Clear and Distinct Perceptions and Clear and Distinct Ideas: The Cartesian Circle

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a famous criticism to Descartes' argument concerning the cogito and its relation to the arguments for the existence of God, which is traditionally referred to as the Cartesian Circle. In an attempt to provide a clear formulation of the problem itself, this article will attempt to draw a distinction between the concepts of clear and distinct perceptions and clear and distinct ideas. While clear and distinct perceptions, like the cogito, or the mathematical geometrical truths, would yield no more than a performative necessity, clear and distinct ideas, like the idea of God, imply a formal/objective necessity.

In conclusion, this paper argues that, despite Descartes does not explicitly solve the problem of the Cartesian Circle, the distinction he draws between the epistemological truth yielded by perceptions and the formal/objective truth given in ideas, clears the ground for different possible solutions which will be explored by following philosophers.

BIOGRAPHY

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CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTIONS AND CLEAR AND DISTINCT IDEAS: THE CARTESIAN CIRCLE

In his article *Memory and the Cartesian Circle*, Harry G. Frankfurt rightly remarks that the major difficulty in solving the Cartesian Circle concerns what the argument is. Different solutions to the circle are triggered by different interpretations of the argument. However, all solutions to the problem of the circle require dealing with three general issues:

1) the kind of knowledge yielded by clear and distinct perceptions
2) the relation between the knowledge gathered from clear and distinct perceptions and that of extra-mental objects
3) the alleged circularity of this relation.

I shall point out that, insofar as these issues cannot be ultimately settled, there is also no ultimate interpretative solution to the Cartesian Circle. For the latter is a problem concerning the entirety of Descartes' thought, as it is to do with the connection between subjective and formal truths.

I begin by analysing Descartes’ formulation of the argument and show how it opens up to different interpretations. I will examine how criticisms of Descartes' Meditations have taken alternative interpretations of Descartes' argument into account.

I will analyse the notion of the *cogito* and its indubitableness to assess whether this indubitableness applies to all clear and distinct perceptions. Descartes introduces an argument at the beginning of Meditation III which states that I cannot be certain of the truth of clear and distinct perceptions insofar as there may be a God who can deceive even on such most certain matters—we shall call it the ‘second deceptive-God argument.’ I argue that the second deceptive-God argument does not challenge that truth of clear and distinct perceptions established by the *cogito* at the end of Meditation II, but rather another kind of truth, connected with what I will term ‘the real stance.’ This truth will be called metaphysical, since it requires God as the external guarantee of the reality of its objects. In other words, while the *cogito* proves the internal coherence of a system of beliefs, God guarantees that ideas in the mind are true in relation to their external reference.

I distinguish between perceptions and ideas, arguing that these notions are linked with the two different kinds of truth that the two ‘deceptive-God arguments’ challenge. This distinction, which is not directly used by Descartes, can be used to solve the problem of circularity in appealing to God to forestall scepticism. I conclude by sketching subsequent attempts in justifying the existential validity of human knowledge, by solving the problem of the circle.

IN SEARCH OF THE ARGUMENT

Arnauld charges Descartes with circularity in his fourth set of objections, making reference to reasoning in Meditation III and IV:

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists [est]. But we can be sure that God exists [esse] only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists [esse], we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. 

Van Cleve summarises Descartes’ argument as it is understood by Arnauld:

1) I can be certain that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true only if I first am certain that God exists and is not a deceiver.

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2) I can be certain that God exists and is not a deceiver only if I first am certain that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true.3

Hence, by accepting the former proposition, one has to reject the latter and vice versa. Yet, I question that Arnauld’s (or Van Cleve’s) synopsis provides an adequate summary of Descartes’ argument. I believe Descartes’ argument to be more complex.

His starting point is the certainty of the cogito, established in Meditation II via the refutation of the ‘first deceptive-God argument’ — also known as the ‘evil demon argument.’ This refutation runs as follow:

...there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist [sum], if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something.4

Then, in Meditation III, Descartes states:5

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 that I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.6

Here, Descartes moves from the certainty of the cogito to that of clear and distinct perceptions, by using the cogito itself to exemplify all clear and distinct perceptions.

Having deduced the truthfulness of clear and distinct perception from the truthfulness of the cogito, Descartes seems to have established the indubitableness of both. Nonetheless, Descartes adds:

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example, that two and three make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye. (…)

But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises, I must examine whether there is a God and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else.7

Now Descartes appears to negate the indubitableness of clear and distinct perceptions established in Meditation II. There he argues that that clear and distinct perception which the cogito ‘is,’ indubitably resists the most radical doubt, such as the possibility of a ‘supremely powerful deceiver.’8

In order to settle the issue of the ‘circle,’ we must first answer why the cogito is indubitable; and, then, what Descartes means by ‘indubitable.’

THE COGITO

In his Discourse on the Method Descartes summarises the cogito as follows:


4. Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 16-17.

5. It may be also interesting to point out that, as noted by the author of the second set of objections, the problematic nature of Descartes’ argument would cast some suspicions over the just established indubitableness of the cogito. Cf: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 89.

6. Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 24.

7. Ibid., 25.

8. Cf: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 17.
But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat.\(^9\)

In the *Principles* the treatment is more extensive:

Thus, in rejecting—and even imagining to be false—every thing which we can in some way doubt, it is easy for us to suppose that there is no God, no sky and no bodies, and that we ourselves do not even have hands or feet or indeed any body at all. But we cannot suppose that we, who think such thoughts, do not exist [nihil esse]; for it is a contradiction to suppose that the thing that thinks, at the very same time in which it is thinking, does not exist [nihil esse]. And therefore this inference [cognitio], *I think, therefore I exist* [sum], is the first and the most certain of all, and occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.\(^10\)

Finally, in the *Meditations*, Descartes puts it thus:

But I have convinced myself that there is [esse] absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it not follow that I too do not exist [esse]? No: if I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist [sum], if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I think, I exist* [existo], is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived by my mind.\(^11\)

Now, what does render the *cogito* indubitable in the face of the most stringent scepticism? Is it an inherent weakness in radical scepticism that it is impossible to doubt that one thinks or exists? As noted by most commentators, radical scepticism brings about its own refutation; for by doubting everything one doubts radical doubt itself. Descartes’ doubt in Mediation II can be considered part of a cluster of paradoxes called ‘diagonal,’ whose paradoxical nature consists in the fact that the statement is implicitly self-defining.\(^12\) This is to say that the statement defines its own truth value as the reverse of the truth value assigned to the statement itself. The paradox of radical doubt could thus be summarised:

1) Everything is dubious
2) Given 1), it is dubious that ‘Everything is dubious’
3) Thus: one is in no position to say that ‘Everything is dubious’

Nonetheless the syllogistic refutation of radical doubt cannot do the job of eradicating all reasons of scepticism, since to formulate a syllogism the logical background that allows the syllogism to work must be left undoubted.\(^13\)

One may show intuitively that radical doubt must leave undoubted the logical space in which the concept of doubt is still meaningful. This approach seems more plausible and closer to Descartes’ intentions:

Now, awareness of first principles is not normally called ‘knowledge’ [scientia] by dialecticians. And when we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says, ‘I am think, therefore I am, or I exist,’ he does not deduce existence from thought [cognition] by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a single intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that, if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he have to have had prior knowledge of the major premise, ‘Everything which think is, or

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\(^11\) Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 16-17. Though similar to the argument in the *Principles*, mention of the deceiving God raises another issue to be discussed later.

\(^12\) Some examples are: Eubulides’ Paradox, Russell’s Paradox, Gödel’s Theorem etc.

\(^13\) Such position is, however, provisional. As will be shown later in this paper, a syllogistic proof can be carried forth; for the grounding space on which such syllogistic proof is based is the intuition itself, which cannot be doubt unless to render the doubt itself meaningless. As it turns, this is not a problem of logic but one of epistemology.
exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing.\textsuperscript{14}

Nonetheless, these ‘syllogistic’ solutions tackle the problem in an ‘objective’ way.\textsuperscript{15} What I mean by this will become clearer later in this section. On the other hand Descartes takes up a more ‘subjective’ stance,\textsuperscript{16} despite there being no strong reason to prefer the one stance to the other.\textsuperscript{17}

As we have seen, Descartes argues that I myself, by doubting everything, cannot bring about that I am not doubting. The existence of my doubt would therefore be indubitable to me while I am doubting. But what sort of concept of indubitableness does this reasoning endorse? If by ‘indubitable’ we take Descartes to mean ‘non-possibly-false,’ the cogito would turn out to be an analytic truth. Yet Descartes is not talking of doubt in general terms, but, rather, of my doubt. What is the difference? An interesting hint can be found in the cogito argument as stated in the Meditations when it is said:

So (…) I must finally conclude that this proposition, I think, I exist [existo], is necessarily true whenever is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.\textsuperscript{18} [my emphasis]

Indubitableness in this subjective sense does not seem therefore to make the cogito necessarily true but indubitably true in the act of being conceived by me. In other words, whenever such clear and distinct perception is presented before our minds we cannot but assent to it.

What is, therefore, the discrepancy between the subjective stance and the objective stance in the case of the cogito?\textsuperscript{19} In the objective stance the argument against radical doubt is a paradox;\textsuperscript{20} it is neither true nor false, and its rejection is as impossible as its acceptance. On the other hand, by taking the argument in a more subjective sense, no strict syllogistic proof of the indubitableness of the cogito is provided, nor in fact is needed; for it is the act of doubting that, in its performance, results in self-annulment. The cogito is, therefore, not a theoretical notion but a performative one; in other words, there never is a moment in which I actually doubt everything. For doubting everything is performatively impossible. This means that the existence of the doubt in its actual form, i.e. performed by me, is bound to certain conditions of possibility that allow that doubt to happen as it does. If my existence is the actual condition of possibility for that doubt to be my doubt, those possibilities cannot be doubted unless one doubts the very physis of the doubt. Yet, how does this performative impossibility of doubting my existence bring about any truth? And what sense of truth would be meant?

**THE CONCEPT OF SYSTEMIC INDUBITABLENESS**

Before responding to the questions we have just posited, let us turn back once again to the beginning of Meditation III:

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; (…) So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.\textsuperscript{21}

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\textsuperscript{14} Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 100.

\textsuperscript{15} This is not to be confused with Descartes notion of ‘objective’ which contrasts with the concept of ‘formal’ and has to do with the representational force of ideas. Here I am instead using ‘objective’ in a modern sense, meaning something considered in-itself, ‘a-perspectively,’ contrasted with ‘subjective.’

\textsuperscript{16} By this I do not only refer to the first person point of view characteristic of the Meditations, but also, and primarily, to the fact that this first person approach, as we will see later in this paper, grounds the validity of clear and distinct perceptions.

\textsuperscript{17} It has even been argued that this may, in fact, be just the result of a certain stylistic approach typical of spiritual meditations, which, following the trend established by St Augustine’s *Confessions*, would start from a sort of self-reflection which should eventually bring about knowledge concerning the truth of God. On the other hand, once this move is applied to scientific epistemology, the outcomes are impressive.

\textsuperscript{18} Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 17.

\textsuperscript{19} For the use of the term objective in this context compare footnote 16.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 24.
Now, what is the relation between the *cogito* and clear and distinct perceptions? If we analyse the *cogito* from what I have called the *objective stance*, there is no obvious connection between the self-annulling doubt of the *cogito* and mathematical truth such as the equation of 2 + 3 and 5. Therefore, by what criterion do we establish what perceptions are clear and distinct? At this point Descartes’ position starts to become blurry. Does the argument that establishes the indubitableness of the *cogito* establish a criterion for a particular perception being clear and distinct? And what is this criterion?

Let us cast our minds back to the procedure through which Descartes comes to formulate the *cogito*: Descartes’ starting point is a radical doubt which eventually annuls itself, bringing forth the existence of the doubt and making the existence of the thing that doubts indubitable. However, I have also argued that the *cogito* is primarily a performative notion; its evidence is manifest only whenever the reasoning is performed by me as the subject of such reasoning. The *cogito*, therefore, proves both my existence and its validity, because my existence is a condition of possibility for the existence of the doubt as performed by me.

We may thus state that, in order for any clear and distinct perception to be such, it must endure the trial of radical doubt and show its indubitableness. In other words, clear and distinct perceptions must be performatively indubitable, which is to say that their negation would entail a negation of the condition of possibility for the doubt itself to be carried out.

But does the performative indubitableness of the *cogito* and, in general, of clear and distinct perceptions, brings about truth? Andrea Christofidou argues that, due to a diffuse post-Humean perspective used in reading Descartes, there is often a ‘failure to distinguish between what Descartes calls the natural light of reason—a process of reasoning that can be considered to be valid by anyone who reasons and thinks at all—and the phenomenological qualities of consciousness.’ Whenever I actually go through the process of doubt that Descartes describes, I cannot but assent to the truth of the *cogito*, and the same goes for all clear and distinct perceptions. For denying the indubitableness of the *cogito* requires a denial of those rules by means of which my reasoning develops, and which constitute the conditions of possibility for my reasoning to be what it is. Hence, by ‘natural light of reason’ Descartes refers to the totality of those axioms which must be shared by all who ‘think.’ The *cogito*, as well as all the clear and distinct perceptions, enjoys a status that I would call *systemic indubitableness*. In other words, given a certain system of reference, it is impossible to use that system of reference to disprove certain propositions within the system. These propositions are called *necessary truths* and their validity is based on the fact that their falsity would entail the rejection of the very system which grounds these propositions, and without which they are inconceivable. Therefore, we can argue, against the argument of the preceding section, that the validity of the *cogito* can be proved ‘logically,’ although this logical proof is bound to its *performance*. For this Descartes often stresses the importance of the *performance* of the argument and the non-reliability of memory. For truth is yielded by clear and distinct perceptions only when present to mind, so that any mnemonic recollection of the truth of these perceptions is fundamentally misleading.

We must therefore agree with Christofidou when she argues that, for Descartes, clear and distinct perceptions are truthful, relatively to the system of human reasoning. Such truth is attainable by means of human reasoning alone and does not require any external guarantee.

**WHAT KIND OF TRUTH DOES THE SECOND DECEPTIVE-GOD ARGUMENT CHALLENGE?**

Having established the truthfulness of clear and distinct perceptions, we must now try to reconcile this position with Descartes’ claim:

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22 For the use of the term objective in this context compare footnote 16.
23 Concerning Descartes believe in the possibility to infer from the doubt to the thing that doubt compare *Obiectio II* in the Third Set of Replies from the Meditations. Cf: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 122-124.
But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises, I must examine whether there is a God and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else.\footnote{Descartes, \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy}, 25.}

But how can clear and distinct perceptions be indubitable and yet still be in need of external justification? What certainty does the second deceptive-God argument challenge?

I have already mentioned a first version of this argument, the so called evil-genius argument, which appears earlier in Meditation II,\footnote{Ibid., 16-17.} and I have established it to challenge the performative certainty of clear and distinct perceptions, exemplified by the \textit{cogito}. On the other hand, the version of the argument put forward in Meditation III questions a different order of certainty, which is to do with the relation between clear and distinct perceptions or ideas and the extra-mental object that such perceptions or ideas represent. The sort of truth and falsity that pertains to this order of certainty, which Gewirth calls metaphysical,\footnote{A. Gewirth, “The Cartesian Circle Reconsidered,” \textit{The Philosophical Review} 67: 19 (1970): 668-685.} is that of those judgements concerning the correspondence between the representing perception or idea and the object that is represented.

Yet, what is the difference between \textit{perception} and \textit{idea}? Indeed the terms ‘idea’ and ‘perception’ are often confused and used by commentators interchangeably. Yet, I believe Descartes conceives the two to be only related and not synonyms. This is proved by the fairly distinct use Descartes makes of the two. Nonetheless, their distinctness is not definitional but contextual and can be readily grasped with reference to the places in the text where the two respectively appear. For, while the term ‘perception’ is used as early as Meditation I, the term idea is employed only after the second version of the deceptive-God argument.

I have already established that the concept of clear and distinct perception is related with what I have called the subjective stance, namely, that epistemological moment in which indubitableness and truth are both \textit{performative} and \textit{logical} notions. Now, the deceptive-God argument that appears in Meditation III must not challenge the truth of clear and distinct perceptions in exactly the same way as the argument from Meditation II, lest Descartes be in open contradiction. Keeping this in mind, one thing in the Meditations is particularly noteworthy, namely, that soon after the exposition of the second deceptive-God argument, Descartes stops the flow of the argument to examine the notion of idea. The question that practically all commentators have failed to ask is: what is the relevance of such a discussion? Let us begin with the discussion itself. First, Descartes classifies his thoughts ‘into definite kinds’\footnote{Descartes, \textit{Meditations on First Philosophy}, 25.} in order to find out ‘which of them can be said to be the bearer of truth and falsity.’\footnote{Ibid.} He says:

\begin{quote}
Some of my thoughts are, as it were, images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term idea is strictly appropriate -for example when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus, when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object [subjectum] of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions, or emotions, while others are called judgements.\footnote{Ibid., 26-27.} [my emphasis]
\end{quote}

Excluding the Synopsis, this is the first time the word idea appears in the context of the Meditations. The characterization of ideas as \textit{rerum imagines} that we can gather from this excerpt is rather general but can be profitably used as a starting point towards a more thorough definition. According to Descartes, neither ideas taken in themselves as modes of thought nor volitions or affections can, strictly speaking, be false. But what kind of falsity is at stake here? Descartes suggests that judgements are the only kind of thought to be true or false; and “the chief and most common mistake which can be found in them consists in the fact that I judge ideas that are [sunt] in me to resemble, or conform, to things that are located outside me.”\footnote{Ibid., 26.} In other words, judgements are true or false according to the correspondence between the idea and its extra-mental object. A more in depth treatment of the notion of judgement will be attempted in the next section. But what about ideas? John Cottingham has suggested that ideas would enjoy both a formal and an objective status. According to Cottingham, these would define two different realms, that is: a psychological realm, i.e. one’s own private thoughts, and a logical realm, which has to do with the inter-personal dimension of ideas as containing a shared
Therefore, while perceptions are only to do with the operations of the intellect, \cite{Cottingham}, which depends on the purely subjective grasp that I can have of any notion whatsoever, ideas are to do with the relation between the intellect and its object, formally. \cite{Cottingham} When considering the truth or falsity of perceptions one is concerned only with their performative necessity, namely, the fact that, if the perception is clear and distinct and is present to mind, one cannot doubt the truth of that very perception unless to doubt the system of perceptions in its entirety. The same, however, does not hold in the case of ideas 'considered only in themselves'; \cite{Cottingham} for in that case 'they cannot strictly speaking be false.' \cite{Cottingham} Indeed, both perceptions and ideas can be generally defined as modes of the intellect, and both roughly define the same sort of entities. Now, if ideas are, in themselves, always true, while perceptions are true only if clear and distinct, then Descartes' reasoning is either contradictory or it assumes two different notions of truth. I believe Descartes uses the two terms, 'idea' and 'perception,' in order to mark such a difference. For in the case of perception one would deal with performative necessity, which arises from the subjective-epistemological moment of Descartes' argument. In other words, a perception is true if, whenever it is present to mind, it is impossible to be declared false without contradiction. On the other hand, in the case of ideas, what matters would be judgements of existence. Hence, true is that idea which corresponds to an existing reality. If an idea is assessed objectively, true would be the idea that, in a judgement, corresponds to an existing extra-mental object; while, in the case of ideas taken formally, the truth-value would be based on the mere existence of the idea in thought as one of its modes. Yet, since any idea is to be formally in thought or else not be at all, all ideas would formally correspond to an existing reality and, therefore, always be true. \cite{Cottingham}

This shift from subjective-performative necessity to existential reality is, according to me, what marks the difference between the first and the second deceptive-God argument. In other words, while the first version of the argument challenges the performative truth of clear and distinct perceptions, the second version is aimed at testing the reality of such clear and distinct perceptions, i.e. whether or not any objective entity would actually correspond to such perceptions. \cite{Cottingham} We may explain this point by saying: there are certain truths which are analytic and cannot be challenged unless challenging the truthfulness of the entire system. While the first

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33 Compare: ‘… Cartesian ideas are in some respect more like publicly accessible concepts than private logical items: two people could not be said to have the same thought, since a thought is a (private) mental item or mode of consciousness; but they could be said to have the same idea in so far as their thoughts have a common representational content.’ Cf: J. Cottingham, A Descartes Dictionary (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 78.
34 Nonetheless, even though the distinction between psychological and logical validity is ill-conceived (we have in fact seen that a division between the logical and the psychological would lead Descartes project into absurdity), on the other Cottingham is right in pointing out the importance of this double status, i.e. objective and formal, of ideas.
35 As argued by Cottingham, the notion of perception in Descartes refers to ‘the purely mental apprehension of the intellect.’ Cf: Cottingham, A Descartes Dictionary, 143.
36 Here the term ‘formal’ is used, consistently with Descartes’ jargon, to refer to the stance considering reality in-itself, a-perspectively.
37 Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 26.
38 Ibid.
39 This must not be confused with the fact that the clear and distinct perception of my existence that I find in the cogito actually necessitates my existence. This is in fact true; nonetheless the truth of clear and distinct perceptions is not based on whether or not the perception yields actual existence. In the case of a clear and distinct perception of a geometrical notion, let us say the fact that the sum of the internal angles of a triangle is always 180°, such perception is true whether or not triangles actually existed at all. On the other hand, if my clear and distinct perception has some link with reality, any real triangle must conform to such perception or else not be a triangle. Yet, this does not have to do with the truth or falsity of clear and distinct perceptions which are true or false independently from the actual existence of the reality they refer to, if any.
40 There is a further interpretative difficulty concerning truth and falsity of ideas in themselves, namely, the concept of material falsity of ideas. For a thorough discussion on this matter, which would be far off the scope of this essay, refer to: D. Brown, Descartes and the Passionate Mind (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 90-94.
41 Here I am using ‘objective’ meaning in-itself, contrasted with ‘subjective.’
version of the deceptive-God argument challenges the truthfulness of single clear and distinct perceptions as they are present to one’s mind, the second argument challenges the truthfulness of the entire system in relation to the reality that system represents. Hence, the doubt cast in Meditation III is not, as in Meditation II, of a subjective order but of a metaphysical one, concerned with formal reality rather than with performative necessity.

It is at this point in the argument that Descartes switches from clear and distinct perceptions to the term ‘idea,’ in order to distinguish between the knowledge yielded by the performative truth of clear and distinct perceptions and that brought about by judgments concerning real existence. An interesting point on this distinction is made by Keith DeRose, in his article Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity and Scientia, in which he argues in favour of the distinction between knowledge and scientia; the first has to do with the epistemological moment in which clear and distinct perceptions can yield some sort of knowledge, while the second deals with the metaphysical moment, where one would finally come to grip with the true knowledge whose validity would be guaranteed by God. In commenting on the famous passage of the atheist geometer,42 DeRose says:

… the reason Descartes cites for why the atheist’s belief cannot be considered a piece of scientia is that it is vulnerable to skeptical attack: it ‘can be rendered doubtful.’ The skeptical attack to which the atheist’s belief is vulnerable seems to be an undermining attack aimed at the principle that what’s most evident to him is true… In short, the atheist is vulnerable to Descartes’ metaphysical reason for doubt.43

It must be clear by now that no doubt can be cast on the performative truth yielded by clear and distinct perception. But what truth does Descartes challenge in the Meditation III? That of ideas, namely, the existential subjectivity of perceptions; this is made clear by the fact that, as noted again by DeRose, the status that the atheist’s belief lacks of being scientia depends on his own ignorance concerning the existence and the non-deceptive nature of God. Indeed, Descartes is not interested in establishing God as the general guarantor of formal knowledge, but rather he is concerned with a metaphysical justification of one’s own formal knowledge. In other words, through the second deceptive-God argument, Descartes attempts to prove that the performatively true knowledge that he possesses of reality is in fact formally valid.

**DRAWING A CONNECTION BETWEEN IDEAS AND THEIR OBJECT: GOD AND THE CIRCLE**

Let us now go back to the Cartesian Circle. We have argued that Arnauld’s version of the circle does not take into account the entirety of Descartes’ argument; in particular, Arnauld does not distinguish the performative-subjective truth of clear and distinct perceptions from the formal truth yielded by ideas. This distinction is central to Descartes’ argument in support of what Gewirth calls Descartes’ metaphysical justification of knowledge,44 and therefore in assessing the circularity of the argument. The terminological shift coincides with a conceptual shift, which marks the distinction of the truth or falsity of perceptions from that of ideas. Certainty of a perception that is clear and distinct, despite being analytically indubitable, still stands in need of metaphysical justification. This is carried out by establishing the validity of the connection between the perception and its object. When talking about perceptions as a representation of an extra-mental object, Descartes prefers the term ‘idea.’ Hence, an idea is nothing but a clear and distinct perception considered as the representation of an existing object. Furthermore, while the truth that clear and distinct perceptions yield for someone personally is performatively indubitable from within that person’s system of perceptions, the system itself would still stand in need of a metaphysical foundation that would grant its meaningfulness, i.e. the fact that someone’s system of perception actually represents something. Gewirth, Christofidou and DeRose provide three different versions of this sort of solution.45 In the same way, it may seem that the distinction I have drawn between ‘perception’ and ‘idea’ and the two different kinds of truth to which the two terms refer, would offer a similar solution to the circle. In the context of this solution, the proof of the existence of a non-deceptive God would be based on the performative truth yielded by the clear and distinct perception of God himself, according

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42. According to Descartes an atheist geometer may have clear and distinct perceptions of his theorems, but he cannot know them perfectly, because he denies the metaphysical guarantee of these perceptions, i.e. God. Cfr: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, 101.
to which God’s existence and non-deceiving nature would be indubitable. The proofs of God’s existence and non-deceiving nature would justify the correspondence between clear and distinct perceptions, which in this context should be called ideas, and the extra-mental object to which they refer to, thus yielding what I have called formal truth. Nevertheless, this solution to the circle needs to address the issue of how the epistemological truth of the idea of God could prove His existence, if, as Descartes admits in the second deceptive-God argument, clear and distinct perceptions can never give us any assurance of the existence of extra-mental objects. More generally, we need to decide how it is possible to judge the truth of ideas in relation with their extra-mental objects if all we have access to is ideas.

If I want to have knowledge of an object, that object must be thought of by me. That means that the object must become the content of a thought of mine. It must become an image, a mode of my thought of which I can be aware. For, all I am aware of are my mental images, i.e. ideas. From inside our epistemological stance, which, as has been shown by the previous argument, is the only stance we are actually justified in taking, we can never be certain of the correspondence between our idea of an object and the object itself. This is the reason Descartes requires an external justification to grant the metaphysical certainty of ideas, and ensure that our way of knowing objects is right and can provide knowledge.

Descartes does attempt an epistemological proof of the certainty of this metaphysical justificator. This implies that the certainty of the existence of God must be based on the certainty of clear and distinct perceptions, insufficient to yield any metaphysical certainty. Such an argument would prove the truthfulness of clear and distinct perception rather than the clear and distinct idea of God. By reference to the term ‘idea,’ Descartes points out that the second deceptive-God argument does not concern a performative truth, relative only to a given system of belief, but a formal truth, that is to do with the correctness of the relation between an idea and its object. In other words, the argument presented in Meditation III establishes that the truthfulness of clear and distinct ideas stands in need of a metaphysical justification, namely, the proof of the existence of a non-deceptive God. This means that, by distinguishing between perceptions and ideas, the circle has not been solved but merely reduced in ratio, as there is circularity in justifying the certainty of ideas but not that of perceptions.

Despite a certain lack of textual evidence in support of it, the distinction between ideas and perceptions is at the core of any attempt to settle the issue of the circle. Hence, whether or not the distinction between perceptions and ideas, and, most importantly, between performative-epistemological truth and formal-metaphysical truth, has been consciously produced by Descartes, the possibility of including such a distinction within the corpus of Descartes’ Meditations has created a fertile ground for numerous and different philosophies which have, to address, directly or indirectly, the issue of the circle.

THE CIRCLE IN PERSPECTIVE

We have at least come to a definitive formulation of the problem of the circle, which can be summed up by the following questions: first, what sort of knowledge is yielded by clear and distinct perceptions alone? Second, what is the relation between the knowledge that we gather from clear and distinct perceptions and the knowledge of a hypothetical extra-mental reality? Is there any relation between the two? And if so, is it a circular relation? The answer to such questions would also respond to the well known issue of the epistemological relation that the I has to the external world. However, there is no easy response to such queries, as there is no easy solution to the problem of the circle. For this is not merely one problem within the Cartesian corpus but an issue whose solution employs the totality of Descartes’ philosophy.

Throughout the centuries, almost every philosopher has tried to justify the connection between subjective truths, i.e. clear and distinct perceptions, and formal truths, i.e. ideas truly corresponding to extra-mental objects.

Locke, for example, denies the possibility that knowledge and truth are separated from experience; in this way he denies the existence of perceptions in favour of ideas. However Locke does not solve the problem of the correspondence between ideas and extra-mental objects. He maintains that to have knowledge is to be aware of ideas; for any kind of knowledge must be checked against experience. And yet the only way we have to access

46. Namely, our system of beliefs, our language.
47. We may indeed expect some reference to the distinction between ideas and perceptions in various places where Descartes explicitly gives definitions of ‘idea.’ Among such definitions, the one included in the Second Reply is particularly confusing, given that Descartes talks about an idea as that through the immediate perception of which we become conscious of our thoughts. Cf: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy.
experience are ideas. 'How shall the mind, when it perceives nothing but its own ideas, know that they agree with things themselves?' I believe Locke’s answer to this issue can rightly be considered his own answer to the issue of the Cartesian Circle. First, he constructs the notion of simple ideas which ‘the mind (...) can by no means make to itself’ and thus ‘must necessarily be the product of things operating on the mind in a natural way.’ From this he argues that ‘it is the actual receiving of ideas from without that gives us notice of the existence of other things, and makes us know that something doth exist at that time without us, which causes that idea in us.’ However, even if Locke may partially unravel the circle by establishing the existence of something external as the cause of my idea, he does not provide an epistemological justification for the conformity between the ideas and their extra-mental objects, which for Locke is still granted ‘by the Wisdom and Will of our Maker.’ However, for Locke, God is not merely the guarantor of such a relation but, with an idea borrowed from Culverwell and Whichcote, reason itself, something like the transcendent rationale of the universe.

Berkeley, on the other hand, accepts Locke’s argument concerning the relation between ideas and experience, but collapses the distinction between ideas and their object: for Berkeley, given that we can only be aware of ideas, the experience of an object is nothing but the way in which that object is given to us in an idea. Since the experience of the object separated from its idea is impossible, Berkeley finally denies the extra-mental existence of objects. With this move he turns ideas into perceptions, for if the object does not merely correspond to the idea but is, in fact, the idea itself, its existence becomes necessary as insofar as the idea is concerned, i.e. whenever the idea is present to mind. Thus, Berkeley avoids the circle by reducing truth to an internal necessary correspondence between ideas and positing the source of ideas in God. However, Berkeley does not attempt to give any proof of God’s existence, so that the validity of his gnoseology ends up resting on faith alone.

Criticising Berkeley, Hume develops an alternative option to avoid the circle which is based on a general scepticism concerning any actual link between extra-mental entities and ideas, aside from the principle of causation. All we can experience is what Hume calls impressions; the provenance of such impressions is obscure, and their organization into ideas is nothing but the result of the principle of causation, which is derived from habit.

Kant takes inspiration from Hume and Berkeley, but his answer is more conscious of the problem of the circle and of the distinction between epistemology and the metaphysics. For Kant, as for Descartes, epistemological certainties do yield truth. Hence, Kant collapses the distinction between perception and idea by collapsing the subjective and the objective stance within the field of knowledge. This does not imply a mere correspondence between the extra-mental objects and their ideas, but the creation of an entirely new field arising from the interaction between the extra-mental objects and the mental categories used to represent them. In other words, Kant also takes the self-evidence of the knowledge yielded by clear and distinct perceptions as his starting point. The main novelty of Kant’s approach lies in building a metaphysical system beginning from this certainty Descartes instead considers the experience of objects, at least those which are clearly and distinctly perceived, indubitable only within the performative-epistemological moment but still requiring a metaphysical justification. For Kant, there is no doubt that I truly possess the knowledge I have present before my mind as thoughts. From this Kant infers the existence of certain necessary conditions that allow my knowledge to be as it presents itself to me. Kant calls these conditions transcendent. By this he means that their existence is necessary despite the fact our knowledge cannot grasp them in-themselves. In this way Kant established the certainty of his epistemological system without having to describe its foundations by means of the system itself, an attempt which had lead Descartes to vicious circularity. Drawing directly from Kant, Husserl will proceed to bracket the transcendent reality and engage only with phenomenological and transcendental entities.

Similarly, De Saussure, having reduced the entirety of the epistemological field to what he calls langue, defines this linguistic system as a closed one. This implies that any justification of the foundation of such a system carried out from the inside of the system itself is necessarily circular. Furthermore, any attempt to explain the ultimate meaning of a term would merely bring one on a trip around the dictionary.

49. Ibid., 229.
50. Ibid., 326.
51. Ibid., 229.
CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the distinction between perceptions and ideas, based on the different notions of truth expressed by each term, would not by itself solve the problem of the Cartesian Circle. However, by distinguishing between the realm of perceptions, which are performatively and epistemologically true, and that of ideas, which are true only if they correspond to some formal reality, Descartes cleared the ground for different possibilities to solve the circle, by either negating perceptions, i.e. Locke, or ideas, i.e. Berkeley, or both, i.e. Hume, or by collapsing the two, i.e. Kant. Moreover, by opening the possibility for clear and distinct perceptions to yield truth by themselves, Descartes makes room for the final separation between epistemology and God’s metaphysical guarantee, finally carried out by Kant in the First Critique. Indeed, if clear and distinct perceptions are indubitable, even though only performatively indubitable, the guarantee of God is required only to grant the meaningfulness of one’s system of perceptions, not its truth—at least in the sense of that performative truth which is internal to one’s system itself. This point went on to have repercussions on the developments of science. For the possibility to treat epistemology as a system which does not require metaphysical justification, gives the natural sciences the opportunity to finally claim autonomy from philosophy and religion.

In addition, the fact that Descartes’ attempt to ground the truth of epistemology by means of epistemology itself ends up in circularity, opens the way for two different approaches to the metaphysical justification of epistemology. One is the approach of Berkeley and, in some sense, Kant, both of whom admit only that any epistemological system hints to the necessity of a metaphysical foundation, without attempting a positive proof of the existence of such foundation. The other line of argument is that followed by philosophers such as Humboldt and De Saussure, who establish the circularity of any epistemological system and the necessary circularity of any answer concerning the foundation of such system from inside the system itself.

The lack of textual evidence, as well as the way in which Descartes attempts to respond to the objections moved by Marsenne and Arnauld in the Second and Fourth set of Replies,\(^{53}\) show that Descartes is both unaware of the depth of the issue of the Circle and lacking a clear grasp of the distinction between idea and perception laid down in the Meditations. This prevents Descartes from taking a clearer stand on the matter, the lack of which prevents settling the issue interpretatively. In other words, solving the circle implies a thorough revision of Descartes’ own philosophy, which would go largely beyond a mere reinterpretation of the Cartesian corpus. This is not to say that the circle cannot be solved, but that solving it requires taking a stand that Descartes himself does not take. Nevertheless, it is Descartes himself that, by beginning to draw a distinction between the performative truth of clear and distinct perceptions and the formal justification yielded by clear and distinct ideas, has cleared the ground for a multiplicity of solutions to the circle.

\(^{53}\) Consider the Second and Fourth set of Replies in the Meditations. Cf: Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy.