

## 16. GOD AND DESCARTES' PRINCIPLE OF CLEAR AND DISTINCT KNOWLEDGE

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**ABSTRACT.** In the present study of Descartes' epistemological investigations, I have tried to show that his renowned principle of clarity and distinctness is not, in fact, one but two axioms. Most interpreters and critics have taken the two formulations of such a principle here considered as successive moments of it. At best, this position is insufficient, for each "version" of the principle of clarity and distinctness guarantees different kinds of cognitive content. Moreover, while the validity of one "version" is not dependent on the thesis of God's veracity, no such thing can be asserted of the validity of the other. These two formulations of the principle of clarity and distinctness are: 1. Whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true; 2. whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly as belonging to the nature of something can indeed be predicated of the thing in question. The first formula corresponds to what I have characterized as "presentative" knowledge; the second one expresses the guarantee of "representative" knowledge. This distinction is all-important for solving the question of whether Descartes' proofs of God's existence and veracity—both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* proofs that we find in the Cartesian *corpus*—are circular. On the basis of such a distinction, it is possible to argue that at least the ontological argument—and possibly as well the proof "par les effets"—is not at all dependent on the principle of clarity and distinctness, which in turn draws its ultimate validity from God's faithfulness. In other words, as suggested above, only the second "version" needs to be guaranteed by God's veracity. On the other hand, the first "version" has no normative value, for it merely describes what is the case whenever a clear and distinct cognition occurs. An example of this is our knowledge of God as the most perfect being.

**T**he Cartesian principle of clear and distinct knowledge underwent various formulations. In my opinion, each successive version of the principle seems to respond both to a refinement in Descartes' thought and to the explicit demands imposed upon it by the context in which we find it.<sup>1</sup> This is especially apparent when we examine the different expressions of the principle from a specific point of view, name-

ly, in relation to Descartes' exposition of his discovery of the *cogito* and of the problem of divine veracity. It can be argued that once he radicalizes his methodic doubt, he ought to renounce his previous unanalyzed position. Indeed, having rendered the "I think" explicit, he may no longer assume that the clarity of the perception—as experienced by the ego—is *simpliciter* a sufficient guarantee for the abiding truth of the content which is thereby made present. Consequently, Descartes embarks in a series of investigations that lead him to the problem of the existence of God and of his relation to knowledge. As we shall soon see, much can be gained from taking a closer look at such investigations.

## I

We find the first explicit formulation of the principle in question in the *Discours de la Méthode*. It reads as follows: "les choses que nous concevons fort clairement et fort distinctement sont toutes vraies".<sup>2</sup> This statement is taken to be "une règle générale"<sup>3</sup> by Descartes. Such a rule, however, is very different from any other previously considered, and this is due to both its positive sense and its epistemological value.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it may be given expression in this fashion only after the indubitability of the *cogito* has been established, as Descartes himself makes clear. According to him, this rule may be enunciated the moment one realizes that

... there is nothing in all this, [i.e., in the formula] *I think, therefore I am*, to assure me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly that, in order to think, one must be.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to bear in mind that, in the present context, Descartes views the principle of clear and distinct knowledge as a result of his investigations into the requirements a proposition must meet "pour être vraie et certaine".<sup>6</sup> In other words, Descartes wants to know the grounds on the basis of which one can move from the proposition "je pense, donc je suis" to the judgment that the statement "je pense, donc je suis" is true. In his attempt to identify and clarify such grounds, he is able to establish that the content of the *cogito*, namely, the relation between thought and being, indeed is clearly and distinctly perceived. This, furthermore, is for him a sufficient reason to state universally that whatever is perceived with the same clarity is necessarily true.<sup>7</sup> At first glance, however, Descartes' manner of validating his "general rule" here does not seem at all satisfactory.

Let us explore the matter. Descartes' own wording could be misleading, for it may suggest that reasoning is involved in our apprehension of the relation between thought and being, but neither this relation nor the proposition that expresses it is for him possible apart from the experience of the *cogito*. This experience has two aspects: 1. it is an encounter with the reality of thought as something that is presently manifest to me, and 2. it is also a consciousness of the unity given in the subject who says "I think". Furthermore, both aspects result from the performance of the methodic doubt. In other words, what allows for the proposition "je pense, donc je suis" is the fact that we cannot attain knowledge of thought without the experience of its reality as made manifest to a self-conscious subject. This experience alone resists the Cartesian

doubt, and it thus constitutes a first step in Descartes' attempt to establish a chain of indubitable truths.

At this point, it would not be ill-advised to take a look at the justification of the universality of Descartes' "general rule". It is true that Descartes prefers to speak of the proposition "je pense, donc je suis", rather than of the experience of the *cogito*. The reason for this is obvious: one cannot speak of an experience as true or false; within the tradition familiar to Descartes, truth and falsity can only be predicated of a proposition. Descartes is then concerned with determining the reasons that assure us of the truth of the proposition in question. To that end, he must confront the matter or content of this proposition, which is what appears as indubitable in this case. And such a content is no other than the unity of thought and being. This relation, however, is given to him here not as the result of a syllogism, but immediately. The discovery of the certainty afforded by this immediacy is that to which Descartes seeks to give expression in his "règle générale". One is indeed permitted to say that the proposition "je pense, donc je suis" is true, only because it renders manifest an underlying fact which is necessary.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the object we clearly and distinctly perceive by means of the *cogito* is a necessary relation.

To understand this point sufficiently, we must now dwell on the experience of the *cogito*. As Descartes tries to overcome his self-imposed methodic doubt, he finds something the evidence of which is stronger than his will to doubt. This is truly a first experience of certain knowledge. Accordingly, it becomes essential for Descartes to be able successfully to analyze such an experience. As he proceeds with his examination, he is incapable of finding anything which would account for this kind of evidence, except the clarity and distinctness of the perception involved and, correspondingly, the immediately given content, which in this case is the necessary relation between thought and being.

That a cognition may be clear but not distinct<sup>9</sup> can be gathered by examining the case of sensation. Let us first recall Descartes' ostensive definitions that are relevant here. He says that a perception is *clear* "which is present and manifest to an attentive mind",<sup>10</sup> and that *distinct* "which is so precise and different from all others that it does not comprise within itself anything but that which evidently appears to someone who regards it properly".<sup>11</sup> In a sensation, lack of distinctness would result from the incompleteness of what is grasped, inasmuch as the object sensed would not be differentiated by being opposed to other such objects.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, we would have a distinct perception whenever there are no obscure elements in the object as present to the mind, i.e., if and when the totality of the object is given in perception without admixture of confusion. In other words, distinctness implies clarity.

But Descartes is not ultimately concerned with sensation. The question he must answer refers to our awareness of having truly distinct cognitions. In fact, he feels entitled to claim that at least he has had one such cognition, namely, the *cogito*. In his view, what justifies this conviction is the experienced connection between indubitability and perceived necessity in the case of the *cogito*, indubitability being a subjective feature and necessity the correlative objective factor. And yet we are not to say that either grounds the other. This notwithstanding, Descartes seems confident

that experienced indubitability is the required warrant for the validity of our perception of a necessary relation, inasmuch as the latter cannot occur in the absence of the former. At least this much is the lesson he learns from the *cogito* in his search after a rule that would allow him unerringly to recognize any possible instance of genuine knowledge.

Now, the necessary relation given in the *cogito* is that which constitutes the unity of thought and being, whereby it is possible to assert that thought cannot be without being. This connection is primarily an existential fact, that is to say, one which is experienced in the *cogito*. Holding this position does not however impede our formulation of the fact in propositional terms, as Descartes will certainly do later. Moreover, this understanding of the *cogito* does not imply that it is the paradigm after which any possible content of thought would have to be modeled, if it is to be perceived clearly and distinctly. It is, however, a *prime example* of the evidential force involved in a truly distinct cognition. Accordingly, it is the foundation of the proof which would establish that it is possible to have cognitions in which our experience of indubitability would be sufficient to recognize necessity, that is to say, to grasp the content of a perception in which the constitutive elements could not be given except as they are manifestly related in the perception. In other words, indubitability (or the subjective aspect of a clear and distinct perception) is the other face of the objective necessity immediately apparent to an attentive mind.

On the basis of this interpretation, it is now possible to reformulate the principle of clear and distinct knowledge as follows: "any necessary relation perceived with clarity and distinctness is to be accepted", or "a necessary relation cannot be perceived otherwise than it is actually perceived at any given moment", or "a necessary relation is just as it is perceived, if it is clearly and distinctly perceived". Even though Descartes has never used any of these expressions, it is not difficult to see that a tacit understanding of the principle—precisely as recast just now—is indeed at work in his epistemological application of the discover of the *cogito*.

Now then, Descartes' search for a guarantee that may permit him to expand the scope of employment of his general rule is precisely one concerned with the immediate consequences following upon this understanding of the principle. In fact, it is just such an understanding which legitimates his going beyond the level of the mere description of the content as presented. According to the warrants of the general rule, the judgment of truth must never encompass anything which transcends the evidence afforded us by the clear and distinct perception of a given content. In fact, this would require *in some cases* that any statement regarding the truth of the content in question be limited on its holding at the time of the occurrence of the perception. According to Descartes, this proviso would even apply in the case of the perception of the actual unity of thought and being, that is to say, to the content of the *cogito*.<sup>13</sup> This limited guarantee, however, does not seem fit to satisfy Descartes' dream of a universal science, especially if a science of Nature is at stake.<sup>14</sup>

And yet this is not to say that nothing has been gained at this stage of the inquiry. First, it is now evident that the subject of predication is, in any proposition in necessary matter, just the connection responsible for the experienced unity of the el-

ements of the proposition. Secondly, even at this point, it is possible to establish the objectivity of a given content without having to go beyond its actual presentation. Let us call *presentative* any instance of knowledge which is covered by this basic sense or interpretation of experience. Accordingly, the clarity and distinctness of a presentation are a sufficient guarantee of the objectivity of its content, if only at the time of the occurrence of the perception. It is therefore possible to avoid error by keeping within the boundaries of what is clearly and distinctly perceived, and in this manner we are not forced to renounce any true dimension of a given content.

Several of Descartes' own statements would indeed seem to support the view that there is a "presentative" concept of knowledge at work in his epistemological investigations. He contends, for instance, that any distinct perception is valid for as long as it is actually taking place.<sup>15</sup> He points out as well that, once the clarity and distinctness of the perception is discovered as the source of the certainty which accompanies the *cogito*, all that is needed in order to attain other certainties is that we be able to differentiate the truly distinct perception from those which are less clear.<sup>16</sup> One way of doing this consists in distinguishing between immediate knowledge and knowledge which makes use of memory. In fact, Descartes avails himself of this procedure.<sup>17</sup>

On the basis of the present understanding of the *initial* guarantee the *cogito* provides us, we may well be able to overcome any accusation of circularity that could be leveled against his arguments designed to prove the existence of God.<sup>18</sup> In my opinion, a "presentative" interpretation of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, as discussed so far, makes it possible to show that the Cartesian version of the ontological argument is self-contained.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Descartes' comparison between this proof and some mathematical knowledge places the ontological argument within the scope of immediate cognition,<sup>20</sup> while, as we shall see later, Descartes limits the need for God's veracity to the sphere of mediate knowledge.

Nonetheless, we can find texts in which Descartes seems to deny the self-sufficiency of the principle as understood here. He writes, for example, that

... that which I have just taken as a rule, that is to say, that all things we very clearly and distinctly conceive of are true, is certain only because God is or exists, and that He is a perfect Being, and that all that is in us issues from Him.<sup>21</sup>

And to this he adds:

But if we did not know that all that is in us of reality and truth proceeds from a perfect and infinite being, however clear and distinct were our ideas, we should not have any reason to assure ourselves that they had the perfection of being true.<sup>22</sup>

Does this then mean that the principle itself is in need of a divine guarantee? Is Descartes' ontological argument indeed circular? Let us now turn to the consideration of a possible resolution to this problem.

## II

The class of entities referred to as "simple natures" in the *Regulae*<sup>23</sup> seems to encompass what Descartes later classifies as "innate ideas".<sup>24</sup> Some of the *naturae simplices* are true conditions of thought, and as such, they constitute what Descartes calls the *lumen naturale*.<sup>25</sup> Among innate ideas, we also find mathematical concepts. Along with the logical principles and the like, such notions fall within the scope of the methodic doubt once it is radicalized by means of the hypothesis of the malignant demon.<sup>26</sup> All of these, however, do acquire some measure of certitude as soon as the *cogito* is affirmed, at least as objects of consciousness. Moreover, both logical truths and some mathematical knowledge can be guaranteed, so far as their objectivity is concerned, by means of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, provided we interpret the latter in terms of the "presentative" concept of truth, as we did before.<sup>27</sup> Yet even such validated contents of thought are not sufficient to overcome the condition of solipsism imposed upon us by the *cogito*.

Innate ideas exhibit certain characteristics that allow for their classification.<sup>28</sup> Alongside the various ideas exhibiting such characteristics, Descartes finds the idea of an all-powerful God.<sup>29</sup> This idea must not be confused with that of the malignant demon.<sup>30</sup> While the latter is known to be a hypothesis, a "fiction de mon esprit", the former is discovered as a well established member of the stock of ideas I can call mine, or as a part of my mental make-up as it were. Furthermore, this all-powerful God is also taken to be all-perfect. A being of this kind cannot possibly be a deceiver, for the concepts of perfection and deception are mutually exclusive.<sup>31</sup> But even if God were to be just as described, a question would still have to be answered: does such a God in fact exist? This is important, for, apart from the idea of myself, no other innate idea points to a being possibly endowed with actual existence.

In Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, we find several arguments in favor of the existence of God. There he says:

**P.XIV:** That the existence of God may be rightly demonstrated from the fact that the necessity of His existence is comprehended in the conception which we have of Him.

**P.XVII:** That the more objective perfection there is in our ideas, the more should its cause also be more perfect.

**P.XVIII:** That we may thus demonstrate that there is a God.

**P.XX:** That we are not the cause of ourselves, but that God is, and that consequently there is a God.

**P.XXI:** That the mere duration of our lives suffices to prove the existence of God.<sup>32</sup>

Descartes offers here four different proofs of the existence of God which appear, at first glance, to be independent of one another. Yet the order followed in their presentation within the present context of inquiry is not at all arbitrary.<sup>33</sup>

The first proof found in the *Principles* points to the fact that the content of the idea of God includes necessary existence. The mind must admit that in the concept of an absolutely perfect being the notion of existence is present. If one were to think of this being as non-existent, one would incur contradiction. This argument is implied in the comparison between the idea of God and the idea of a triangle, which Descartes discusses in the *Meditations*.<sup>34</sup> In the *Principles* he writes: "... necessary existence is not similarly included in the notion we have of other things".<sup>35</sup> This makes the idea of God unique in a very important sense. In considering the possible origin of "adventitious ideas", Descartes points out in the *Discours* that, since none of them point to something superior to me, nothing prevents me from thinking that I might be their source.<sup>36</sup> The idea of God, therefore, is unique in two respects: not only is existence a necessary element of it, but also the objective reality (i.e., the content) of this idea refers us to a being that is intrinsically superior to the human mind. Thus one can predicate the following of the object of the idea of God: 1. it is self-justified, for it involves necessary existence; 2. it cannot be a mere product of the mind, for, being superior to any contingent and finite thinker, it cannot be grounded in the human mind.

The uniqueness of the content of the idea of God leads to the privileged position of its object in relation to the knower, and this, in turn, points to the need for an equally superior cause, responsible for the formation of such an idea in the mind. Judging by the order of exposition, it seems to me that Descartes is not merely appealing to the traditional principle of causality, since what he seeks to find is the ultimate ground for the content of the idea. "Cause", in Principle XVII, does not refer only to the source of the being of the idea, but also to its logical and epistemological justification. Principles XIV to XVIII, therefore, must be viewed as interdependent for the total weight of these proofs.

It is important to recognize the two moments these proofs involve, as well as their interconnectedness. It is evident that one is to begin with the content of the idea of God precisely as one among the clear and distinct perceptions of the mind. Moreover, it is manifest that Descartes feels entitled to take this perception as a ground sufficient to draw several conclusions, namely, those which would follow from the analysis of the content of the idea of God and of its relation to the knowing mind. In other words, the idea of an all-perfect being presents us with the concept of necessary existence, so far as necessary existence and perfection are given to us as intrinsically bound to each other in the objective reality of this idea. Moreover, the objectivity of the relation of perfection to existence may be said to belong in the same kind with that holding between thought and being (in the case of the *cogito*). In both instances, the clarity of the perception is such that it justifies our assent to its content. Once the objectivity of this mental content is established (i.e., once he realizes it presents us with a valid relation), Descartes assesses it for what it is in itself and finds it to be *sui generis*, for it shows itself to be the only one for which the mind alone cannot account.

Now then, even though this second proof is indeed distinguishable from the first one, it is nevertheless impossible without it.

Principles XX and XXI deal with the condition of dependence in which I find myself, for I know myself not to be self-caused. If I were, maintains Descartes, I would give myself all perfections of which I have knowledge.<sup>37</sup> Even my existing at every moment throughout the duration of my life needs to be explained by a cause superior to me. Here Descartes seemingly abandons the realm of ideas and moves into the realm of being. Yet these arguments cannot be seen as divorced from the knowledge obtained in the *cogito* and by means of our clear and distinct perception of the idea of God. In this sense, they are no different from Principle XVII. The latter, moreover, prepares the way for the required transition. In other words, Principle XVII is concerned with the actuality in consciousness of an idea that points beyond finite consciousness. In this manner, the being of the idea of God is found to exhibit a double relation, namely, to the knower (whose existence is a recognized fact) and to an object (whose extra-mental existence seems to demand recognition *de jure*). If we follow these clues, it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that Descartes is here looking for a way to establish the actual existence of a perfect being, and that he aims to do so only within the realm where existence can be ascertained, i.e., within the scope of the knowledge afforded by the *cogito*. Does this mean that the ontological argument is not really regarded as self-sufficient by Descartes? Even if this were the case, as was already pointed out, the step he takes in Principle XVII cannot be divorced from our giving assent to the objectivity of the content of the idea of God, at least subject to the limitations of a "presentative" concept of truth. Hence, we have to ask once again whether it is valid to invoke here such an interpretation of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge.

### III

Let us recall at this point what is meant by the "presentative" understanding of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge. It signifies that the Cartesian principle is to be taken as the universalization of what we find whenever the clear and distinct perception of a mental content takes place. In other words, Descartes' formula makes explicit, first and foremost, that there is a correspondence between the clarity and distinctness of a perception and the apprehension of a necessary relation. If one regards the *cogito* in the light of this principle, one soon discovers that—despite the primacy of the *cogito*—neither is the principle in any way grounded in the *cogito* nor is it the source of the validation of such an experience. The *cogito* is only one instance, an illustration of indubitable knowledge. To be sure, the *cogito* occupies a privileged position in the chain of truths that Descartes aims at determining, and yet it nonetheless remains, however decisive it may be otherwise, a *de facto* truth. The *cogito* cannot ground the validity of the principle, even though the latter can be discovered only after we experience the evidence that establishes the thinking ego as capable of resisting the methodic doubt. Indeed, the privileged position of the *cogito* arises only to the extent that it is the basic experiential instance in which to recognize necessary truth.



As was pointed out before,<sup>38</sup> the necessary union of essence and existence disclosed by the analysis of the idea of perfect being affords the same kind of evidence as the *cogito*. With this idea we have another example of immediate, self-evident knowledge, which for Descartes is the genuine form of knowledge. Accordingly, in regard to a perfect being, the positing of an essence, the non-existence of which is unthinkable, is no more dependent on any principle than the *certainty* of the *cogito* is. As a result of the examination of these two prime examples of indubitable knowledge, one can safely say that the principle of clear and distinct knowledge is not to be viewed as the instrument to validate certain cognitions. Rather, it is a rule or norm of thought (after the standard discovered and exemplified in the *cogito*) which merely reassures the knower of the possibility of attaining self-evident knowledge, whenever the object of our perception meets the requirement of being presented with clarity and distinctness. And this is so whenever our perceptions grasp a necessary relation (as is the case with innate ideas, e.g., some mathematical entities).

This is insufficient for Descartes' purposes, however, since the evidence afforded by a clear and distinct perception is only valid, as we know, for as long as the actual perception is occurring. In the case of my existence, for example, it is enough that I perceive it in the *cogito* as a reality verified at this or any subsequent moment of my conscious life. Yet, in the case of God's existence, the perception of necessity seems to guarantee for us His enduring through time. Or to put it differently: even though only the actual perception of this idea can give me the certainty of the eternal being of God, it is nevertheless enough that I actualize such a thought once in order to perceive that the necessity of God's existence implies eternity. But one may wonder what the case is when mathematical truths as well as logical and ethical principles are involved, and even when the laws of physics are under consideration, especially if they are viewed as applicable to Nature. What is in question is the availability of evidence which would guarantee that the necessity perceived in the past would still hold at a later time, if the only indication at our disposal at that point is merely the memory of having perceived the necessary being or relation in question.<sup>39</sup> Meeting these difficulties is essential for a possible development of a deductive science as it may be cultivated by a fallible, finite mind.<sup>40</sup> But the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, when understood in a "presentative" manner, seems to be unequal to the task of establishing the validity of any cognitive content beyond the actual moment in which it is present to the mind,<sup>41</sup> thus calling in question the viability of any such deductive science.

We must not say, however, that this amounts to a nullification of the value of a present certainty, as some authors seem to believe.<sup>42</sup> It is rather a matter involving a subtle and important distinction, namely, that which holds between the present apprehension of a content and other possible apprehensions of the same content, whether past or future. On this basis, one is entitled to ask whether one can rest assured that what one now apprehends as being the case will not be denied by other non-contemporaneous apprehensions of the same state of affairs. And yet this question is not equivalent to that of the rejection of present knowledge. On the contrary, that which is given as necessary in actual evidence must be recognized as a valid and lasting acquisition.

In my opinion, it is in the context determined by this problem that the following formulation of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge is best understood. We find it in Descartes' responses to the second set of objections raised against his *Meditations*. There he says:

. . . that which we clearly [and distinctly] understand [conceive] to belong to the nature of anything can truly be affirmed of that thing.<sup>43</sup>

It seems to me that what we read here is not a mere re-formulation of the principle as encountered by us before. This version seems to employ a concept of knowledge that differs from the one implied in those early statements. Descartes is no longer just saying that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true, for he introduces here a distinction between our knowledge of something and our knowledge of the essence of something. Such a distinction seems to be based on the notion that we may have mediate knowledge of the essence of something. In that case, no matter how accurate our judgment would be, it would still depend on a presentation of something other than the thing judged about.

According to the formula under consideration, the principle no longer consists in expressing the correspondence between a clear and distinct perception and the knowledge of necessity. The role which it is now destined to play is much more ambitious, for it is meant, as such, to serve as a link between the content of an idea and something that by definition lies outside the mind. It asserts that clear and distinct knowledge is valuable, because it allows us to predicate what is clearly and distinctly perceived of a reality that is not part of the content of the idea, except insofar as the idea seems to make reference to it. The principle now states that a given essence—which is known in this fashion—truly belongs to a "thing" of a certain sort.

The principle here works as an instrument of synthesis, for it brings reality and thought immediately together in a context in which reality is considered to be other than thought. But it is not at all obvious that there is a correspondence between the ideas and the objects represented by the ideas, if such objects have to meet the twofold requirement of being referred to by the ideas and yet having to lie beyond them. A guarantee is indeed needed at this point, while no such guarantee seemed to be required by the initial formulation of the principle. The original "presentative" concept of knowledge (as illustrated by the truth of the *cogito*) is now being replaced by a "representative" understanding, and yet the latter is not altogether independent of the former. In fact, this *new* version of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge is unintelligible apart from and prior to our cognition of the existence of a truthful God, a finding which is possible only under the "presentative" content of truth.

#### IV

A clue to the function assigned by Descartes to the principle of clear and distinct knowledge and to its position in relation to the idea of God may be found by paying attention to Descartes' own discussion of the matter. And yet the indication needed may not be so easy to find, since we are faced with two apparently conflicting

orders of presentation in the major works in which he deals with these problems, namely, the *Meditations* and the *Principles*.<sup>44</sup>

In the *Meditations*, the order is as follows: 1. the discovery of the *cogito*;<sup>45</sup> 2. the "presentative" version of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge;<sup>46</sup> 3. the *a posteriori* proof of the existence of God (which is based on the application of the principle of causality to the idea of perfect being);<sup>47</sup> 4. an examination of the origin of error;<sup>48</sup> 5. the "representative" formulation of the principle of clarity and distinctness (as guaranteed by God's veracity);<sup>49</sup> 6. the *a priori* proof of God's existence (or the ontological argument, which is based solely on the notes discovered as belonging to the idea of perfect being),<sup>50</sup> and 7. the recovery of outer reality by the evaluation of the sense data at our disposal.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Principles*, Descartes also begins with the *cogito*<sup>52</sup> and, on that basis, he proceeds to make certain distinctions (e.g., between body and mind), which imply the application of the "presentative" concept of truth.<sup>53</sup> Afterwards, he establishes the need for a knowledge of God's veracity and existence as the only possible means to overcome the universal doubt, motivated now by the uncertainty characteristic of any knowledge that is merely remembered.<sup>54</sup> This is followed by the development of the *a priori* proof of God's existence,<sup>55</sup> and, only later, by that of the *a posteriori* proof.<sup>56</sup> Once Descartes has accomplished this, he proceeds to discuss God's nature in an extended fashion, and on this basis he is able to conclude that God cannot be the cause of error.<sup>57</sup> Finally, Descartes contends that "tout cela est vrai que nous connaissons clairement être vrai"<sup>58</sup> and that, therefore, it is legitimate to validate judgments on such grounds.<sup>59</sup>

The difference between the two renderings cannot be taken lightly. It is true that in the *Meditations* Descartes is following what he calls the *analytic* order of exposition, while in the *Principles* he abides by the *synthetic* order.<sup>60</sup> Yet I do not think that the difference can be accounted for by arguing that it is the mere expression of the dissimilarity existing between two equally valuable modes of presentation. In the *Meditations*, the *a posteriori* proof is organically bound to the *cogito*. In this light, it is easy to see that the idea of God is not just one among many contents readily available to me once my attention turns inwards; rather, the idea of God is closely linked to the idea I have of myself *qua* finite being.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it is to be expected that in the order of discovery (i.e., in the analytic order) we are first to encounter God as the formal cause of our idea of perfect being. In the *Principles*, however, this proof of God's existence appears independently of the *cogito*.<sup>62</sup>

The *a posteriori* proof is presented by Descartes in the *Meditations* as follows:

... from this alone, that I exist and that the idea of an all-sovereign being (i.e., God) is in me, God's existence is evidently demonstrated.<sup>63</sup>

Here the argument is clearly that I cannot be the cause either of my being or of the idea of God in me, since I recognize myself as imperfect. Moreover, the idea of perfection is what allows me to recognize imperfection in me. In a systematic order of

discoveries proceeding from the *cogito*, therefore, the *a posteriori* proof must of necessity precede the *a priori* proof. This does not mean, however, as Gueroult would have us believe, that the latter depends for its validity on the former.<sup>64</sup>

We are now in a position better to appreciate the value of the order that Descartes follows in the *Principles*. To begin with, it confirms the *cogito* as the absolute beginning and cornerstone of the Cartesian method. In this work, the *cogito* is soon shown to be the sufficient ground for the derivation of valuable consequences regarding the nature of the mind, since a discussion of the distinction between body and mind follows there immediately after the discovery of the evidence of the *cogito*.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the need for God's veracity is clearly established on the basis of a doubt that concerns only truths that are merely remembered.<sup>66</sup> The text renders explicit the fact that we are in need of being assured that whatever is known clearly and distinctly at any given time continues to be valid, even in the case that the actual experience of indubitability is absent. On this basis, it is easier to understand *in what sense* is our faculty of judgment to be safeguarded from error whenever it is used in the right manner. This is in fact essential for the successful employment of Descartes' method.

From a Cartesian point of view, the faculty of the understanding is passive, since its function is simply that of receiving the light proper to evidential knowledge. For this no judgment is required. According to Descartes, it belongs to the will to go beyond the present evidence that is afforded by a clear perception, for the will is the power called upon to give its assent to the content of a perception. We are no longer confronted with the question of recognizing as distinct a given presentation at the moment of its occurrence; we are rather dealing with the matter of judging whether or not a relation, which has been clearly and distinctly grasped, continues to hold beyond the occasion of the experience disclosing it. Since it is in this connection that for Descartes God's faithfulness is indispensable,<sup>67</sup> he proceeds to examine the idea of God precisely at this point. It is also valuable to remember here that both the *a priori* and *a posteriori* proofs of God's existence give support to one another in the *Principles*,<sup>68</sup> that their order of presentation is the reverse of that which we find in the *Meditations*, and that they both make their appearance in that work before the principle of clear and distinct knowledge has been guaranteed by the criterion of the veracity of God. Moreover, in the *Principles*, the principle of clarity and distinctness is itself derived on the basis of the existence and veracity of God.<sup>69</sup> Descartes would indeed be guilty of circular reasoning if the principle (the guarantee of which is thus being established) were required by the proofs preceding it.

It is true that, in the *Principles*, Descartes' manner of speaking of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge reminds us of what I have characterized as the "presentative" version. Yet, as used there, the principle is directly related to judgment, namely, to that which may arise only from that which is clearly and distinctly perceived. In this context, the problem to be solved is then this: whether anyone can validly and certainly assert, for example, that "2+2=4" is true" (a judgment that expresses an enduring objective relation), and not simply to affirm that "2+2=4" (which is a proposition limited to describing what is immediately apprehended).<sup>70</sup> Clearly, Descartes' intention in the *Principles* is to present an expanded version of the principle of clarity and distinctness. Accordingly, in the formulation of the principle as it is

found in this work, the predicate "true" must refer to the subject of the proposition, which is taken as something endowed with extra-mental and permanent significance. In other words, the subject of predication is understood as being totally independent of subjective contingency in general and of the subjective contingency of my thoughts in particular. To this end, we require the "representative" understanding of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, which, as guaranteed by God's veracity, allows for the possibility of affirming the "is true" with all its consequences. This is the cognitive value that clarity has in the *Principles*, and it is ultimately this aspect of evidential knowledge which matters to Descartes and the one in need of God's veracity as a guarantee. On the other hand, since clear and distinct ideas provide the matter of our judgments,<sup>71</sup> we can, once more, rest assured that the clear and distinct ideas themselves are in no need of a guarantee, and this not only if taken as events in consciousness but as well when regarded in terms of their content and its validity.

On the basis of this interpretation, I believe it is possible now to proceed to an orderly presentation of Descartes' epistemological discoveries. What follows does not appear as such in any of Descartes' works, and yet it can be viewed as a valid compromise between the analyses of the *Meditations* and the formulations of the *Principles*. In my opinion, these are the steps that best summarize the Cartesian chain of truths:

1. The experience of the *cogito*, which permits us to establish that clear and distinct cognition entails indubitable knowledge of necessary relations;
2. The "presentative" understanding of the truth proper to clear and distinct knowledge, and the initial formulation of the principle of clarity and distinctness as an expression of the constant correspondence between clear and distinct perception and immediate, actual knowledge of necessity;
3. The validation of all immediate knowledge at the moment of actual perception;
4. The idea of God in us as that occurrence, the content of which: a. consists in being the necessary unity of essence and existence that is essential to perfect being, and b. requires a cause other than me;
5. God's existence established as an indubitable truth: ontologically, on the basis of the evidence afforded by the immediate knowledge of the necessary unity of essence and existence in the idea of perfect being; *a posteriori*, on the grounds of the principle of causality, which stands as a logical truth immediately known and according to which a cause other than the thinker is established;
6. God's veracity as a consequence of God's perfection;

7. The principle of clarity and distinctness expanded—under the guarantee of God's faithfulness—so as to allow for a synthesis between essence and existence in the case of contingent beings, as well as for the permanency of relations grasped clearly and distinctly in a past or future time.
8. The possibility and development of a science of Nature, on the grounds of the guaranteed and expanded principle of clear and distinct knowledge, which—in its "representative" version—now permits the application of mathematics to the realm of phenomena, provided that extension has been validly recognized as the essence of material being.<sup>72</sup>

One could perhaps object at this point that the *a posteriori* proof of God's existence belongs under the species of mediate knowledge. If this were the case, the proof would depend for its validity on the expanded understanding of the principle of clarity and distinctness, itself guaranteed by divine veracity. I do not think, however, that this would invalidate the *a posteriori* argument; it would merely make it dependent on the ontological proof, since the latter would then be the only source of immediate certainty regarding God's existence and veracity. Neither would "la preuve par les effets" be a futile exercise in such a case, for it would establish the relationship between God and the mind, thus reinforcing the importance of God's faithfulness in the matter of our innate ideas. Nevertheless, it seems to me that one does not have to accept the contention that the *a posteriori* proof does not stand on its own, i.e., an another instance of a self-guaranteed immediate cognition.

It is true that here we are confronted with more than one step leading us to the conclusion that God indeed exists and is at least the cause of some ideas. Yet the steps, as well as the principle of causality upon which the proof ultimately rests, all exhibit the kind of evidence that the mind can easily behold with immediately experienced certainty, and not only taking each step one at a time, but putting them together as well. In the first place, there is no genuine need for memory here. Moreover, one must admit the possibility of complex self-evident conclusions, such as the one illustrated by the *a posteriori* proof, for, otherwise, the veracity of God would be epistemologically useless. According to Descartes, all we have to do to be able validly to draw conclusions on the basis of clear and distinct cognitions is to remind ourselves that God is all perfect, and hence not a deceiver.<sup>73</sup> Yet how could this be, if we could not hold in view more than one distinct cognition at a time? In fact, all our scientific conclusions, according to the Cartesian position, must be accompanied by at least two thoughts: 1. the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, and 2. God's existence and veracity as the ultimate ground for truth. If these contents were merely remembered, we would then be faced with an additional problem in Descartes' system. It seems to me that Descartes did not feel the need to solve such a problem. From this it follows that both thoughts can be taken to be actual perceptions each time their application is required. Hence, from Descartes' standpoint, it is possible to have more than one

evident cognition at a time. In summary, neither the *a priori* proof nor the *a posteriori* proof of God's existence, as developed by Descartes, requires any other guarantee than its own clarity and distinctness. They are both examples of "presentative" knowledge, and any accusation of circularity leveled against Descartes is not warranted in either case.<sup>74</sup> □

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All references and quotations from Descartes will be taken from his *Oeuvres*, rev. ed. by C. Adams and P. Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1964). Translation from the French or Latin, when necessary, will be mine. For the various formulations of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge, cf. René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, iv, A.T. VI, 33; *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (French translation), A.T., IX-1, 117-18, and *Principia philosophiae*, I, xliii, A.T. VIII-1, 61.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. VI, 33.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Descartes' first attempt at developing a method for the attainment of knowledge is to be found in his *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*. Cf. A.T. X, 349-488.

<sup>5</sup> A.T. VI, 33: ". . . il n'y a rien de tout en ceci: *je pense, donc je suis*, qui m'assure que je dis la vérité, sinon que je vois très clairement que, pour penser, il faut être".

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 27: "Je suis certain que je suis une chose que pense; mais ne sais-je donc pas aussi ce qui est requis pour me rendre certain de quelque chose? Dans cette première connaissance, il ne se rencontre rien qu'une claire et distincte perception de ce que je connois; laquelle de vrai ne seroit pas suffisante pour m'assurer qu' elle est vraie, s'il pouvoit jamais arriver qu'une chose que je concevrois ainsi clairement et distinctement se trouvoit faussee". (Occasionally, as in this case, I take some liberty with the spelling of the original so as to update the appearance of some common words.)

<sup>8</sup> In a note that F. Alquié adds to his edition of Descartes' works, he proposes an interpretation similar to mine. Cf. *Oeuvres philosophiques de Descartes* (Paris: Garnier), I, 605, n. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Descartes, *Principia philosophiae*, i, A.T. VIII-1, 22, vv. 10 ff. and *Principes*, A.T. IX-2, 44, No. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* (*Principes*, i, No. 45).

11 *Ibid.*

12 Cf. Georges Le Roy's "Commentaire" to Leibniz, *Discours de la métaphysique et correspondance avec Arnauld* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957), art. 24, 246-47.

13 Cf. *Med.* ii, A.T. IX-1, 21.

14 Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, ed. B. Cassirer (Berlin, 1906), I, 2, iii.

15 Cf. *Med.*, "Sec. Rep.", A.T. IX-1, 117.

16 Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 27. It is then, within this context, that one must understand the need for God's veracity, which is viewed by Descartes as a guarantee of truth.

17 Cf. *Med.* v, A.T. IX-1, 55; see also his letter to Mesland, dated May 2, 1644, A.T. IV, 115-6.

18 The circularity, of course, would consist in guaranteeing, say, the validity of the ontological argument, on the basis of a principle of knowledge which is seen as being itself in need of a guarantee dependent on God's existence and veracity. Antoine Arnauld was among the first to point out this possible circle in Descartes' thought. Cf. A.T. VII, 214, vv. 8-14. For a recent discussion of this matter, see Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1970), 170 ff.

19 Cf. H. Gouhier, "La preuve ontologique de Descartes", *Revue internationale de philosophie* (Bruxelles), No. 29, 1954, fasc. 3, 1-9; see also his "La véracité divine dans la méditation V", *Les études philosophiques*, 11, 197-310. Gouhier defends the independence of the ontological argument against M. Gueroult's contentions on the matter. Cf. M. Gueroult, *Nouvelles réflexions sur la preuve ontologique* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1955).

20 Cf. *Med.* v, A.T. IX-1, 52.

21 Cf. A.T. IV, 38: ". . . cela même que j'ai tantôt pris pour une règle générale, à savoir que les choses que nous concevons très clairement et très distinctement sont toutes vraies, n'est assuré qu'à cause que Dieu est ou existe, et qu'il est un être parfait et qui tout ce qui est en nous vient de lui".

22 *Ibid.*, 39: "Mais si nous ne savions point que tout ce qui est en nous de réel et de vrai vient d'un être parfait et infini, pour claires et distinctes que fussent nos idées, nous n'aurions aucune raison qui nous assurât qu'elles eussent la perfection d'être vraies".

23 A.T. X, 381.



<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. "À Mersenne", October 16, 1639, quoted in Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, text and commentary by É. Gilson (Paris: J. Vrin, 1962), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Med.* i, A.T. IX-1, 17 and *Principes*, I,v, A.T. IX-2, 26-7; also see H. Gouhier, *Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1949), 143 ff.

<sup>27</sup> Logical truths meet two requirements that justify this: 1. their function as rules for correct thinking is self-fulfilling, for—being empty of content, i.e., entirely formal—they make no reference to any reality outside the mind; 2. their function is such that, for the most part, they are actually being perceived whenever they are used as guarantees for truthful judgments. Cf. A.T. II, 64; also see L.J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 69-70.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 29. Innate ideas appear as immutable; they are for the most part simple, and their content can be easily justified solely by the power of the understanding. Accordingly, they are not to be confused either with ideas born from our power of imagination or with those which seem to make reference to something outside the mind and appear as images of things. Cf. L.J. Beck, *The Method of Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 247-48.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 34.

<sup>30</sup> For the difference between the being of God and that of the malignant demon, see H. Gouhier, *op. cit.*, 144 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Med.* iv, A.T. IX-1, 42-3.

<sup>32</sup> A.T. IX-2, 31-4. For the English translation, see *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. Haldane and Ross (Cambridge: The University Press, 1967), I, 224-27. I will henceforth refer to this edition as H.R.

<sup>33</sup> In fact, as we shall soon see, these proofs could be shown to be interdependent in terms of the consequences that follow from the manner in which they approach God's existence. Let us remember that also Thomas Aquinas' proofs were not simply ways of demonstrating God's existence, but rather true avenues of access to various aspects of His nature and His relation to man. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, i, q.2.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Med.* v, A.T. IX-1, 52; see also *Discours*, A.T. VI, 36.

<sup>35</sup> H.R. I, 225; A.T. IX-2, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. *Discours*, A.T. VI, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 38.

38 Cf. *supra*, 289.

39 In his fine book *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, Frankfurt struggles with the validation question in the case of remembered knowledge. He rightly argues against those who maintain that the object of God's guarantee is memory itself, such as Willis Doney for one does (cf. "The Cartesian Circle", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XVI, 1955). Yet Frankfurt misses the crucial question, which the Cartesian "metaphysical doubt", to use his own expression, must answer. According to Frankfurt, the problem is "whether what is recollected . . . is sufficient to establish the conclusion [that was once before deduced with evidence]". To be sure, the absence of an immediate perception which would grasp a given content in a clear and distinct manner is a significant factor in bringing us to doubt a content corresponding to a cognition that is merely remembered. Nonetheless, Descartes is primarily concerned with determining whether one is required to guarantee the abiding value of whatever content one does perceive clearly and distinctly. Indeed, this is a metaphysical rather than a psychological matter, as Frankfurt himself would agree, and yet one affecting the content of knowledge and not necessarily the power of reason as such. (Cf. H. Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, 156-61).

40 One reason for Descartes' caution at this point is that he conceives of the mind here as a passive contemplator of ideas, the origin of which is still unknown to him. Cf. A.T. VI, 32 and 35 and IX-1, 38.

41 In connection with this problem, cf. Émile Bréhier, "La création des vérités éternelles", *Revue Philosophique* (1937), iii, 22.

42 Cf. M. Gueroult, *op. cit.*, 31 and 85. Indeed the possibility of our constantly being subject to deception is partly grounded in a psychological fact. The *malin génie* is the possibility of deception carried to its ultimate consequences. In this connection, it is important to bear in mind Frankfurt's rejection of the view that, for Descartes, what is indubitable is true. (Cf. H. Frankfurt, *op. cit.*, 163-5). As I try to establish in this paper, such a view consists of two different moments, namely, the "presentative" and the "representative" understandings of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge. (For the "representative" understanding, cf. *infra*, 292ff). If the view in question is not accepted in terms of the "presentative" understanding of the principle, then the power of reason would of course be in need of a guarantee for its continued valid employment, and the accusation of circularity against Descartes' procedure would be justified. In my opinion, however, there is sufficient evidence to believe that Descartes did not think it necessary to distrust reason at every turn, once the *cogito* is established and its experience carefully analyzed.

43 *Med.*, "Sec. Rep.", A.T. IX-1, 118: "Ce que clairement et distinctement nous concevons appartenir à la nature de quelque chose, cela peut être dit ou affirmé avec vérité de cette chose". See also *Med.* v, 52.

44 Cf. M. Gueroult, *op. cit.*, 17 ff.

45 Cf. *Med.* ii.

- 46 Cf. *Med.* iii.
- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 Cf. *Med.* iv.
- 49 *Ibid.*
- 50 Cf. *Med.* v.
- 51 Cf. *Med.* vi.
- 52 Cf. Part I, vii.
- 53 *Ibid.*, viii ff.
- 54 *Ibid.*, xiii.
- 55 *Ibid.*, xiv.
- 56 *Ibid.*, xviii.
- 57 *Ibid.*, xix and iii ff.
- 58 *Ibid.*, xxx.
- 59 After some remarks on error and freedom, the body of Descartes' philosophical system follows. Cf. *Principles*, Part II and III.
- 60 Cf. L.J. Beck, *The Method of Descartes*, 175 and M. Gueroult, *op. cit.*, 17-18.
- 61 Cf. *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 39 ff.
- 62 Cf. *supra*, 288.
- 63 *Med.* iii, A.T. IX-1, 40: ". . . de cela seul que j'existe, et que l'idée d'un être souverainement parfait (c'est-à-dire de Dieu) est en moi, l'existence de Dieu est très évidemment démontrée".
- 64 Cf. M. Gueroult, *op. cit.*, 18 ff. As we shall see later, both proofs find their ultimate justification in the evidence afforded me by the immediate knowledge I have of the content of the idea of God. Neither has to be considered epistemologically prior to the other.
- 65 Cf. *Principles* I, ix, A.T. IX-2, 28.
- 66 *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Med. iv*, A.T. IX-1, 43.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *supra*, 289.

<sup>69</sup> In fact, there is no mention in that work of the principle of clear and distinct knowledge before Principle xiii of Part I has been formulated. In other words, there is no prior need for this rule here; only in its final form can such a rule be truly functional as a cognitive principle capable of facilitating Descartes' goal.

<sup>70</sup> Descartes himself distinguished between "material truth" and "formal truth". The former is proper to distinct ideas, and the latter to judgments. (Cf. *Med. iii*, A.T. IX-1, 34-5).

<sup>71</sup> Cf. L.J. Beck, *The Metaphysics of Descartes*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *Principes* II, ix, A.T. IX-2, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *Med. v*, A.T. IX-1, 55.

<sup>74</sup> One question still remains, but my dealing with it here would interfere with the unity and purpose of this paper. It could be formulated as follows: what does God's veracity ultimately guarantee? If we agree that that which needs to be guaranteed is both the immutability of the content of clear and distinct knowledge and the application of innate ideas to the created universe, then no further investigations are required. And yet there is a passage in which Descartes seems to raise a new difficulty. As he says in his Fifth Meditation: ". . . si j'ignore qu'il y ait un Dieu, . . . je puis me persuader d'avoir être fait tel par la Nature, que je me puisse aisément tromper, même dans les choses que je crois comprendre avec le plus d'evidence et de certitude . . ." (A.T. IX-1, 55). This seems to suggest that God's guarantee is needed not only by what is apprehended, but by the manner of our apprehension as well. But perhaps this problem can be seen in its proper light, if I point out that the new source of doubt to which Descartes is referring makes its appearance only in the context of truths merely remembered. (*Ibid.*)