, then there are facts other than any given notion relevant to its acceptability, for to have implications is also, by modus tollens, to be corrigible. In order to be certain that my present apprehension of some simple idea (whether of sense or reflection) is veridical (not to say infallible), I must apprehend all the features of the content of that idea, for if I do not, then I cannot be sure that my apprehension is veridical. Thus if the content of the idea in question has implications for ideas or states-of-affairs not currently apprehended, then I cannot be sure that my apprehension is infallible because I do not know at the time of that apprehension that the relevant implications obtain. Infallibility is achieved at the expense of implicative nullity. (The same problem infects Descartes' "strict" notion of sensing.) The mutual independence of basic claims is only an evaluative virtue if there is a way of individually checking each such claim directly against reality. Atomistic accounts of meaning or of ideational content and doctrines of self-evidence or of knowledge by acquaintance are twins. But if there can be no such piecemeal examination, then the logical, semantic, or evidential interdependence of basic claims needs to be made an evaluative virtue rather than a vice. The problems with foundationalism, as many recent developments in epistemology show, do lead in the direction of pragmatism.

ENDNOTES

1 Replies V; PWD ii, 263; AT viii 384; to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641, in Descartes: Philosophical Letters, ed. Anthony Kenny (London, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 119; hereafter abbreviated as "K". This, of course, is closely related to Descartes' denial of scientific knowledge to atheists (Replies II; PWD ii, 101; AT vii, 141). The translations used are those by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), abbreviated "PWD". References are also given to the standard edition of Descartes' works by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, Œuvres de Descartes (revised edition, Paris: 1964-76), abbreviated "AT". The relevant volume number of each edition is indicated in lower case roman numerals.

2 Gassendi indicates Descartes' familiarity with the skeptics in Objections V (PWD ii, 93; AT vii, 277) and Descartes refers to skeptics in Replies II and V (PWD ii, 93, 263; AT vii, 130, 384) and in his letter to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641 (K, 119). He refers to Pyrrhonians twice in "The Search After Truth" (PWD ii, 408, 413; AT x, 512, 520) and once in his letter to Reneri (for Pollot), April 1638 (K, 53).

3 Descartes formulates the rule twice in Meditation IV (PWD ii, 41, 43; AT vii, 59, 62) and calls it a rule in Meditation V (PWD ii, 49; AT vii, 70) and in letters to Clerselier (PWD ii, 272; AT ix a, 208) and to Gibieuf,
19 Jan. 1642 (K, 124). Gassendi uses the term "criterion" in the fifth Objections (PWD ii, 188; AT vii, 269), as does Descartes in a letter to Mersenne, 16 Oct. 1639 (K, 65).

4 There is a fair amount of indirect allusion to and confrontation of classical skepticism in the Meditations themselves and in Descartes' discussion of them. The demon is introduced in Meditation I not only as a counterposed alternative to Descartes' natural trust in knowledge, but as one aimed at suspending assent (PWD ii, 15; AT vii, 22-3); he mentions the variously round and square appearance of a tower in Meditation VI (PWD ii, 53; AT vii, 76)—a piece of skeptical stock-in-trade; he apologizes for serving up the "precooked material" of classical skepticism in the first Meditation (Replies II; PWD ii, 94; AT vii, 131); his conception of scientific knowledge is supposed to be so strong as to "never be shaken by any stronger argument" (to Regius, 24 May 1640 [K, 147])—a very likely allusion to skeptical contraposition arguments. He also holds that reliance on clear and distinct ideas will avoid conflicting judgments about the same object at different times (Meditation V; PWD ii, 48; AT vii, 69) and he is cautious about question-begging (to Mersenne, 16 June 1641 [K, 104]), both of which are favorite skeptical charges. For extended discussions of the skeptical backdrop to Descartes' program, see Richard Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes (New York: Humanities Press, 1960) and "The Sceptical Origins of the Modern Problem of Knowledge" in Perception and Personal Identity. Eds. N. Care and R. Grimm (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1969); and E. Curley, Descartes Against the Sceptics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), chap. 1.

5 As will be noted below, Sextus officially leaves it an open question whether adequate logical and explanatory canons and actual explanations are possible.

6 Sextus states, "... we are unable to say what is the real nature of each of these things, although it is possible to say what each thing at the moment appears to be" (PH I 93, cf. I 59). He is willing to press the apparent transitoriness of things to the Platonic extreme of doubting that things, strictly speaking, exist: ". . . inasmuch as about bodies also there is much controversy as to whether or not they are apprehended, owing to what is called their 'continual flux', which gives rise to the view that they do not admit of the title 'this' and are non-existent—just as Plato speaks of bodies as 'becoming but never being'," (PH III 54; cf. Plato, Timaeus 49de). The point about "momentary appearances" and "continual flux" is to question whether we're able to attribute anything to the nature of ordinary objects and indeed whether they even have a nature to which to attribute anything. (References are to Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism. Translated by R. G. Bury [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933], abbreviated "PH"). Also cited is his Against the Mathematicians VII-XI, abbreviated "M". (This text is also called "Against the Logicians" I-V, and "Against the Professors" VIII-XI. It is translated under this latter title by R. G. Bury; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933.)

7 See M. Frede, "Des Skeptikers Meinungen" Neue Hefte für Philosophie, Hefte 15/16 (Göttingen: 1979), 102-129; recently translated as "The Skeptic's Beliefs" in his collection, Essays in Ancient Philosophy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 175-200; and "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge"
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(ibid.), 201-22; and Charlotte Stough, "Sextus Empiricus on Non-Assertion" Phronesis 29 no. 2, (1984), 137-64.

8 Sextus' terms for these are almost always enargea and adelon and their variants. "Enargea" means resplendently manifest, "adelon" means unclear. (At M VIII 143 Sextus uses 'delon' in a sense of clear and evident.) Myles Burnyeat glosses "the evident" as follows: "The notion of that which is evident . . . is a dogmatist's notion in the first instance. Things evident are things which come to our knowledge of themselves (PH II 97; M VIII 144), which are grasped from themselves (PH II 99), immediately present themselves to sense and intellect (M VIII 141), which require no other thing to announce them (M VIII 149), i.e., which are such that we have immediate or non-inferential knowledge of them, directly from the impression (M VIII 316). Examples: it is day, I am conversing (M VIII 144), this is a man (M VIII 316). Sextus declares that this whole class of things is put in doubt by the skeptic critique of the criterion of truth (PH II 95; M VIII 141-2)" ("Can the Sceptic Live his Scepticism?" in Doubt and Dogmatism. Eds. Schofield, Burnyeat, and Barnes [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980], 26 note 9.)


10 Most of the major figures in the modern period (and thereafter) were motivated to do epistemology as a first philosophy in order to clear away what they saw as clouds of error surrounding other substantive topics. Descartes sought the foundations of knowledge in order to establish something lasting in the sciences (Meditation I; PWD ii, 12; AT vii, 17). Locke came to write his Essay due to controversies in theology (An Essay Concern Human Understanding. Ed. A. C. Fraser [New York: Dover Publications, 1959], 13). Berkeley argued for "immaterialism" on epistemological grounds in order to stem the atheism concomitant with materialism (Three Dialogs Between Hylas and Philonus, Preface, in Berkeley's Philosophical Writings. Ed. D. M. Armstrong [London: Collier, 1965], 133.) And Hume endeavored in his Treatise to provide a "study of man" as a foundation for all other sciences (A Treatise of Human Nature. Ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge [London, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], xvi).

11 PH I 170, 178.

12 PH I 166-9.

13 PH I 203; II 79, 103.

14 Peter King suggested (in conversation) one reason that the method of contraposition may have fallen into disuse among modern and contemporary skeptics is that later periods have enjoyed a greater consensus about what would count as adequate canons or principles of proof. Other reasons are those pointed out by Michael Williams, namely, widespread commitment to a modern, representational theory of mind and the historical triumph of Newtonian physics, to which Aristotelian physics could not plausibly be equipoised. (See M. Williams, "Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt" in Essays in Descartes' Meditations. Ed. A.O. Rorty [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986], 117-40; hereafter cited as "Rorty".)
This is also to say that the niceties of Sextus’ views will not be of concern here. The interested reader is referred to the secondary literature cited in the notes.

See note 22 below.

Cf. *PH* II 72-3.

Locke is often criticized for failing to see this problem. However, Locke thinks that he has the double correspondence of ideas and things as a *premise* in his argument. The real target of attack is, on what grounds did or could he claim this crucial thesis as a premise? M.P. Burnyeat is right that this problem does not quite constitute the modern "problem of the external world", because the existence of the world is not called into doubt by this objection to representationalist theories of perception (see "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed" *The Philosophical Review* 91 no. 1, 3-40). In following Burnyeat's lead and analysing the transformation of classical into modern skepticism Michael Williams (op. cit.) overlooks a basic reason why classical skeptics did not press the problem of the external world as a stock epistemological problem: pressing this problem as a stock problem requires commitment to a representational account of perception and, in true Pyrrhonian fashion, Sextus would avoid commitment to this doctrine. Nevertheless, Sextus does use this argument against those who hold representational theories of perception, and thus Williams is wrong to hold that "classical scepticism makes exclusive use of . . . the "formal" problems of the regress and the criterion" (ibid., 122; emphasis added).

Sextus comments, "... the view about the same thing having opposite appearances is not a dogma of the Sceptics but a fact which is experienced not by the Sceptics alone but also by the rest of philosophers and all mankind . . ." (*PH* I 210); "... so that the Heracliteans start from the general perception of mankind, just as we also do and probably all the other philosophies" (*PH* I 211).

The Stoics were anything but unaware of the kinds of difficulties posed by claiming knowledge based on sensory states that convey states of the world. One central Stoic doctrine pertinent to settling problems about the reliability of sensation is that of the "*kataleptike phantasia*", a sensory presentation which is absolutely and manifestly reliable. Although this doctrine is a predecessor of Descartes' doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, it does not bear discussion here because the Stoic notion of perception is decidedly different from Descartes'. The Stoics were materialists through and through and never would have countenanced what Descartes identifies as the strict sense of perceiving in Meditation II, namely, seeming to see, hear, and feel (PFD ii 19; AT vii 29). (See W. Matson, "Why Isn't the Mind-Body Problem Ancient?" in *Mind, Matter, and Method*. Eds. Feyerabend and Maxwell [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966], 92-102). Also, the Stoics never clearly formulated the distinction between an impression's being absolutely reliable and its being *manifestly* reliable, and so never clearly resolved this difficulty. (See J. Annas, "Truth and Knowledge" in *Doubt and Dogmatism* [op. cit.], ch. 4). For a very helpful discussion of this doctrine see M. Frede,
"Stoics and Skeptics on Clear and Distinct Impressions" (rpt. in Essays in Ancient Philosophy [op. cit.], 151-76).

23 M VII 278, 294-6. See C. Stough, Greek Skepticism (Berkeley: University of California, 1969), 145. This is not to say that Protagoras was a phenomenalist, but only that he refused to distinguish between appearances and the things that cause those appearances.


25 PH I 226, 236.

26 PH I 170.

27 PH I 192-3.

28 Meditation II; PWD ii, 24; AT vii, 35.

29 More specifically, what is at issue is whether Descartes calls non-inferential knowledge of particular clear and distinct ideas into question. Kenny's, van Cleve's, and Frankel's defenses of Descartes depend on his not having done so. (See A. Kenny, Descartes [New York: Random House, 1968], chap. 2, and "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths" Journal of Philosophy 47 no. 19, Oct. 8, 1970, 690; J. van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle" The Philosophical Review 88 no. 1, 55-91, 67-9; L. Frankel, "Reason and Antecedent Doubt" Southern Journal of Philosophy 22 no. 3, 341.) Though this issue cannot be settled quite yet, several relevant points may be made. First, Descartes holds that the cogito gives non-inferential knowledge of particular clear and distinct ideas (Replies II; PWD ii, 100; AT vii, 140). Second, Descartes holds that innate ideas are potentials or capacities to represent certain contents or principles to oneself. Hence innate ideas involve operations of the mind. Thus it is not clear (as Frankel would have it) that when Descartes calls mathematics into question in the first Meditation he is only questioning inferential knowledge. Rather, his example of adding 2 and 3 or counting the sides of a square are the simplest "operations" he could think of (Meditation I; PWD ii, 14; AT vii, 21)—and this may not mean that these involve inference. Third, Descartes holds that the knowledge of common notions is knowledge of universals, and such knowledge is not questioned until it is used in knowing existential truths (Principle X, Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 195-6; AT viii, 8). This threatens Frankel's reliance on the distinction between particular and universal truths. Also relevant is Descartes' statement in the fourth set of Replies that "... one of the exaggerated doubts which I put forward in the first Meditation went so far as to make it impossible for me to be certain of this very point (namely, whether things do in reality correspond to our perception of them) ..." (PWD ii, 159; AT vii, 226). The "things" under discussion are mind and body; they are not formulated as general truths and they do not concern the "meta-level" principle of the reliability of clear and distinct ideas generally. Similarly, Descartes expresses concern about having erred even in that which he thinks he sees "utterly clearly with my mind's eye" (Meditation III; PWD ii, 25; AT vii, 36), a category which would include singular claims. Two further
cartesian grounds for doubting the reliability of singular clear and distinct propositions will be noted below (pp. 98, 104). Alan Gewirth points out that Descartes' doubt, as expressed in the third Meditation, is unrestricted and distributive, applying to each possible object of clear and distinct perception, and so to particular propositions ("Descartes: Two Disputed Questions", *Journal of Philosophy* 68 no. 9, May 6, 1971, 296), a point that holds against van Cleve's and Frankel's interpretations.

It has been suggested that the problem of circularity is a red herring because this generalization (the last two sentences of the passage quoted above) is Descartes' argument for the truth of clear and distinct ideas, insofar as he offers an argument at all. This surely is not how Descartes understood his argument, for he insists twice in the "Synopsis" that he cannot and does not prove the truth of clear and distinct ideas before Meditation IV (*PWD* ii, 9, 11; *AT* vii 13, 15).


31 Meditation III; *PWD* ii, 25, 26; *AT* vii, 36, 38. Cf. Principle XIII, XXX (*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 197, 203; *AT* viiia, 9-10, 16), CB [81] (50); Letter to Regius, 24 May 1640 (*K*, 74).

32 Meditation III; *PWD* ii, 25, 26; *AT* vii, 36.

33 Ibid.

34 Descartes states this in Meditation III and V (*PWD* ii, 25, 45, 48; *AT* vii, 36, 65, 69), in the third and sixth Replies (*PWD* ii, 135, 292; *AT* vii, 192, 432-3), in Principle XLIII (*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 207; *AT* viiia, 21), to Burman (CB [6], 6), and to Regius, 24 May 1640 (*K*, 73).

35 Meditation I; *PWD* ii, 14; *AT* vii, 21.

36 The *cogito* is alternatively and apparently equivalently said to be known by clear and distinct perception and by the light of nature (Meditation III; *PWD* ii, 24, 26-7; *AT* vii, 35, 38). The light of nature and clear and distinct knowledge or ideas are used in close connection about the same claims in the third Meditation (*PWD* ii, 29; *AT* vii, 42), Replies II (*PWD* ii, 37-8; *AT* vii, 134-6), and in Principle XX, XXX (*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 200, 203; *AT* viiia, 11, 16-7).

37 *PWD* ii, 28, 29, 32; *AT* vii, 40, 41, 42, 47. The qualification that the cause must be an actual (rather than merely a possible) entity is added in Meditation III (*PWD* ii, 32; *AT* vii, 47). Cf. Replies I (*PWD* ii, 97; *AT* viiia, 135-6), Principle XVIII (*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 199; *AT* viiia, 12), and to Regius, June 1642 (*K*, 132). Descartes' ground for this premise is discussed in §1VE, below 107.

38 *PWD* ii, 31, 47; *AT* vii, 45, 68. Cf. Principle XXI (*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 200; *AT* viiia, 13); and to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (*K*, 147).

39 The sub-argument for this crucial premise is discussed in §IVD, below 106.
Meditation III (PWD ii, 31; AT vii, 45).

PWD ii, 34; AT vii, 49-50. This is a summary formulation of the logical import of Descartes' claim that any being which could bring itself into existence—that being a perfection—would surely give itself all other perfections as well (Meditation III [PWD ii, 34; AT vii, 50]; Replies IV [PWD ii, 167, 168; AT vii, 240, 241]; Principle XX [Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 199-200; AT viiia, 12]). That a being would have all perfections or none is reinforced by Descartes' contention that one of the perfections of God is that all perfections are in Him simply one and unitary (Replies I [PWD ii, 98; AT vii, 137]).

PWD ii, 31, 35; AT vii, 45, 51. Cf. Principles XXII, XXIV, and XXVII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 200, 201, 202; AT viiia, 13, 14, 15), CB [33] (22), to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641; to Elizabeth, 6 Oct. 1645, for Arnauld, 29 July 1648 (K, 115, 180, 236-7 respectively).

PWD ii, 35, 37, 56; AT vii, 51, 53, 80. Cf. to Mersenne, 28 Jan. 1641 (K, 94).

PWD ii, 37-8, 40; AT vii, 54, 58. Cf. to Elizabeth, 6 Oct. 1645 (K, 180), Preface to the French edition of the Principles and Principle XXVII and XXX (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 184, 202, 203; AT ixb, 10; AT viiia, 15, 16; respectively).

Meditation IV (PWD ii, 43; AT vii, 62). Cf. Meditation V (PWD 48; AT vii, 70).

PWD ii, 43, 48; AT vii, 62, 70. Cf. to Mersenne, 17 May 1630; to Elizabeth, 6 Oct. 1645 (K, 14-5, 180), Replies II (PWD ii, 103; AT vii, 144), CB [33] (22).

PWD ii, 35, 37; AT vii, 52, 53. Cf. Replies VI (PWD ii, 289; AT vii, 428), to Clerselier, 23 April 1649 (K, 255), Principle XXIX (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 203; AT viiia, 16).


Meditation IV (PWD ii, 43; AT vii, 62).

Descartes equates the having of ideas with the having of concepts in a letter to Mersenne, July 1641 (K, 105) and describes innate ideas as capacities in the "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet" (PWD i, 303, 309; AT viiiib, 358, 366) and in letters to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641; and to Mesland, 2 May 1644 (K, 117, 148 respectively).

Geneviève Rodis-Lewis attempts to solve the problem of circularity by reducing Descartes' task to one of obtaining a simultaneous intuition of these premises and their conclusion, which suffices to show that "my God-given rational nature cannot err when I conduct it well" ("On the Complementarity of Mediations III and V: From the 'General Rule' of Evidence to 'Certain Science'" in Rorty [op. cit.], 271-96, 280). I do not see how this constriction of the purported task of the proof of God's existence and veracity in any way avoids or solves the problems I raise here and below.
Descartes expressly says that the causal principle is needed to explain how we have knowledge of anything external to the mind in the second Replies and in Axiom V of the "Arguments . . . Arranged in Geometrical Fashion" (PWD ii, 97 and 116; AT vii, 135 and 165; respectively).

To Gibieuf 19 Jan. 1642 (K, 123, 124). Cf. Meditation III (PWD ii, 26; AT vii, 37), Axiom V of the "Arguments . . . Arranged in Geometrical Fashion" (PWD ii, 116; AT vii, 165), and the references given in notes 57 and 75 below.


L.J. Beck, The Metaphysics of Descartes (London, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 135. It is worth noting that the Augustinian view does not entirely leave Descartes' thinking, for he grants that God may miraculously reveal Himself directly to us, although this lies beyond the limits of his philosophy (to Silhon, March 1648 [K, 229-30]). This letter provides, I believe, the crucial evidence against construing Descartes' argument for the existence of God as precisely parallel to the cogito argument, where the "argument" for God's existence is alleged to lead to having a direct intuition of God.

Replies I (PWD ii, 75; AT vii, 102). Cp. Meditations, Preface to the Reader (PWD ii, 7; AT vii, 8), Replies I; "Arguments . . . Arranged in Geometrical Fashion" Definition 3; and Objections V (PWD ii, 75, 113-4, 199; AT vii, 102, 161, 285; respectively).

Harry Frankfurt attempts to clear Descartes of the charge of circularity by downplaying Descartes' concern with the correspondence of his ideas to reality. In this connection he cites the following passage: "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" (Replies II [PWD ii, 103; AT vii 145]). This is indeed a remarkable passage, but it can only be regarded as backtracking in an impossible situation. As others have pointed out, often in direct reply to Frankfurt, Descartes' "metaphysical" doubt concerns exactly the problem of whether or not clear and distinct ideas do in fact correspond to their objects. Bernard Williams is particularly succinct on this point: "What appears false to God, God being omniscient, is false, so this possibility would mean that God was, radically, a deceiver. The reference to 'absolute falsehood', in this sense, is not to be taken seriously" (Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry [Humanities Press, 1978], 200). Also see A. Gewirth, "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered" Journal of Philosophy 67 no. 19, Oct. 8, 1970, 676-6, 677-8; E. Curley, Descartes Against the Sceptics (op. cit.), 110; and the text quoted in note 81 below.

CB [34] 23.
Replies I (PWD ii, 75-6; AT vii, 103-6).

Meditations III and V, Replies I (PWD ii, 26, 29-32, 47, 83-5; AT vii, 36-8, 43-7, 68, 116-9); to Mersenne, 16 June 1641 (K, 104).

To Mersenne, 16 June 1641 (K, 104). Cf. Meditation V (PWD ii, 47; AT vii, 68), Principle XV (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 198; AT viiia, 10).

There are passages indicating that all innate ideas represent eternal essences, such as Meditation V (PWD ii, 44-5, 47; AT vii, 54, 68), Postulate 4 of the "Arguments . . . Arranged in Geometrical Fashion" (PWD ii, 115; AT vii, 163), Principle XIV (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 198; AT viiia, 10) and there are passages stating that such ideas have "no existence outside our thought", such as Principle XLVIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 208; AT viiiia, 22-3); CB [52] (34); cf. Principle XLIX and LVIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 209, 212; AT viiiia, 23, 27); and "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet" (PWD i, 303; AT viiib, 358). It is perhaps plausible to hold that there are essences or entia corresponding to mathematical truths, so that such knowledge is objective; but it is much less plausible to hold that there is an ens corresponding to any of the causal principles Descartes mentions.

One can only wish that Descartes had answered Gassendi's question concerning the whereabouts of Plato's essence, now that he is deceased (Objections V [PWD ii, 225; AT viii, 324]).

Replies V and VI (PWD ii, 261, 293-4; AT vii, 380, 432-3), Principle XXII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 200; AT viiiia, 13), CB [33] (22), to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641 (K, 116).

Principle XXIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 201; AT viiiia, 14).

Replies V (PWD ii, 261, 262; AT vii, 380, 381-2), to Mersenne 16, June 1641 (K, 104).

Principle XXVIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 202; AT viiiia, 15-6), to Elizabeth, 6 Oct. 1645 (K, 180).

Descartes himself makes the distinction between the content and the semantical aspect of ideas. See the Preface to the Reader and Meditation II (PWD ii, 7, 26, 27, 28, 29; AT vii, 8, 38, 39, 41, 42).

Cf. Meditation III (PWD ii, 26; AT viiia, 38). It is worth noting that in the case of material objects, these causes are occasioning causes (see "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet", PWD i, 304; AT viiib, 359).

Meditation III (PWD ii, 29; AT vii, 42), to Mersenne, March 1642; to Regius, June 1642 (K, 132, 133-4 respectively).

For a helpful discussion of Descartes' theory of ideas see Vere Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas" in Rorty (op. cit.), 177-98.

Cf. note 52 above.

To Elizabeth, 6 Oct. 1645 (K, 180), Principle XXIV, XXVIII, and LI (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 201, 202, 210; AT viiiia, 14, 15-16, 24).
Divine voluntarism is not explicitly announced in the Meditations, but Descartes' "metaphysical doubt" rests on this doctrine, as does the Cartesian priority of metaphysical over mathematical knowledge. (See the Preface to the Reader and Meditation V [PWD ii, 11, 48, 49; AT vii, 15, 69-70, 71].) He is quite explicit about this elsewhere. See Replies V and VI (PWD ii, 261, 293-4; AT vii, 380, 435-6) and the following note.

On Descartes' mathematical doubts, see Meditation I (PWD ii, 14; AT vii, 21). Also see Replies V and VI (PWD ii, 261, 293-4; AT vii, 380, 435-6) and to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, 6 May 1630, 27 May 1630, 17 May 1638; to Mesland, 2 May 1644; for Arnauld, 29 July 1648; to More, 5 Feb. 1649 (K, 10-11, 13-4, 15, 55, 150-1, 236, 241 respectively). Alan Gewirth examines Descartes' representationalist account of mathematical knowledge in "The Cartesian Circle Revisited" [op. cit.], 676-7. Hide Ishiguro has argued (in "The Status of Necessity and Impossibility in Descartes" in Rorty [op. cit.], 459-72) that Descartes' views on divine creation of logical and mathematical truths needn't entail that God is capable of creating self-contradictory truths or states of affairs. While I find much merit in her discussion, her conclusion does not reflect what Descartes actually says.

George Nakhnikian charges Descartes with misologism, but in so doing ignores Descartes' representationalist account of ideas that leads him to entertain the possibility that God may have made some contradictions true. His objections to Harry Frankfurt's "Descartes' Validation of Reason" fail due to his leaving Descartes' representationalism out of account. (See "The Cartesian Circle Revisited" American Philosophical Quarterly 4 no. 3, July 1967, 251-55; esp. 254.)

Replies II (PWD ii, 107-8; AT vii, 150-2), CB [37] (25).

Cf. Meditation III (PWD ii, 25, 28-9, 32; AT vii, 36, 40-2, 47) and Replies II (PWD ii, 97; AT vii, 135).


PWD ii, 103; AT vii, 144. Cp. Principle XXIX (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 203; AT viia, 15).

See note 41 above.

See Meditations Synopsis and V (PWD ii, 9, 48; AT vii, 13, 70), Replies II (PWD ii, 102-3, 110-3; AT vii, 144, 155-9), CB [17] and [78] (12, 49), and the Preface to the Principles (PWD i, 183-4; AT viijb, 9-11). Exactly what the "analytic" method comes to is obscure, but certainly it involves adhering to the law of non-contradiction. See Edwin Curley's helpful analysis of Descartes' analytic method, "Analysis in the Meditations: The Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas" in Rorty [op. cit.], 153-76. See note 9 and p. 112 below, contra Alan Gewirth's defense of Descartes.

This sort of supercharged demon hypothesis has been hinted at in the literature, but not developed. Harry Frankfurt comes close to suggesting it in "Descartes' Validation of Reason", reprinted in Descartes, ed. Doney (New York: Anchor, 1967), 209-26, note 22. Bernard Williams is closer to it in Descartes: the Project of Pure Inquiry (op. cit.), 178.
Anthony Kenny comes closest to proposing this hypothesis in "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths" (op. cit.), 690-1.

Edwin Curley argues (Descartes Against the Skeptics [op. cit.], 121) that Descartes can and does meet the skeptical contraposition argument, but he fails to notice that the contraposition argument can be made a good deal stronger by developing the "severe" demon hypothesis that I give here. Additionally, he contends that the equipoised arguments offered by a Pyrrhonian skeptic must be equally compelling in the sense of equally inducing belief. However, I think that Sextus can consistently demur at this interpretation of the relevant equipoise. Sextus grants, of course, that nature compels him to believe many things, and he accepts those beliefs, though he does not, for that (or any other) reason think that this gives him grounds for holding those beliefs to be true. Given the special doctrines that Descartes holds concerning how humans cannot but believe what they clearly and distinctly perceive, and the fact that the reliability of human nature is cast into metaphysical doubt by the demon, Sextus could well grant that, if he had a clear and distinct idea, then he would hold the belief, while denying that he therefore would have rational grounds to believe it to be true. The relevant equipoise is that the severe demon hypothesis accounts just as well for the putative phenomena and suffices to show that Descartes' argument for the existence of God is not clearly sound.


85 D. Hume (op. cit.), Bk. I Pt. III §III (78-82).

86 Objections VI (PWD ii, 278; AT vii, 413).

87 To Clerselier concerning Objections V (PWD ii, 271; AT ixa, 206); Principle X (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 195-6; AT viiia, 8).

88 Replies VI (PWD ii, 285; AT vii, 422), to Mersenne, 16 Oct. 1639, to Elizabeth, 21 May 1643 (K, 65-6, 138-9 respectively); Cf. Principle L (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 209; AT viiia, 24).

89 Principle X (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 196; AT viiiia, 8), to Mersenne, 22 July 1641 (K, 108).

90 To Clerselier concerning Objections V (PWD ii, 271; AT ixa, 206); to Mersenne, 22 July 1641 (K, 108).

91 Cf. Meditation III: "... as far as ideas are concerned, provided they are considered solely in themselves and I do not refer them to anything else, they cannot strictly speaking be false ... the only ... thoughts where I must be on my guard against making a mistake are judgments. And the chief and most common mistake which is to be found here consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply as modes of my thought, without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me any material for error" (PWD ii, 26; AT vii 37).

It should be noted that this plight affects the putative reliability of singular clear and distinct propositions.

CB [81] 49-50. When pressed, Descartes claims that we can know the truth of the premises of his argument for the existence of God before knowing the existence of God, so long as we pay attention to those premises. See CB [6] and [81] (5-7, 49-50), Principle XIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 197; AT viii, 9-10).

The anchor of Alan Gewirth's defense of Descartes against the charge of circularity is his claim that on Descartes' account it is impossible to form a clear and distinct idea of an omnipotent being that is a deceiver. Thus it is impossible to raise a legitimate reason to doubt the argument for God's existence and veracity ("The Cartesian Circle" Philosophical Review 1 no. 4, July 1941, 388-95; "The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered" [op. cit.], 682-3, 388-92; "Descartes: Two Disputed Questions" Journal of Philosophy 68 no. 9, May 6, 1971, 292). Gewirth, like Frankfurt, Doney, and Curley after him, attempt to undo the skeptic by placing the burden of proof onto the skeptic and showing that on Descartes' grounds the skeptic is in no position to raise considered doubts about the veracity of clear and distinct ideas because even the skeptic must believe these ideas when they occur to him or her and because one cannot form a clear and distinct idea of an omnipotent deceiver. This strategy, however, greatly overplays the commitments made by a skeptic of Sextus' stripe. Sextus only uses principles of reasoning that are employed by his opponents and it suffices for his skeptical aims to show that his opponents cannot prove what they claim to be able to prove. In the case of Descartes' argument for the existence of God, it suffices to show that the argument is invalid (or, at the very least, not known to be sound) by offering an alternative account of how it is that Descartes could have the idea of God which he has, why he cannot but believe it to be true, and yet that the idea is not true. This is precisely the point of the severe demon hypothesis formulated above. (See Frankfurt, op. cit., 222, 224; Willis Doney, "Descartes' Conception of Perfect Knowledge" Journal of the History of Philosophy 8 no. 4, Oct. 1970, 399-403; and Curley, Descartes Against the Skeptics [op. cit.], 116-7). Frankfurt also follows Gewirth's point about the impossibility of clearly and distinctly perceiving the idea of an omnipotent deceiver, but also restricts his purpose to interpreting rather than evaluating Descartes' strategy (see Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen [Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970], 175, 174 respectively).

Bernard Williams suggests that the rule, "Accept as on-going beliefs just those propositions which are at any time clearly and distinctly perceived to be true", is rationally acceptable independent of the proof of God's existence because it is "a minimal structural condition of getting on at all" (op. cit., 203, 206). However, Sextus offers skepticism as a healthy way of life, the cardinal tenet of which is to relinquish "getting on" with pointless inquiry. The independent plausibility that Williams finds in this rule is, unfortunately for his defense of Descartes against the charges of circularity, precisely the issue between Descartes and his skeptical opponents, who won't find this rule independently plausible at
all. Descartes is still guilty of exactly the circularity or dogmatism that Sextus would charge him with, and the alleged independent plausibility of William's proposed rule evaporates when confronted with the severe demon hypothesis.

97 PWD ii, 31; AT vii, 45. Cf. to Hyperaspistes, Aug. 1641 (K, 114-5).

98 PWD ii, 31; AT vii, 45. Descartes obliquely allows in the third Meditation that he might be able to compound his notions of power up to infinity (PWD ii, 32-3; AT vii, 47-8), and in a letter to Hyperaspistes (Aug. 1641) he reiterates his allowing such powers of amplification in his fifth Reply (PWD ii, 255; AT vii, 370-1), but as he emphasizes to Hyperaspistes, such a power is only possible because the archetype of the endpoint of such amplification actually exists in God (K, 114-5). For a very helpful discussion of this issue, see Margaret Wilson, "Can I Be the Cause of My Idea of the World?" in Rorty (op. cit.), 339-58.

99 Meditation III (PWD ii, 32; AT vii, 46-7).

100 Meditation III (PWD ii, 33-4; AT vii, 49). Cf. Principle XXI (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 200; AT viiia, 13) and to Mesland, 2 May 1642 (K, 147).


102 To Gibieuf, 19 Jan. 1642 (K, 124).

103 A. Baier, "The Idea of the True God in Descartes" in Rorty (op. cit.), 359-88, 363-64. Her suggestion supplements what Descartes claims on behalf of causal principles, but it fits Descartes' method so well that I concur with her suggestion completely.

The main point of her essay is to propound and defend an extraordinary and fascinating interpretation of Meditation III according to which Descartes himself is an idea of God, and Descartes' idea of himself is an idea of his being an idea of God. On her reconstruction, Descartes' argument for the existence of God is circular, but because it is a "bootstrapping" argument, the circle is virtuous. There are, however, some decisive internal difficulties facing her reconstruction. If Descartes is an idea of God, then he is a mode of a divine thinking substance—all ideas being modes of thinking substances, according to Descartes. Two points follow: Descartes' being a mode of the divine substance would render impossible Baier's account of how Descartes can extract a substance/mode metaphysics from the cogito, and it would prove that the crucial causal principle was false! On the first point, Descartes could not extract a substance/mode metaphysics from the cogito (384), since he himself according to Baier is a mode and his ideas are thus accidents. On her view, then, Descartes has no intuition of a substance and so cannot generate a substance metaphysics on that basis. On the second point, Descartes' idea of himself is an idea of himself as a thinking substance. But if in fact (according to Baier) he is a mode, then his idea of himself represents him as having more reality than he actually, formally has. Thus the causal principle would be false. Also, her account of how Descartes could count as an idea in a broad sense confuses material and objective senses of "idea" (369).
Meditation V (PWD ii, 47-8; AT vii, 69, 70), Replies II and IV (PWD ii, 100, 171; AT vii, 140, 245-6), Principle XIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 197; AT vii, 9-10), CB [81] (49-50), to Regius, 24 May 1640 (K, 73-4).

PWD ii, 48; AT vii, 69.

See the quotation on pp. 97-8 above.

Meditation III (PWD ii, 48; AT vii, 70), Replies II and IV (PWD ii, 100, 171; AT vii, 140, 245-6), Principle XIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 197; AT vii, 9-10), to Regius, 24 May 1640 (K, 73-4). Harry Frankfurt has established that the central doubts in the Meditations do not concern the reliability of memory. See "Memory and the Cartesian Circle", Philosophical Review 50 no. 4, July 1941, 504-11. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis (op. cit.) corroborates this point with some careful textual exegesis in her note 37.

Replies II (PWD ii, 102-3; AT vii, 143-4). Arnauld and Gassendi point out this circularity (Objections IV and V (PWD ii, 150, 194-5; AT vii, 214, 279). Descartes responds by referring to his discussion of memory in Replies II, §3 and §4 (Replies IV and the Letter to Clerselier concerning Objections V [PWD ii, 171, 274; AT vii 246-7, 211]); but he goes on to reiterate the circularity discussed in the same Replies IV (PWD ii, 169; AT vii, 226). The same circularity and evasion occur in conversation with Burman (CB [81], 36, 49-50) and the circularity is stated in the Preface to the Principles and in Principle XXX and XLIII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 183-4, 203, 207; AT viiia, 9-10, 16-7, 21) and in especially brief compass in the "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet" (PWD i, 306; AT viiib, 362).

Mike Marlies ("Doubt, Reason, and Cartesian Therapy" in Descartes, ed. Hooker [Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978], 89-113); and, after him, Lois Frankel (op. cit.) have made particularly plain this pedagogical aspect of the Meditations. See the Letter to Clerselier concerning Objections V, Replies V (PWD ii, 270, 241-2, 260; AT ixa, 204-5; AT vii, 348-50, 379), Principle LXXI and LXXII (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 218-20; AT viiia, 35-7]), and to Mersenne, 16 June 1641 (K, 104). Frankel grants (in conversation) that on this construal of the project of the Meditations Descartes propounds a simple—if covert—dogmatism.


W. Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism" Journal of Philosophy 72, 163-85. See 166, 168, 179.

In a very interesting essay Amelie Rorty suggests ("The Structure of Descartes' Meditations" in Rorty [op. cit.], 1-20) that charges of circularity lose their sting once the Meditations are read as meditations (2), but these charges lose their sting because Descartes' conclusions, on the meditational reading Rorty gives them, lose their force, for no attempt is made to derive realist ontological conclusions from a "phenomenological" investigation of the structure of the meditator's set of ideas. This is to leave Descartes strapped with the semantic circle discussed in §11B and also to face the same difficulties as Frankfurt's view that "ab-
solute truth" in the sense of the correspondence of ideas to reality plays no role in the Meditations (see note 57). Aryeh Kosman follows Rorty's lead in reading the Meditations as meditations and claims that "The central fact is that meditation . . . provides the [meditator] . . . with a perspective that makes the goal of unimpeachable certainty, like the doubts so earnestly entertained in its behalf, silly—worthy of our laughter and finally of our rejection . . . . Skepticism is thus disarmed not by the power of philosophical reason to defeat its arguments but by the power of philosophical meditation to restore a rational (and reasonable) faith which will reveal the unreasonableness of those arguments" ("The Naive Narrator: Meditation in Descartes' Meditations" in Rorty [op. cit.], 21-44; 29). This view of Descartes' response to skepticism is plainly at odds with Descartes' own claim to found "certain science" in the sense of knowledge that cannot be shaken by any stronger argument (cited above, note 4). Descartes is committed to refuting arguments, not dismissing them. Gary Hatfield joins in reading the Meditations as meditations, but he does not attempt to rebut the charge of circularity ("The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations Read as Cognitive Exercises" in Rorty [op. cit.], 45-80; 55 and notes 28 and 29).

113 Meditation II (PWD ii, 18; AT viii, p. 27).

114 Meditation III (PWD ii, 27; AT vii, p. 38); Replies II (PWD ii, 102-3; AT vii, 143-4).

115 Replies II; "Argumenta . . . Arranged in Geometrical Fashion", Postulates 5-7; to Clerselier concerning Objections V (PWD ii, 87, 115-6, 271; AT vii, 135, 153-4; AT ixa, 205-6, respectively); Principle L (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 209; AT viiia, 24).

116 Recall that the metaphysically loaded notion of "conservation" is presumed to be obvious (Meditation III; PWD ii, 33; AT viii, 49). Cf. Principle XX and XLIX (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 199-200, 209; AT viiiia, 12, 23-24); and to Reneri for Pollot, April 1638 (K, 54).

117 Meditation II (PWD ii, 24; AT vii, 35); quoted on p. 97 above.

118 Descartes seems to notice the very important reflexive character of the cogito, but to classify it with other clear and distinct perceptions anyway. See Meditation II (PWD ii, 116-7; AT vii, 25) and Principles XI and XLIX (Principles Pt. I; PWD i, 196, 209; AT viiia, 9, 23-4). If Descartes' argument for the reliability of clear and distinct ideas is construed on a mathematical model, where what holds good of one idea—provided that it does not hold of it in virtue of any of its specific differences from other ideas—holds good of all ideas, then this reflexive component marks the crucial difference between the ideas involved in the cogito and all other of Descartes' ideas.

119 In partial defense of the "radical dissimulation" hypothesis, Louis Loeb attempts to extract a substantive Cartesian epistemology from Descartes which does not rely on divine veracity ("Is there Radical Dissimulation in Descartes' Meditations?" in Rorty [op. cit.], 243-270; esp. 253-64. Loeb overlooks the problem I have just pointed out, namely, that Descartes' main principles and premises, the "output of one's hierarchically ordered set of cognitive faculties" (257), has little to recommend it without a divine origin. Without that origin it is arbitrary and dogmatic. I also think that Loeb seriously underestimates the role of God in
the *Principles*. The absence of radical doubt from the *Principles* can be readily explained by Descartes' claim that radical doubt should be entertained only once in a lifetime (Principle I [*Principles* Pt. I; *PWD* i, 193, *AT* viiia, 5]), a procedure he had already performed in the *Meditations*.

120 "... I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking" (Meditation II [*PWD* ii, 19; *AT* vii, 23]; cf. Meditation III [*PWD* ii, 26; *AT* vii, 37).


122 William Alston has been especially emphatic about these distinctions. See his "Varieties of Privileged Access" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7 no. 3, July, 1971, 223-41.

123 "The Cartesian Circle" (op. cit.), 387.

124 Ibid., 394.

125 See van Cleve (op. cit.), 60-1.

126 "The Cartesian Circle", 373. What this points out is that Descartes did no better than the Stoics in trying to unite an idea's being absolutely reliable and its being manifestly reliable (see note 22 above).

127 "In studying logic, you hope to correct your present ideas of what reasoning is good, what bad. This, of course, must be done by reasoning ... Some writers fancy that they see some absurdity in this. ... They say it would be a 'petitio principii' ... . Let us rather state the case thus. At present you are in possession of a *logica utens* which seems to be unsatisfactory. The question is whether, using this unsatisfactory *logica utens*, you can make out wherein it must be modified, and can attain to a better system. This is a truer way of stating the question; and so stated, it appears to present no such insuperable difficulty, as is pretended." C.S. Peirce, *Elements of Logic*, Chapter 3, ¶191 (*Collected Papers*. Eds. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931], Vol. 2, 111).

128 To Elizabeth, 21 May 1643 (K, 138).

129 See Ishiguro (op. cit.), 465.