

**A DEFENSE OF CARTESIAN CERTAINTY**

**by**

**STEPHANIE LARSEN WYKSTRA**

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in the Philosophy Department

Written under the direction of Ernest Sosa

And approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2008

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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By STEPHANIE LARSEN WYKSTRA

Dissertation Director:

Ernest Sosa

This dissertation examines Rene Descartes' view of certainty and defends the view that Cartesian certainty is possible. The first half of the dissertation includes an interpretation of Descartes' epistemology as well as an examination of other interpreters' readings. The second half of the dissertation is a defense of the claim that Cartesian certainty of a particular kind is possible; it includes a variety of contemporary objections and replies in defense of the possibility of certainty.

## **Acknowledgments**

My thanks to Martha Bolton and Ernie Sosa as well as members of the epistemology dissertation group: Matthew Benton, Pavel Davydov, Carl Feierabend, Jonathan Ichikawa, Alex Jackson and Josh Orozco.

For ongoing conversation about Descartes and philosophy in general, I am very grateful to Geoff Anders.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter 1: Descartes' View of Certainty</b> .....	5
<b>Chapter 2: Other Interpretations Considered</b> .....	29
<b>Chapter 3: Memory</b> .....	53
<b>Chapter 4: The Creation of the Eternal Truths</b> .....	63
<b>Chapter 5: On the Meaning of "Cartesian Certainty"</b> .....	84
<b>Chapter 6: A Defense of Cartesian Certainty</b> .....	107
<b>Chapter 7: When Not to Avoid Begging the Question</b> .....	128
<b>Chapter 8: Objections to the Possibility of Certainty</b> .....	141
<b>Chapter 9: The Possibility of Strong Rationalism</b> .....	162
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	184

## **Introduction**

All roads in philosophy lead to epistemology. When one asks questions in ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, or another area, sooner or later epistemology rears its head: how do I justify any of my claims? Do I know any of the things I think I know? What is the right way to go about answering philosophical questions?

I began with metaphysics. Soon into my studies, methodological questions morphed into methodological discontents. Contemporary analytic philosophy favored and still favors common sense mixed with philosophical intuitions of unknown provenance. I found little to assuage my worry that hunches were not to be trusted, that disagreement points to unreliability, and that metaphysics built on such a foundation is unlikely to last.

Such was my preparation for Descartes. Aware of the need for a method I could count on if I was to continue philosophizing in good faith, I found myself drawn to an epistemology promising certainty. My thought on undertaking a study of Descartes' method was as follows. If certainty turned out to be possible, then I would have found a way out of my worries. If not, this would also be good to find out. In neither case would I be wasting time on the project.

My project is two-fold. In the first half of the dissertation, I interpret Descartes' epistemology – specifically, his view of certainty. I have tried to be faithful to the text while being as charitable to Descartes as possible. There are two main features of my

reading that I want to mention here. First, there is no “circle” in the *Meditations* (this is essential to any good reading of Descartes). Second, I interpret Descartes as having two distinct concepts of knowledge, which I call *cognitio* and *scientia*. *Cognitio* is the concept that I focus on, because unlike *scientia*, it does not require any successful proof of God’s existence and non-deception. The “Cartesian certainty” that I am interested in is, as Michael Della Rocca has put it, epistemology without God.<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the dissertation, I defend *cognitio* – which I call certainty – against contemporary objections. Many contemporary epistemologists are anti-skeptics in the sense that they defend “knowledge” and repudiate Cartesian skepticism. Many are also skeptical, however, in the sense that they would deny the possibility of Cartesian certainty, which is different from what they call “knowledge” in that it’s infallible.<sup>2</sup> It is my aim in the second half to answer their objections.

A brief chapter summary will set the stage for what is to come. In the first four chapters, I lay out my interpretation of Descartes. Chapter 1 lays out my two-concept interpretation of “certainty” and uses the text to defend such the reading. Chapter 2 includes synopses of five competing interpretations- those of Edwin Curley, Janet Broughton, Louis Loeb, Harry Frankfurt and James Van Cleve- and presents textual and philosophical evidence against each of them. Chapter 3 is an explanation of Descartes’ view of memory. Chapter 4 deals with the issue of the eternal truths; I argue that

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<sup>1</sup> Della Rocca “Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology without God”

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 5 for elaboration on what I mean by Cartesian certainty.

Descartes' stance on the creation of the eternal truths is inconsistent with other parts of his system, and argue that several attempts to render his views consistent fail.

In the second part of the dissertation, I begin by explaining my view of “Cartesian certainty” in Chapter 5, first describing what my concept of certainty is not, and then drawing on Richard Fumerton’s work to explain what it is. In Chapter 6, I take on the skeptic who demands that we fulfill certain criteria in order to attain Cartesian certainty by arguing that such a skeptic is not justified in his claims. In Chapter 7, I argue that begging the question against the skeptic is not only acceptable but good, in cases of certainty. In Chapter 8, I respond to contemporary objections taken from the work of Keith Lehrer, Bruce Aune, and Timothy Williamson. In Chapter 9, I respond to further objections made by Laurence Bonjour and Ernie Sosa.

In the course of writing this dissertation, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about philosophy. In the end, I have ceased to ask some questions and have begun to ask others. I have come to believe that many questions of the form “What is X?” have little to offer us even if we could answer them definitively.<sup>3</sup> In their stead, however, I have discovered many other questions pertaining to what is valuable in philosophy and in life.

Though I am critical of Descartes in some regards, studying his philosophy has also made me more optimistic. I have come to believe that certainty is possible (and, to a very limited extent in my own case, actual). Objections which once seemed devastating are no longer devastating. As a result, I am hopeful that there is a way to make progress

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<sup>3</sup> See the final section of chapter 9.

in philosophy and move beyond the “inextricable darkness” of the problems that we cannot and should not avoid.

## Chapter 1: Descartes' View of Certainty

Interpreters of Descartes have struggled to attribute to him a view which fits with the *Meditations* and his other writings, while also avoiding the Cartesian circle. In this chapter, I will present an interpretation which fulfills both criteria.<sup>4</sup>

On my interpretation, “certainty” for Descartes picks out two philosophically valuable types of knowledge, which I will refer to as *cognitio* and *scientia*.<sup>5</sup> The two types of knowledge have very different requirements, and play different roles in Descartes’ method. I will argue that whereas *cognitio* is the type of knowledge one has when one infallibly connects with the truth, *scientia* is the state of securing this knowledge in place.

In the first section, I will briefly explain the problem of the Cartesian circle. In the second section, I will give Descartes’ reply to the circle objection (made by Arnauld and Mersenne), and explain how my interpretation of Descartes coheres with his reply. In the third section, I will look at the passages which seem to conflict with my interpretation. I will then give a reading on which the passages and my reading are compatible. In the fourth section, I will raise a possible philosophical difficulty for the view I propose, and suggest two ways in Descartes could respond to it.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kenny’s view (Ch 8, *Descartes*, 1968) is probably the most similar to mine, though we differ in some regards. Michael Della Rocca (“Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God”), and James Van Cleve (“Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle”) also have similar views, though we diverge at certain key points (see Ch 2 and Ch 4 for examples).

<sup>5</sup> I will use the terms “certainty” and “knowledge” interchangeably throughout the dissertation; where I mean different things by the terms, it will become clear (e.g. in reference to the distinction which other philosophers have made between the two).

## I. The Problem of the Circle

It has often seemed to readers of the *Meditations* that Descartes commits a serious error. He wants to attain certainty beyond any doubt, and in the Third Meditation, he seems to suggest that absolutely everything is open to doubt until he can prove that God exists and is not a deceiver. The difficulty is not hard to see. If *everything* is open to doubt, then how will the proof of the existence of God itself be certain? And if it is uncertain, then how can he use it to definitively rule out doubt?

Arnauld and Mersenne both notice the problem, known as the “Cartesian Circle.”<sup>6</sup> Arnauld writes, “We can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true” (CSM II.150).<sup>7</sup> Arnauld is pointing out that we can’t be sure of anything – not even things that are clear and distinct to us - until we know the general rule “whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true.” In that case, we can’t be sure that God exists until we are certain of the general rule. Since Descartes requires knowledge of God in order to achieve knowledge of the general rule, his system hardly seems able to get off the ground.

James Van Cleve helpfully puts the problem as follows: There would be a circle of justification if Descartes were to maintain the following two claims:

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<sup>6</sup> Mersenne’s objection appears in the second set of objections, CSM II.89.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, Rene. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* Vols. I-III. (CSM) Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (vol III). Cambridge University Press, 1984.

1. We are certain that (a) what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only if we are first certain that (b) God exists.
2. We are certain that (b) God exists only if we are first certain that (a) what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.<sup>8</sup>

If Descartes makes both of these claims, his view is clearly circular.

Fortunately, Descartes offers a way out of the difficulty in his replies to both Arnauld and Mersenne. His reply should be the springboard for any interpretation of Descartes seeking to get him out of the Cartesian circle, since he explicitly addresses the problem. In the following section, I will give his reply and using it and other passages, will lay out my interpretation.

## II. Descartes' replies to Mersenne and Arnauld

In his reply to Mersenne, Descartes writes:

When I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge (*scientia*) of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them... (CSM II.100).

In his reply to Arnauld, he writes:

To begin with, we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain (*certi*) that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver (CSM II.171).

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<sup>8</sup> I derive this presentation of the circle from Van Cleve, 1979.

What does Descartes have in mind here? In the first passage, it is clear that he is making a distinction. The distinction is between “conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them” and, implicitly, conclusions of which this is not the case.

If we look a little further in the replies, it becomes clearer what sort of contrast Descartes wishes to make. He maintains that there are some perceptions which “are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. The fact that I exist so long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, are examples of truths in respect of which we possess this kind of certainty (*certitudinem*)” (II.104). He goes on to say that there are other truths “which are perceived very clearly by our intellect as long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge (*cognitio*) of them depends...but we may forget the arguments in question and later remember the conclusions which were deduced from them” (II.104).

Suppose that we remember a particular conclusion without remembering the argument by which we arrived at it. We do remember that we clearly perceived the conclusion when we had the argument in mind. But lacking the argument now, we are not clearly perceiving that it is true. In that case, according to Descartes, we can only be certain of the conclusion if we are certain that God exists. If we are certain that God exists, then we can be certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

And if we are certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true, we can be sure that what we remember having clearly perceived is true.

Hence, Descartes' reply, going on these two passages alone, is as follows: we can be certain of things when we clearly and distinctly perceive them. If, however, we merely remember clearly and distinctly perceiving them, we must know that God exists and would not allow us to go wrong in what we clearly and distinctly perceive, in order to be certain. A moment's reflection reveals a slight problem: how can we be sure that our memory is not deceiving us, and that we really did clearly perceive the thing? But putting aside the issue of how we can be certain that our memory is accurate, does this reply deal with the circle problem? It seems that it does. If it is in fact Descartes' view, then his view is free from circularity.

Unfortunately, matters are not so simple. There are two passages which may seem to indicate that this is not Descartes' view. The backbone of the view, again, is that we can be certain of at least some things without God i.e. of things that we clearly perceive, at the time that we clearly perceive them.

The two passages I have in mind are famous ones: the Third Meditation passage in which Descartes seems to claim that we need to know God exists in order to know anything else, and the atheist mathematician passage in the Second Replies. In the Third Meditation passage, Descartes writes that some things – such as  $2+3=5$ , “I exist for as long as I think,” and so on – seem so clear that he cannot deny them as long as he is thinking of them. But later, when he reflects on even these clearest and

most distinct perceptions, he “cannot but admit that it would be easy for [God], 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...in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt...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” (II.25).

Here Descartes *seems* quite clearly to be saying that we must be sure that God exists before we can be sure of even the clearest propositions. In other words, there is no certainty without certainty about God’s existence and non-deception.

This wrecks havoc on the view delineated above.

In a similar way, Descartes writes in the Second Replies:

“[An atheist] cannot be certain (*certus*) that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident...And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point...So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists”( II.101).

Here Descartes seems to be saying quite clearly that there is no certainty without first conducting the proof of God. Until we know God exists and is not a deceiver, we cannot put to rest the “slight and metaphysical doubt” that we are deceived even in the most evident matters. So much for the simple interpretation which is most readily suggested by Descartes’ reply to Mersenne and Arnauld i.e. that we can be certain of some things without proving that God exists and doesn’t deceive us.

If Descartes denies that we can be certain of anything until we are certain of God’s existence and non-deception, however, how are we to absolve him of the circle objection? Recall that the circle arises in the case that Descartes maintains

exactly what he appears to maintain in the Third Meditation passage i.e. that we need knowledge of God *in order to* have knowledge of *anything*. It is obviously impossible to satisfy the demand that we know God exists prior to knowing God exists. So how are we to interpret Descartes' thesis non-circularly?

### III. Two Kinds of Knowledge

There is a way out of the circle. The way out is to read Descartes as having two concepts of certainty. In the Latin version of the text, Descartes sometimes uses "*cognitio*," sometimes "*scientia*" and sometimes "*certus*" to mean certainty.<sup>9</sup> There is no circle if we read Descartes as having two kinds of certainty, only one of which is possible to attain prior to proving that a non-deceiving God exists. Making a distinction between "*cognitio*" and "*scientia*" (and reading "*certus*" as a neutral term which Descartes uses to refer to either of them) is how I propose to extract Descartes from the circle.

Before looking at the textual basis for the distinction, let me present the difference between the two concepts. *Cognitio* is knowledge which one has when one clearly and distinctly perceives a particular truth. A paradigmatic example of *cognitio* is "there is a sensation," when one is aware of a sensation. Descartes also

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<sup>9</sup> Certus is a neutral term which can refer to either *cognitio* or *scientia*, which are different types of certainty. In the English translation (CSM), this distinction is not obvious, though the editors do acknowledge in a note that he uses both terms, and they sometimes translate "*scientia*" as "perfect knowledge" as opposed to "knowledge."

claims that we can have *cognitio* of such propositions as “I think,” “I exist,” “2+2=4,” as well as “God’s essence includes existence” and others.

The key difference between *cognitio* and *scientia* is that when one has *cognitio*, one is clearly and distinctly aware that one’s belief is true. If the certainty consists of an intuition, then one is clearly aware of the concepts involved such that they are separated from any unclear concepts. A perception is clear “when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind,” and it is distinct if it is both clear and “so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.”<sup>10</sup> If the certainty relies on an argument, then one is clearly aware of all the steps of the proof and of their joint entailment of the conclusion. There is no reliance on the *memory* of having clearly and distinctly perceived something, when one achieves *cognitio*.

*Scientia* is different in two main ways from *cognitio*. First, it does not require clear and distinct awareness of the truth of the perception in question. It is sufficient to merely remember that one clearly and distinctly perceived that the perception was true. Second, having *scientia* requires that one remembers that one once clearly and distinctly perceived that a non-deceptive God exists and that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

In the Second and Third *Meditations*, Descartes establishes with certainty (*cognitio*) that he exists as a thinking thing, that God exists, and that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. He actually has certainty of these things, when he is thinking of

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<sup>10</sup> Principles, Part I.46 (CSM I.207-208).

them. This certainty is not merely psychological conviction, but is infallible connection to the truth. *Cognitio* is also available to the atheist, who is able to become certain in this short-lived way when he is clearly and distinctly aware of various things.

However, *cognitio* has a short-coming which Descartes wishes to overcome. He cannot maintain the sort of certainty offered by *cognitio* beyond the moment of concentrating on particular propositions. As soon as he stops focusing on them, he is able to doubt what he was previously certain of. In other words, his certainty is short-lasting and depends on his attention. Prior to proving that God exists, he is in the same position as the atheist in this regard. The atheist clearly perceives that the sum of the three angles of a triangle is always equal to two right angles, and yet is able to doubt this as soon as he turns his mind away from the proof. When the doubts arise unanswered, they de-stabilize the original *cognitio*. It would be possible to go back and re-build, but doing that constantly would be time-consuming. Descartes wants a foundation of beliefs which can withstand skepticism, as he notes at the beginning of the First Meditation. Elsewhere he says that he thinks one should only overhaul one's beliefs once in a lifetime, not again and again.<sup>11</sup> His goal is to lay the foundation, build the house, and move on. In order to keep the house standing, Descartes requires something further to enable him to answer these doubts when they arise. This is where *scientia* enters the picture.

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<sup>11</sup> "A point to note is that one should not devote so much effort to the *Meditations* and to metaphysical questions, or give them elaborate treatment...it is sufficient to have grasped them one in a general way, and then to remember the conclusion" (III.346).

Perhaps the most evocative way to describe the difference between *scientia* and *cognitio* is to use a metaphor. Suppose that knowledge is a house. (In the Seventh replies, Descartes calls it a chapel). *Cognitio* is like building a house, and *scientia* is preventing the house from being knocked over by doubt (which one could imagine as a strong wind, should one desire to extend the metaphor).

The clearest passage in the *Meditations* where Descartes explains what is necessary for *scientia* is found in the Fifth Meditation. There he writes:

Now...I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, *even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true*, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge (*scientia*) not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on. (II.48).

From this passage, it is clear that we can have *scientia* when we are merely *remembering* the justification rule and other things we have clearly and distinctly perceived. Though we are not now aware that these things are true – we do not now have them clearly in mind – it is sufficient for Descartes that we *could* bring them to mind and regain this awareness. In this way, *scientia* is very different from *cognitio*. Whereas *cognitio* requires *current* clear and distinct perception of the truth in question, *scientia* requires only *prior* clear and distinct perception of the truth as well as *prior* clear and distinct perception that a non-deceiving God exists.

Descartes considers himself to have achieved *scientia* or “perfect knowledge” when he has:

1. Perceived X clearly and distinctly,
2. Now remembers that he perceived X clearly and distinctly,
3. Perceived clearly and distinctly that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.
4. Now remembers that he perceived that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

When all four components are present, Descartes maintains that we have achieved *scientia*. *Scientia* consists of beliefs which can resist skeptical attack, because we are able to dismiss skeptical worries to our satisfaction.

When we dismiss the skeptical worries, we do not have current *cognitio* that X; it is enough, for Descartes, that *in fact* the worries are baseless and that we can point to a reason (i.e. God’s non-deception) to believe that our past clear and distinct perceptions are true. It is important to note that we are not (at the time of the dismissal) clearly and distinctly aware that God exists and doesn’t deceive, as made clear by the Fifth Meditation passage above. Instead, we are merely pointing to a memory of God’s non-deception which assuages our skeptical doubts, and we *could* go back and prove what we are pointing to, if we wanted.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the above passage that Descartes has the concept of certainty considered as *scientia*. Now let’s turn to passages which support a reading on which Descartes also has another concept of certainty i.e. *cognitio*.

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<sup>12</sup> In this way, Descartes’ concept of *scientia* is reminiscent of recent “externalist” theories of justification and knowledge.

First, however, recall the two passages which initially caused the difficulty i.e. the Third Meditation passage and the atheist mathematician passage. Our question is whether these passages are at least compatible with a view on which Descartes has two concepts of certainty, one of which is possible prior to the proof of a non-deceiving God.

In the Third Meditation passage, Descartes writes that when he is focusing on various propositions in whose negations he perceives a contradiction, he cannot but believe that they are true. It is only when he reflects afterwards that he doubts, and he writes that it is this doubt which prevents him from achieving certainty.<sup>13</sup> On my interpretation, Descartes does believe he can have *cognitio* of these propositions when he is focusing on them. It is *scientia*, and not *cognitio*, that he is speaking of when he says that we must prove that God exists. Recall the key passage from the Third Meditation:

“[An atheist] cannot be certain (*certus*) that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident...And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point...So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists”( II.101).

On my interpretation, Descartes is using the neutral word “certus” here to refer to *scientia*. Thus, in this passage, he is denying that we can have *scientia* without God.

Next let’s look at the atheist mathematician passage. There he writes:

The fact that an atheist can be ‘clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles’ is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness (*cognitio*) of his is not true knowledge (*scientia*), since no act of

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<sup>13</sup> Here he uses the neutral word “certus” (which can refer to either kind of certainty), though he clearly has “*scientia*” in mind.

awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge (*scientia*).

Descartes calls this clear awareness *cognitio*, and “true knowledge” is a translation of “*scientia*.” He denies that *cognitio* is *scientia*. On my interpretation, this is not surprising, since the two are very different. It is consistent with this passage that Descartes does think of *cognitio* (what the atheist is able to achieve) as a type of knowledge. This passage makes it clear, however, that Descartes is after *scientia* in the Meditations, and not merely *cognitio*. Descartes is not content with belief that can be shaken, even if it *is* a type of knowledge.

There are two passages in the *Conversation with Burman* which provide evidence that Descartes thinks that we can have some kind of certainty (i.e. *cognitio*) prior to proving God’s existence. Burman objects as follows:

It seems there is a circle. For in the Third Meditation the author uses axioms to prove the existence of God, even though he is not yet certain of not being deceived about these.

Descartes replies:

He does use such axioms in the proof, but he *knows* that he is not deceived with regard to them, because he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain (*certus*) that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to assent to them (CSMK 334, my emphasis).

From this passage, it is clear that Descartes does think that we have some kind of knowledge of some things (in this case, of the premises used to prove the existence of God) prior to becoming sure that God exists. In other words, there is knowledge apart from *scientia*.

Further support for the interpretation comes from Descartes' reply to the circle objection, which we have already seen. Recall that Descartes responds to Mersenne's objection (in which Mersenne argues that we cannot be certain of anything prior to proving God exists) by making a distinction between simple, clearly perceived propositions and those conclusions which we call to mind without calling to mind the argument by which we came to believe them. My interpretation can explain why Descartes would make such a distinction. His view is that we can achieve certainty (*cognitio*) of things we clearly and distinctly perceive, prior to proving that God exists. The conclusions whose arguments we do not call to mind are not clearly perceived at that time. For this reason, we cannot have *cognitio* of them. He does think that we could have *scientia* of them, however, if only we remember that we have clearly perceived that God exists and is not a deceiver.

From these passages, all of which Descartes wrote within a few years of each other, it seems clear that Descartes maintains that 1. there are two kinds of certainty, and 2. only the long-lasting kind (*scientia*) requires conducting a proof of a non-deceiving God.

## **V. Conflicting Passages**

Thus far, I have looked at evidence that Descartes maintains a view on which there are two kinds of certainty, where only *scientia* requires the proof of God and of the

rule that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. I will now lay out the passages which seem to indicate that Descartes thinks that in order to be certain, we must first be certain of the rule that God exists and that all clear and distinct ideas are true. My aim to discern whether these passages are, in spite of first appearance, compatible with my interpretation.

There are three possibly problematic passages. The first is in the First Meditation, where Descartes appears to doubt even the simple truths like  $2+3=5$ . After asking whether he could be deceived about even such “transparent truths,” Descartes concludes that a powerful being could deceive him about even these things. If the evil demon could deceive him even about  $2+3=5$ , he can’t be certain of it, since he has a reason to doubt.

He writes:

...I am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons (CSM 14-15).

This passage may seem to indicate that Descartes thinks that he cannot be certain of anything, not even  $2+3=5$ , until after he proves that God exists. In the First Meditation, he says that he doubts absolutely everything. Then, in order to be certain of anything, he must first discover whether or not God can be a deceiver. Thus, this passage may seem inconsistent with my reading, on which Descartes thinks there is certainty (*cognitio*) without first proving that God exists.

My response to the passage is to consider its place in Descartes’ overall method. In the First Meditation, he does not yet perceive anything clearly and distinctly. It is only later that he distinguishes between those perceptions which are clear and distinct, and

those which are not. The clarity and distinctness of a perception depends not merely on the content of the perception (e.g.  $2+3=5$ ) but on whether he is clearly and distinctly perceives it. When he does clearly and distinctly perceive something (in the Second Meditation and beyond), he achieves certainty, at that time.

In his replies, Descartes notes that in the First Meditation, “[he] was supposing that [he] was not attending to anything that [he] clearly perceived” (II.309). His doubt in the First Meditation was not of clear and distinct perceptions, but was instead merely of the belief that  $2+3=5$  which he had, before he learned how to distinguish clear and distinct perceptions from other beliefs. When he does clearly and distinctly  $2+3=5$ , he becomes certain of it.

One might suppose that it’s impossible to consider  $2+3=5$  without it being clearly and distinctly perceived. But it is apparent that Descartes disagrees. He thinks it’s possible that someone fail to perceive anything clearly and distinctly as long as they live, even though (presumably) they think things like “ $1+1=2$ ” at some point in their lives.<sup>14</sup>

Since Descartes does not clearly and distinctly perceive that  $2+3=5$  in the First Meditation, the passage in which he says that he can doubt it does not constitute evidence against my view. He may doubt  $2+3=5$  *before* he clearly and distinctly perceives it, but that doesn’t mean that is still uncertain of it (lacks *cognitio* of it) afterwards.

The second possibly problematic passage also comes from the Third Meditation.

In the second paragraph, Descartes writes:

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<sup>14</sup> He writes in the Principles I.45, “Indeed there are very many people who in their entire lives never perceive anything with sufficient accuracy to enable them to make a judgment about it with certainty” (CSM I.207).

...I have gone through everything I truly know, or at least everything I have so far discovered that I know. Now I will cast around more carefully to see whether there may be other things within me which I have not yet noticed. I am certain (*certus*) that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain (*certus*) 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 (*certum*) of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true (CSM 24).

Given what he writes here, why doesn't Descartes argue in the following way, which appears to be open to him?

1. I am certain that I am a thinking thing.
2. In this certainty, there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am affirming.
3. The clarity and distinctness of my perception is what makes my belief certain.
4. All other clear and distinct perceptions must also be certain.
5. All certain perceptions are true.
6. Therefore, all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

Why doesn't Descartes argue in this way that all clear and distinct perceptions are true?

Why does he take the somewhat more arduous path of proving that God exists and is not a deceiver, as a means of assuring himself that all clear and distinct perceptions are true?

A different view from mine would have recourse to an easy answer: he is not actually certain that he is a thinking thing, prior to proving that God exists. This explains why he suggests this line of argument, only to retreat from it two paragraphs later. He is convinced that the evil demon hypothesis cancels any certainty that he thought he had. On my view, what could be the explanation?

The most plausible answer to this is that Descartes is not certain of premise 3. Though he can be certain that he is clearly and distinctly perceiving, he is not certain that clarity and distinctness is a sufficient, and not merely a necessary, condition for certainty.<sup>15</sup> There are other features of the belief, like its content (that it is about his existence), as well as how it is caused. Perhaps he can't rule out that it is the content of the belief, and not merely its clarity and distinctness, which is that in virtue of which the belief is certain. Given that he is not certain of this, he can't conclude from the certainty of the belief that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. Instead, he must take the longer route of proving that God exists and doesn't deceive.

There is one more passage that might seem to threaten the interpretation that I have proposed. Voetius objects to Descartes' view by arguing that we *can* come to doubt

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<sup>15</sup> One might object here that if DC doesn't know that clarity and distinctness is sufficient for certainty, then he wouldn't be able to become certain by recognizing that he clearly and distinctly perceives something. My answer to this is that he doesn't recognize his certainty *by way of* its clarity and distinctness. He becomes aware that he is certain, and that he is clearly and distinctly perceiving, but his awareness of the former is not dependent on his knowledge of latter.

things that Descartes is calling certain. In his reply, Descartes distinguishes certainties which we have at the time we are aware of them, which we can come to doubt when they are merely remembered as conclusions, and certainties which we can't come to doubt in any circumstances. He then writes that the fact that we *can* come to doubt the certainties which we have at a time merely shows "the weakness of human nature, since we do not always remain fixed on the same thought." He adds:

It does not follow that there should be any doubt in the knowledge (*scientia*) itself...for I was speaking not of any certainty (*certitudine*) that would endure throughout an entire human life, but merely of the kind of certainty (*scientia*) that is achieved at the moment when some piece of knowledge (*scientia*) is acquired...(CSMK 223, my italics).

On my interpretation, *scientia* is supposed to last an entire human life. Why, then, is Descartes using it to refer to "the kind of certainty that is achieved at the moment when some piece of knowledge is acquired"?<sup>16</sup>

There is one answer which I think may explain this use of the terms. Voetius has pointed out that we may come to doubt what we previously held to be certain. His objection is sufficiently general so as to include such cases as contracting complete amnesia and starting over from scratch. Suppose that we forgot everything that we have ever thought, including whether we clearly and distinctly perceived X. In that case, of course we could come to doubt X (supposing that is not clearly and distinctly perceived every time we think of it). And yet, according to Descartes', this would not prevent us from having *scientia* of it. Hence, the way that we can interpret Descartes in this passage

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<sup>16</sup> This is the only passage that I have found in which Descartes' use of the terms "*cognitio*," "*scientia*" and "*certus*" is surprising, given my interpretation.

is as follows: he is repudiating an objection of the form “If one could come to doubt X under any circumstances whatsoever, one does not have *scientia* of X.” His answer is to deny this claim. We can have *scientia* of X even if, under some special circumstances, we would come to doubt it.

## VI. The Possibility of Certainty

So far, I have explained what I take to be Descartes’ view. I have not addressed the question of whether it is a good view philosophically. This, however, is relevant to my interpretation, since if the view which I ascribe to Descartes is obviously flawed, it is better to look for another view which is compatible the text. Therefore, I now turn to the question of whether it is charitable to attribute this view to Descartes.

I imagine that the main objection which many philosophers would have to the view is as follows. Descartes calls into question whether he might be mistaken even in his clearest perceptions. In the Third Meditation, he writes:

...perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident...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... (II.25).

Whether we hypothesize that an evil god implants false beliefs or gives us a nature such that we come to form false beliefs, the result is the same: we have a reason to doubt that even our clearest beliefs are true. The objection is: as long as it is epistemically possible for Descartes that he is deceived in even his clearest beliefs (or that his nature is defective

and will lead him to false beliefs), he cannot be certain of anything, no matter how clearly he seems to perceive it.<sup>17</sup> In other words:

1. Unless I am certain that I am not deceived about my clearest beliefs (considered generally as a group), it is epistemically possible that any of these beliefs is mistaken.
2. I am not certain that I am not deceived about my clearest beliefs.
3. I have a clear and distinct belief.
4. It is epistemically possible that I am deceived about this belief.
5. If it is epistemically possible that a belief is false, then I cannot be certain that it is true.
6. Therefore, I cannot be certain that this belief is true.

I maintain that Descartes believes we can be certain – i.e. have real, internal connection to the truth –without being certain that all clear and distinct beliefs are true. But, the objection goes, this is uncharitable because it is false. We simply can't be certain of a belief, in Descartes' sense of the word, where we have this (slight, metaphysical) reason for doubting it! We might be convicted (*feel* sure) but we can't actually be certain.<sup>18</sup>

How would Descartes respond to this objection, on my reading? I think that he would deny that premise 1 is true. Suppose that I currently have a clear and distinct belief. I think Descartes would say I can be certain (have *cognitio*) of that belief, even if

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<sup>17</sup> X is epistemically possible iff X is compatible with everything I am certain of. X is epistemically impossible iff X is incompatible with something that I am certain of. X is epistemically necessary iff I am certain of X.

<sup>18</sup> See Chapters 2 and 5 for further description of certainty.

it is epistemically possible that some other, previous clear and distinct beliefs—those I am not currently focused on—are mistaken.<sup>19</sup> So even if I am certain of one clear perception, this does not require that I am certain of the rule that all my clear and distinct perceptions are true. I can't rule out that an evil god deceives me about my other clear beliefs (the ones I merely remember having had) or that I have a nature such that I am misled about some of my clearest beliefs. But I can rule out that I am deceived about this particular belief, when I am certain of it.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the objector will re-formulate the objection more sharply, as follows. There is a strict requirement for becoming certain about anything. In order to become certain of anything, it is necessary to *first* become certain that my clear and distinct perceptions are true, considered generally. In other words, the re-formulated objection is:

1. In order to become certain of X (a particular clear and distinct perception), I must *first* be certain that all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true.
2. I am not certain that all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true.
3. Therefore, I am not certain of X.

First, note that (1) is impossible to fulfill. Anyone who thinks (1) is true should admit straight away that it implies that certainty is impossible. It says that in order to

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<sup>19</sup> A note on belief and certainty: whether or not we continue to have beliefs when we aren't aware of them (it isn't clear to me what Descartes would say about this), it is clear that clear and distinct perception and the certain judgment which accompanies it must be conscious/focused upon. I can only have the certainty (*cognitio*) which accompanies clear and distinct perception if I am currently focusing on the clear and distinct perception. This is because clear and distinct perception must be (by definition) "present and accessible to the attentive mind" (Principles I.46).

<sup>20</sup> Descartes seems to say exactly this in the Conversation with Burman: "He does use such axioms in the proof, but he *knows* that he is not deceived with regard to them, because he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain (*certus*) that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to assent to them (CSMK 334).

become certain of anything, I must first become certain that all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true. This means, of course, that in order to become certain that all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true, I must *first* become certain that all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true. This can't be, then, a recommendation as to the course Descartes should be following in the *Meditations*, in order to achieve certainties.

That being said, I think that Descartes has two possible responses to this objection. The first is to try to convince the objector that certainty is really possible, by leading the objector to become certain of something. This will prove that certainty is possible, thereby showing that (1) is false. I believe that this is a strategy which Descartes employs in the *Meditations*; he insists that it is crucial to meditate with him, in order to become certain about the truth.<sup>21</sup>

In the same vein, though less cooperatively, Descartes can simply respond that he IS certain of something (e.g. there is a sensation), and so (1) can't possibly be true. This is a Moore-type response which I think Descartes should take to such an objection, and which I defend in Chapter 7.<sup>22</sup>

There is also a second way of responding to the objection, which may be more dialectically effective than the Moore-type response. The objector claims that there can be nothing certain *until* it is certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. Why think that this demand must be met, in order to become certain of something? Descartes could challenge the objector's justification for the claim that we must first become certain

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<sup>21</sup> See Second Replies II.113-116.

<sup>22</sup> See chapters 8 and 9.

that all clear and distinct perceptions are true, before becoming that a particular clear and distinct perception is true. The objector can't be certain that this claim is true – by his own argument, this would be impossible. Thus, Descartes could argue that if, in fact, nothing is certain, the objector lacks any justification at all (of the appropriate kind) for his claim. Though Descartes does not take this line, as far as I am aware, it is a line of argument which I will consider in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 2: Other Interpretations Considered

In the first chapter, I laid out Descartes' view of certainty. My view is that he has two levels of certainty. The first is achievable by presently clear and distinct perception. I refer to this as *cognitio*. The second, which I call *scientia*, is achievable only when he achieves first-level knowledge of the rule "all clear and distinct perceptions are true." When he proves that God exists and is not a deceiver, he is then able to defeat doubt about clear and distinct perceptions which occurs when he is not presently aware of them. At that point, *cognitio* becomes *scientia*, since *scientia* is knowledge which cannot be rendered doubtful.

There are, then, two kinds of certainty. As Descartes himself responds, there is no circle, because what is clearly and distinctly perceived all at once (intuitions) are never doubted and are certain as long as they are presently perceived. Since knowledge of the rule that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true is not relied on in achieving first-order certainty, there is no problem in becoming certain (i.e. achieving *cognitio*) of God's existence and deriving the truth rule from it.

I consider this interpretation of Descartes a good fit with the text and the best view available. What is the relation of my interpretation to the work of those who have written on this topic in the past forty years? Surprisingly, the view that I hold has not been held by many other interpreters.

In this chapter, I will consider four interpretations of Descartes which are radically different from mine. In the first three sections, I will describe the views of Edwin Curley, Janet Broughton, and Louis Loeb, which are all similar in their approach. In each section, after presenting their views, I will explain why I think they are mistaken. In the fourth section, I will lay out Harry Frankfurt's view and cite passages from Descartes which refute one of his main claims. In the fifth section, I will consider a view which someone might consider Descartes', involving an alternate conception of truth, and in the sixth section I will explain why it is not charitable to ascribe it to Descartes, even if the text allows for it. Finally, I will conclude by discussing a view which is most similar to my view, held by James Van Cleve, but explain how my view differs from his.

### **I. Epistemic Certainty: Edwin Curley**

In his book *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, Edwin Curley defends an interpretation on which Descartes aims at what I will call epistemic certainty. There are two main features of Curley's theory. The first is that Descartes does not aim at finding beliefs which are indubitable in the "normative sense of indubitability" (123), i.e. beliefs which are connected to the truth. Instead, he aims only at beliefs which he can't help but believe, and which he can find no valid reason to doubt. He writes, "...part of the strategy is to adopt a subjectivist conception of proof...Descartes will accept an argument as a proof if, as he is going through it, it compels his assent, and if, at the end of the

argument, he finds that he has no valid ground for doubting the conclusion” (116). That an argument compels assent is compatible with its conclusion being false. Thus, according to Curley, Descartes is willing to accept beliefs which might (for all he knows) be false, as the end products of his inquiry. Curley writes, “[Descartes] admits that indubitability is compatible with falsity. But he is unconcerned about this...” (118).

The second main aspect of Curley’s thesis is that Descartes believes that skeptics must have a “valid ground for doubt” in order to make a dialectical case for skepticism (116). If they have no such ground, then they lose the battle, since they are required to give a reasonable ground for skepticism. Curley presents the following picture of what is required for a ground of doubt to be valid:

Someone has a valid ground for doubting a proposition,  $p$ , if and only if he can think of some other proposition,  $q$ , such that

- (i)  $q$  is incompatible with  $p$  or with some principle,  $r$ , which provides the basis for his assent to  $p$ ;
- (ii)(a) if either  $p$  or  $r$  is not assent-compelling, then he can think of no assent-compelling proposition incompatible with  $q$ .
- (b) if both  $p$  and  $r$  are assent-compelling, then so is  $q$ .
- (iii)  $q$  explains how he might have erroneously thought  $p$ . (122)

Suppose that  $p$  is “God does not deceive” and  $q$  is “there is powerful being deceiving me in even my clearest perceptions.” Descartes provides an assent-compelling argument for  $p$ . If the skeptic is to prevail, then he must also provide an assent-compelling argument

for  $q$ . But he does not. Descartes is then in a position to be certain of  $p$ , since skepticism presents him with no valid ground for doubt.

This view—like Broughton and Loeb’s views, which I will discuss shortly—has the merit of keeping Descartes from arguing circularly. Rather than argue that we can somehow get from a state of doubt to a state of normative certainty, Curley argues that Descartes never attempts to get to the state of normative certainty at all. His goal is to stay in the realm of epistemic certainty, where this means that he is compelled to believe and has no good reason to stop believing. But at no point does Descartes claim to have *definitely* reached the truth. He can effectively respond to the skeptic without doing that, according to Curley, which is enough for his purposes.

Though Curley’s view has merits, I think it is clear that it can’t be right. I have two main objections. The first is the following. Descartes claims that once we have proved that God exists and is not a deceiver, *scientia* is now possible, which is a state of unshakable belief. He makes it clear that *scientia* is immune to all possible challenges, even ones which have not yet arisen. In the Second Replies, for instance, he writes that the atheist’s awareness is not true knowledge (*scientia*). The reason he gives is that “he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived...although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself...” (101).

Curley claims that Descartes can achieve certainty as long as the skeptic has not given an assent-compelling argument for a skeptical hypothesis. The problem is that

there seems to be no way to rule out that the skeptic will come up with such an argument. If Descartes has not achieved normative certainty, but only indubitability, with respect to a belief, then it's epistemically possible that the belief is false. It is thus also epistemically possible that the skeptic will come up with an assent-compelling argument that the belief is false. Even if the skeptic has no such reason now, it's epistemically possible that he will come up with such a reason later. If he does, there will be a valid ground for doubt, and the belief will no longer be certain. Therefore, fulfilling the conditions of Curley's epistemic certainty does not guarantee unshakability. But this is a point on which Descartes is clear: he thinks that the theist, unlike the atheist, achieves unshakable beliefs.

I conclude that a view on which we only achieve epistemic certainty cannot be Descartes' view. Instead, Descartes believes that we discover the truth about God's existence and non-deception, among other things. We are also normatively certain that contraries cannot be possible together, and we can therefore be certain that we will not happen upon any (clear and distinct) reason to disbelieve what we have clearly and distinctly perceived.<sup>23</sup>

My second objection to Curley is the same objection that I will make against Broughton and Loeb. These interpretations have in common the following: they do not leave a place for Descartes' claims that he aims at and achieves the truth.

The concept of certainty which they ascribe to Descartes is compatible with false belief. Even if my assent is compelled and I have no good reason to stop believing, it is still left

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<sup>23</sup> See chapter on the creation of the eternal truths for my approach to Descartes' view on this matter.

open by the theory that my belief is false. If this is the case, then Descartes would not have any reason to claim that he has discovered the truth, as he frequently does.

Consider the following passages:

...If there is anything which is evident to my intellect, then it is wholly true.  
(*Fifth Meditation*, II.29)

I have already amply demonstrated that everything of which I am clearly aware is true. (*Fifth Meditation*, II.45).

...No matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e. without being true. (Seventh Replies, II.310).

...Our ideas cannot be anything but true, in every respect in which they are clear and distinct. (*Discourse on Method*, I.130).

I ask [my readers] to ponder on those self-evident propositions which they will find within themselves...and by this means the truth of the following axioms will easily become apparent to them” (Second Replies, II.115).

The best way to interpret these statements, it seems to me, is to take them at face value.

Descartes is really aiming at the truth, and aims to prove that our clear and distinct perceptions are true. He is not aiming merely at proofs which compel our assent, but which could be false for all we can tell. He thinks that we can come to know the truth through his arguments, as long as we meditate carefully.

Curley writes that “Descartes does not want to rely, in his published works (that is, making an exception for the *Regulae*), on the contention that his first principles are self-evident. He knows that self-evidence will be dismissed by the skeptic as a matter of merely subjective conviction, liable to great variation from one person to another” (115). But this theory is completely at odds with, for instance, the last passage in the list above. In it, Descartes encourages his readers to discover the truth of self-evident propositions

through meditation. Only a theory which posits extreme prevarication on Descartes' part could reconcile this passage with Curley's thesis.

There is only one passage which might seem to give support Curley's view. This is a passage in the Second Replies, where he writes of "a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed" and adds that "such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty."<sup>24</sup>

To Curley, Frankfurt and others, this passage is good evidence that Descartes does not aim at anything more than unshakable conviction. Curley writes, "Descartes recognizes that perfect certainty—understood as a conviction so strong that it cannot be overthrown—is compatible with absolute falsity. But he regards the demand for anything more than his perfect certainty as quixotic" (108).<sup>25</sup>

Though I find this passage puzzling, I think there are two convincing reasons not to read it as Curley does. First, there are many passages (some of them cited above) which provide evidence that Descartes is aiming at the truth. To take this single passage (the only one of its kind) as clear evidence that Descartes is not aiming at the truth would be to ignore or to give a non-straightforward reading of many passages in the main body

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<sup>24</sup> "As soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty." (Second Replies, II.103.)

<sup>25</sup> In this passage, Curley is describing Frankfurt's view. But I quote it because it also represents his view about this passage.

of his work, in order to give a straightforward reading to one passage in the Replies. This is not the right approach unless there is absolutely no other plausible explanation of this passage available.

Second, there is another reading of this passage which I think is better. Descartes is considering an objector who responds to his certainties by suggesting that not everyone sees things in the same way. He suggests that even though Descartes thinks he is certain, God or an angel might not have the same perceptions that he does. This objection amounts to this: Descartes thinks he is certain, but he may not be certain. But this isn't a good objection. The certainties prevail, since Descartes is actually certain of them. And so he responds by dismissing this objection as "feigned." A few paragraphs later, he writes, "the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story" (II.104). He is dismissing the objection as weak and insubstantial compared to his certainty.

Descartes then adds that we have everything we could reasonably want, and that "such conviction is the same as the most perfect certainty." Doesn't this indicate that he is concerned merely with the conviction (stability of belief) and not with grasping the truth? I don't think so. It's quite possible that by "is the same as," he means to say that perfect certainty *involves* this unshakable conviction as a necessary condition, but does not mean that it is a sufficient condition. Read this way, he is merely saying that perfect certainty is at least unshakable belief, and is not saying that perfect certainty is *merely* unshakable belief. It's left open that a belief must also be true, in order to be certain.

Given that the passage can be read compatibly with my view, and that it is outweighed by many passages which are at odds with Curley's view, I conclude that there is more evidence against Curley's view than for it. I will now consider two other views which are similar to Curley's in some respects.

## **II. Epistemic Certainty: Janet Broughton**

Janet Broughton's theory has two main features. First, like Curley, she argues that by certainty, Descartes means a state of being unable to rationally doubt that a proposition is true. She has a slightly different way of setting up the requirement for rational doubt. Broughton begins by claiming that in order to doubt, I must construct a skeptical scenario in which my belief is false. The scenario must give an account of why I have the belief that I do. For instance, in the evil demon scenario, it's false that I have hands, but I believe it because the demon is causing it to appear to me as if I have hands.

Broughton's interpretation is as follows. To discover what is certain, we must consider propositions which have to be true if any imaginable skeptical scenario were to be the case. Those propositions, she argues, are ones which we cannot rationally doubt. Therefore, we can be certain of them, where certainty is rational indubitability.

Broughton calls this strategy one which uses "dependence arguments," and writes, "Suppose I somehow managed to show that I could have a reason for doubting a particular belief—the belief that (B)—only if that belief were true. By recognizing this, I

would be able to see that I cannot rationally doubt whether (B) is true: I would be able to be absolutely certain about (B)” (99).

Broughton’s theory has the advantage of avoiding the circle. This is because according to her view, Descartes is able to be certain of some things without first being certain of God’s existence. He can be certain that he exists, for instance, since any skeptical scenario is one which describes a meditator who has been caused to have false beliefs. In any skeptical scenario, he exists. Therefore, he cannot rationally doubt that he exists. Descartes is also unable to construct a skeptical scenario in which it is false that God exists, according to Broughton. Therefore, he cannot doubt this. Since he doesn’t rely on any rule of justification to prove that God exists, he does not argue circularly.

Broughton’s theory coheres well with some of the things that Descartes says about the use of the method of doubt.<sup>26</sup> However, it has a second feature which puts it at odds with many passages. Like Curley, Broughton argues that Descartes aims at and achieves indubitability, where this is compatible with the falsity of his beliefs.<sup>27</sup> I have already cited passages which indicate that this is not the correct reading. It’s very implausible that Descartes aimed at merely indubitability, given his many assertions otherwise. Broughton’s view is appealing, since it is an interesting idea of how one

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<sup>26</sup> For example, he writes in *The Search for Truth*, “Just give me your attention and I shall conduct you further than you think. For from this universal doubt, as from a fixed and immovable point, I propose to derive the knowledge of God, of yourself, and of everything in the universe” (II.409). It is also consistent with this that Descartes use doubt to separate clear from unclear perceptions, which is how I read this sentence.

<sup>27</sup> Though she isn’t so explicit about this point as Curley, it’s clear that this is true. The fact that I can’t doubt X using a skeptical scenario does not entail that X is true.

might go about attaining unshakable beliefs, but it does not leave room for aiming at and achieving the truth, and so cannot be Descartes' view.

### III. Psychological Certainty: Louis Loeb

Louis Loeb draws a distinction between epistemic and psychological certainty. He discusses two kinds of interpretations, one on which Descartes aims at the former, and his own interpretation, according to which Descartes aims at the latter. If Descartes aims at epistemic certainty, then he aims to prove the truth rule ("all clear and distinct perceptions are true") in order to provide a good reason not to doubt clear and distinct perception. He then has epistemic certainty about his clear and distinct perceptions i.e. no good reason to doubt them. This is the view which Curley and Frankfurt hold.

Loeb's view is that the proof of the truth rule merely makes it psychologically impossible, according to Descartes, to doubt clear and distinct perceptions. Descartes does not aim at giving a good reason not to doubt. He only aims at making clear and distinct perception unshakable by rendering us incapable of doubting it.

The main reason that Loeb gives to think that Descartes favors psychological indubitability is that he doesn't discuss unshakability in terms of what is unreasonable or unjustified to doubt. Instead, he uses terminology which indicates a psychological basis for the inability to doubt i.e. a firmness of belief which *can't* be overturned by any argument.

I think that Loeb's interpretation is wrong for the same reason that I think Curley and Broughton's interpretations are wrong. His view does not allow for Descartes' stated pursuit of truth, and so it doesn't cohere adequately with the text. Though his view does have the advantage of avoiding the circle, it has Descartes aim only at psychological certainty, where this can (for all he knows) come apart from the truth. I do not see how to reconcile this with his many assertions that he has aimed at and achieved the truth.

#### **IV. An Alternate Conception of Truth: Harry Frankfurt**

Harry Frankfurt's view consists of two claims. The first claim is that for Descartes, we are certain of X if we clearly and distinctly perceive X and have no reasonable ground for doubting it. He claims that Descartes aims to show that using reason leads to no reason to doubt reason. Once we have clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and is not a deceiver, we are able to deduce that all of our clear and distinct perceptions are true. We then have a reason to believe which is incompatible with the deceiving god hypothesis and all other reasons to doubt. Given that there is no reason for doubting, the skeptic's doubt is rendered "utterly capricious" (173).

Now I will consider Frankfurt's second claim. Unlike the other views I have looked at, Frankfurt's view is that Descartes is aiming at truth. However, on his view, the relevant concept of truth is something other than correspondence of thought to reality. He writes,

Descartes's most basic and insistent preoccupation is with certainty itself, and he tends to be rather indifferent to the question of whether the certain corresponds or fails to correspond with the real. . . . certainty is his fundamental epistemological concept, and he defines truth in terms of it. Now certainty is for him essentially a matter of the coherence of evidence. It is a coherence theory of truth, accordingly, which most authentically expresses the standards and goals of his inquiry. (*Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, 26)

Frankfurt maintains that Descartes' view is that truth is consistency of beliefs. If he can show that there is no reason to doubt that clear and distinct perceptions are consistent with each other, then he has shown that we can be certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

Frankfurt explains further how the argument in the *Meditations* proceeds. When Descartes proves that God exists and does not deceive, this amounts to a proof that all clear and distinct perceptions are consistent. This is because if we can be certain that God does not deceive, we can be certain that all of our clear and distinct perceptions—the beliefs which we can't help but assent to—are true. Since truth is consistency, Frankfurt claims, Descartes has then proved that clear and distinct perceptions are all consistent. Thus, all skeptical scenarios on which our clear and distinct perceptions are inconsistent are ruled out, and reason is vindicated: we can be sure that using reason will not lead to inconsistent (i.e. false) beliefs.

The main passage which Frankfurt uses to support his claim is the one found in the second replies, in which Descartes writes:

What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that is quite

incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty” (II.103).

From this passage, Frankfurt concludes that absolute truth and falsity are irrelevant to his inquiry. He writes, “Descartes cares less about the correspondence of beliefs to “reality” than he does about their permanence and constancy” (180).

On Frankfurt’s view, Descartes avoids the circle. Frankfurt writes, “When it is understood that his problem is to remove any basis for doubting the consistency of the set of clear and distinct perceptions, it is not so difficult to understand how his argument avoids the elementary logical blunder of circularity with which it has so often been charged” (171). There is no circularity, because Descartes merely relies on premises he can’t doubt, not premises which he must assume to be true before he is in a position to do so.

My main objection to this view is that it is clear from several passages that Descartes does not mean consistency of belief by “truth.” Instead, he clearly indicates that he uses “truth” to mean correspondence with reality. There are several passages which imply this clearly:

The chief and most common mistake...consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me. Of course, if I considered just the ideas themselves simply as modes of my thought, without referring them to anything else, they could scarcely give me any material for error. (*Third Meditation*, II.26)

When a judgment is false, this is because I judge that my ideas resemble things outside me when they do not. This clearly implies that a judgment is true if it correctly describes the resemblance of an idea to something outside me. Even clearer is this passage:

No matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e. without being true. (*Seventh Replies*, II.310)

However, the absolute clearest passage is this one:

...for my part, I have never had any doubts about truth, because it seems a notion so transcendently clear that nobody can be ignorant of it. There are many ways of examining a balance before using it, but there is no way to learn what truth is, if one does not know it by nature. What reason would we have for accepting anything which could teach us the nature of truth if we did not know that it was true, that is to say, if we did not know truth? Of course it is possible to explain the meaning of the word to someone who does not know the language, and tell him that the word 'truth', in the strict sense, denotes the conformity of thought with its object, but that when it is attributed to things outside thought, it means only that they can be the objects of true thoughts, either ours or God's. (Letter to Mersenne, 16 October 1639, III.130)

It is impossible to mistake Descartes' theory of truth for a theory according to which truth is consistency among beliefs, given that this passage says the opposite so clearly.<sup>28</sup> As for the passage which Frankfurt cites, in which Descartes writes, "Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us," I take it that he does not mean that if our beliefs were absolutely false, it wouldn't bother us. Rather, as the second half of the sentence says, he thinks that there is no reason to think that our clear and distinct perceptions are absolutely false. The clear implication is that if there was a good reason, we might worry, but as the situation stands, we are certain of our beliefs, and we can therefore dismiss the "alleged" absolute falsity as a made-up story (104).

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<sup>28</sup> And in fact, Frankfurt ultimately gave up his view because of this passage.

In the next section, I will consider another view, on which Descartes takes “truth” to mean something other than either correspondence to reality or consistency among beliefs.

## **V. Another Conception of Truth**

Suppose that someone were to interpret the above passage about truth as denoting “conformity of thought with its object” as indicating, not that Descartes holds a correspondence theory, but that he thinks something like the following.

There is a set of beliefs which is special, in that it is the set of beliefs which 1. are the results of an ideal inquiry, or 2. are maximally well-justified beliefs, and/or 3. are ideally rational. Beliefs are true not because they correspond to reality, nor because they cohere with each other (though this is true), but because they have some property like one of those above.

The alternate theory of truth theory is as follows. Descartes writes that “truth...denotes the conformity of thought with its object...” (III.130). By “its object,” he means one of the beliefs which is included in a special set like one of those listed above. For a thought to be true, it must conform to, i.e. be the same as, one of the beliefs which is a part of the set of ideally rational beliefs, or the results of an ideal inquiry, or etc. A proponent of this view might propose that for Descartes, the ideal beliefs are clear and distinct perceptions. Thus, a belief is true if it is a clear and distinct perception.

Perhaps these beliefs in particular are included in the special set because they are those for which there is maximal evidence.

If Descartes held this view, his view would be like that of Hilary Putnam, who has argued that “truth comes to no more than idealized rational acceptability.”<sup>29</sup> For the moment I will put aside whether this view seems to fit with this passage and others. Is this view of truth coherent?

There are several reasons to think that it is not. I will consider several particular versions. Consider the following version. A belief is true if it is the result of an ideal inquiry, where an ideal inquiry is one which relies upon all of the relevant evidence. The problem here arises in the notion of evidence. A proposition is generally considered as evidence just in case it entails another proposition’s truth or makes it likely that another proposition is true. Clearly, no such notion can be used in the definition of truth, since truth is the very thing being defined. Thus, evidence must be disconnected entirely from truth. But if evidence isn’t related to the truth in the usual way, it’s not clear what evidence is or why an inquiry would be ideal if it was based on all the relevant evidence.<sup>30</sup>

Nor will a version of this theory which uses only the notion of justification work. Suppose the theory is that a belief is true just in case it is ideally justified. Again, justification is usually thought to have some connection to the truth. A belief is justified just in case there are good reasons to think that it is true. But on this view, it is

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<sup>29</sup> Cited in Alston, William. *A Realist Conception of Truth* (1996), 184.

<sup>30</sup> Alston makes a similar point in *A Realist Conception of Truth*, 205.

impossible to tie justification to truth, since truth is the thing which is being defined in terms of justification. So “justification” must have some other meaning, and it is not clear what it is.

Likewise, the view that a belief is true if it is ideally rationally acceptable also seems to involve the notion of truth, via the concept of rational acceptance. But if “rational acceptance” is divorced from the concepts of having evidence, having reasons to believe that a proposition is true, and so forth, it is no longer clear what it means. Generally, we consider it rational to accept a proposition if there are good reasons i.e. justification for thinking that it is true.

Thus, the various views according to which truth is defined in terms of some epistemic state seem to have the problem of illicitly presupposing the concept of truth. In any case, as a final point, according to this interpretation, to be true *just is to be* a clear and distinct perception. That is, the concept of truth includes the concept of being a clear and distinct perception. But if that is the case, the passage in the Seventh Replies (“nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e. without being true”) is trivially true. As it stands, Descartes never mentions that he thinks that the concept of truth involves that of clear and distinct perception, and in fact he treats the claim “all clear and distinct perceptions are true” as a synthetic claim which needs to be proved.

Thus, neither of the two alternate theories of truth seems to work as an interpretation of what Descartes means by truth. I conclude that the best reading of Descartes is to take him as claiming that truth is correspondence of thought with reality.

## **VI. Justifying the Foundations: Van Cleve**

James Van Cleve's view is perhaps the closest to my own. He reads Descartes as having a two-level view, on which only the second level requires the proof of God and the use of the rule that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. On the first level are clear and distinct perceptions which we can be certain of simply by having them. When I am in the state of perceiving e.g. "there is a thought" and am also aware of that very thought, I am certain that there is a thought. This first level of beliefs is what I refer to as *cognitio*. It is clear and distinct perception, which does not require that I have or apply the concept of certainty.

After becoming certain in this way of the premises needed to prove that a non-deceiving God exists, I can become certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. At that point, I can become certain of clear and distinct perceptions which I merely recollect. In this way I achieve *scientia*, since there is no way in which I can doubt the first-level beliefs. If ever I attempt to doubt recalled clear and distinct perceptions, I can call to mind the proof that clear and distinct perceptions are true, and retain my certainty of them.

So far, I agree with Van Cleve. But here is where we diverge: I will now present two claims of Van Cleve's, and afterwards explain why I think that both are mistaken. First, according to Van Cleve, Descartes thinks that until I prove the rule that clear and distinct perceptions are true (hereafter the C+D rule), the belief that I am certain that X—where X is some clear and distinct perception—is unjustified. It is only after I prove the C+D rule, according to Van Cleve, that I am justified in believing I am certain that X. This is because the justification for the belief “I am certain that X” comes from the proof of the C+D rule.

Van Cleve arranges the order of beliefs as follows:

- (1) I think, the causal maxims, etc      Propositions known because they are clearly and distinct perceived.
- (2) God exists, God is no deceiver      Propositions known because they are clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from premises at level (1).
- (3) Whatever I c+d perceive is certain Principle known because it is clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from propositions at level 2.
- (4) I perceive clearly and distinctly      New premises, one corresponding to each premise at level (1)
- (5) I am certain that I think, etc.      Propositions known because they are clearly and distinctly perceived to follow from propositions at levels (3) and (4).

Thus, Van Cleve's view is that Descartes proceeds from premises of which I am certain, but to which I cannot apply the concept of certainty, to the C+D rule, and finally to propositions like "I am certain that I think." Until I proceed through these steps, I am not in a position to assert that I am certain of anything, though I can *be* certain of some things without recognizing it.

Van Cleve's second claim is that Descartes uses the C+D rule as a means of justifying the foundational premises. Suppose that the skeptic says that the foundational premises (I think, etc) are arbitrary. By "arbitrary," he means that there is no more reason to accept than to reject them. Van Cleve claims that the right way to respond to this is to claim that there is a principle deduced from them—the C+D rule—which validates the foundational premises. Since the rule says that clear and distinct perceptions are true, and they are in fact clear and distinct, we have a way of justifying belief in them. Van Cleve suggests that this a dialectically sound way of refuting the skeptic's charge: the foundational premises are not arbitrary, since there is a reason for believing them.

He writes:

[Being certain of the C+D rule] enable [Descartes] to vindicate his starting point. It gives him an answer to the critic who says, "I grant that your procedure is not circular, but I don't see how you can escape the charge of arbitrariness in your first premises. What is the justification for starting from just the premises you did?" After he has proved proposition [the C+D rule] Descartes can give the following reply: "Those premises are things I knew for certain. The proof is that I perceived them clearly and distinctly, and whatever I so perceive is certain. (72)

I will respond to both of Van Cleve's claims. First, is it true that we must first prove the C+D rule, before we are in a position to know that we are certain of anything?

I don't think so. For Descartes, it's possible to know that "I am certain of X," merely on the basis of my clear and distinct perception that X. First, I have the clear and distinct perception of X. At this point, I am certain of X. I agree with Van Cleve that I can be certain of X even if I don't have the concept of X, or if I am not applying it.

Next, if I have the concept of certainty, I can apply this to my clear and distinct perception. When I do this, I recognize and am in a position to say "I am certain of X." There is no additional step of proving the C+D rule required. I merely apply my concept of certainty to my clear and distinct perception. The result of applying my concept of certainty in this way is still only *cognitio*; in order to achieve *scientia* I would have to take the further step of becoming certain of the C+D rule.

I can also become certain that I am certain in the same way. If I can apply my concept of certainty, and in this way because certain that I am clearly and distinctly perceiving something, then I can also apply my concept of certainty again to the first-level certainty. I clearly and distinctly perceive X (I am certain that X), and then I clearly and distinctly perceive that I am clearly and distinctly perceiving X (I recognize that I am certain of X), and then finally I can also clearly and distinctly perceive that I am certain of X (I recognize that I am certain that I am certain of X). At no point is the C+D rule called for.

Thus, on my view all the justification required or desired for the foundational principles is available, without proving the C+D rule. There are two reasons to believe this. First, there is textual support for it. Descartes claims that he is certain and asserts

this prior to the proof of the C+D rule, in the Third Meditation. He writes, “The modes of thinking which I refer to as cases of sensory perception and imagination, in so far as they are simply modes of thinking, do exist within me – of that I am certain” (24) He also writes, “I am certain that I am a thinking thing.” (24) Descartes is clearly asserting that he is certain of some things (and is in a position to recognize it) at this stage. There is no hint that he is unable to assert that he is certain here, as Van Cleve claims.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, this is a more charitable view. This is because it’s far from clear that it’s possible to validate the foundational principles in the way that Van Cleve describes. On Van Cleve’s view, until he deduces the C+D rule from the first principles, Descartes is not in a position to justify them. It is only after he deduces the C+D rule that he has a reason available to him for accepting the first principles. Only after he deduces the C+D rule, Van Cleve claims, is he in the position to answer the skeptic’s charge that the first principles are arbitrary.

If this were true, it seems that Descartes couldn’t become certain of the first principles at all without circularity. If his first principles are (for all he knows) arbitrary to begin with, then nothing which he deduces from them can bring him to be certain of them. It is clear that nothing deduced from uncertain principles can render them certain. What is deduced from uncertain principles will itself be uncertain. If the C+D rule is uncertain, then it can’t be used to render clear and distinct perceptions certain

Moreover, if Descartes could only justify the first principles by referencing

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<sup>31</sup> In the First Chapter, I interpreted the passage at the end of the fourth paragraph of the Third Meditation as indicating that Descartes can’t achieve *scientia* prior to proving that God exists. Here, of course, I am merely talking about *cognitio*, and so this passage doesn’t call into question my view.

something later deduced from them, this wouldn't help him respond to the skeptic. If the skeptic claims that the foundational principles are arbitrary, there is no reason for him to concede that they are non-arbitrary, on the basis of something deduced from them.

Anything deduced from them will be as arbitrary as they are.

A note about this last claim. There is a circumstance in which something deduced from arbitrary principles could render them less arbitrary. Suppose that it could be shown that in general, if a method self-validates i.e. yields the result that it is true, it is more likely than it would be otherwise to be true.<sup>32</sup> Then deducing the C+D rule from C+D premises might increase the epistemic likelihood that they are true. But this isn't something which either Van Cleve or Descartes shows. And in any case, the self-validation would only increase the epistemic likelihood that they are true, and wouldn't render them certain.

I conclude that the most charitable reading of Descartes is one on which his belief that he is certain is derived from his clear and distinct awareness of the first principles. He has the concept of certainty, and applies this to his clear and distinct perception, and without any further justification he is aware that he is certain.

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<sup>32</sup> Induction may be an example of a method which self-validates.

### Chapter 3: Memory

Does Descartes think that memory is infallible or fallible? If he thinks that memory is fallible, does this jeopardize the attainment of either type of certainty? In this chapter, I will first discuss about whether Descartes doubts memory. I will then argue that for the role he assigns to memory, it is not necessary that he knows that memory is infallible, or even that it be infallible unbeknownst to him. To attain *scientia*, it is enough that he in fact does remember correctly.

#### 1. Doubts about memory

Does Descartes doubt memory? There are several places in Descartes' work where it may appear that he is calling memory's reliability into question: in the First Meditation, he writes, "I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened" (II.16).

The First Meditation passage is similar to one in the Principles, in which he writes: "What does very often give rise to error is that there are many things which we think we perceived in the past; once these things are committed to memory, we give our assent to them just as we would if we had fully perceived them, whereas in reality we never perceived them at all" (I.207). How shall we understand these passages? There are two ways of reading them. The first is to read him as calling memory into question. The

second is: he in fact remembers correctly how things appeared to him at past times, but he was mistaken about which things were happening, at those times.

The best reading of both passages is the latter. He is not doubting memory, but rather he is doubting that the things he believed in the past were true. This is the best reading for two reasons. First, the wording of the Principles passage lends itself to the reading that we remember things which appeared to us to be the case at some time, but which were not the case. We later think that they were clear to us, remembering our state at the time, but we are mistaken. Second, in the conversation with Burman, Descartes reveals an attitude toward memory which would conflict with the first possible reading of the passage. If Descartes is concerned with memory, to the extent that he would write that many errors derive from memory, one would not expect him to respond to Burman in the following way.

Burman says: “Someone, however, may still raise the following objection: after I have proved that God exists and is not a deceiver, then I can say that my mind certainly does not deceive me, since a reliable mind was God’s gift to me; but my memory may still deceive me since I may think I remember something which I do not in fact remember. This is because of the weakness of memory.”

Descartes: “I have nothing to say on the subject of memory. Everyone should test himself to see whether he is good at remembering. If he has any doubts on that score, then he should make use of written notes and so forth to help him”  
(Conversation with Burman, CSMK III.334.)

Thus, the First Meditation passage may be read not as raising a skeptical worry about memory, but rather as calling into question our seemingly clear perceptions at a time, which we then remember as clear and true. This fits well with the other skeptical doubts in the First Meditation. We may think we remember being awake, not deceived in

our beliefs, etc. But Descartes raises scenarios which are meant to call into question the basis for these beliefs. Thus, what we thought we perceived and then remembered may not actually be true; the fault does not lie with memory but with our initial judgments.

There is no definitive reason to think that Descartes was worried about the reliability of memory. On the other hand, did he think that memory was infallible? That is not clearly the case either. If he believed that memory was infallible, then why would he answer Burman by saying that if anyone has doubts, they should use written memory aids? It seems that he would respond by saying that we never make errors with memory. Furthermore, it seems odd that if Descartes thinks memory is infallible, he would omit explicit discussion, proofs, etc.

I conclude that while Descartes is not overly worried about memory, neither does he think that it is impossible to make mistakes when using memory. Looking at the texts, it seems most plausible that Descartes does think we can make mistakes using memory, but is not particularly disturbed by this fact. The question I turn to next is as follows: is there reason for Descartes to be worried about memory, given the use that he makes of it in his epistemology?

## **II. The Use of Memory**

There are several roles which memory could play in Descartes' system. I will mention the first only to put it aside: Willis Doney suggests that the purpose of

introduction God into the *Meditations* is to validate memory. Until proving that God exists and does not deceive, Descartes cannot be sure that what he seems to remember, he does in fact remember. This handicaps him in terms of completing long proofs, and so he proves God exists and doesn't deceive him about memory in order to assuage that worry. He is able to perceive all the required elements of the God proof without memory, so there is no circularity.

As Harry Frankfurt points out, there is much evidence against this interpretation and little for it. First, the Burman passage cited above is not what we'd expect, if Descartes' primary aim were to prove that memory was reliable. We would expect that he would report that we can know that our memory does not deceive us, because God would not let us be deceived. Second, Descartes says nothing about God's validating memory, and much about God validating the rule that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. If he were using God to validate memory, we should expect to see at least some positive indication of this. I conclude that Descartes is not trying to validate memory using the proof of God.

What use does he make of memory, then? He does not claim to be certain that memories are accurate: for all Descartes says, it could be that sometimes we make mistakes. Nowhere does he argue that memory is infallible. Nonetheless, memory does play a major role in achieving *scientia*.

Let's consider a crucial passage in the Fifth Meditation, where Descartes describes his reliance on memory in obtaining *scientia*. He writes:

Now...I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, *even if I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to judge that this is true*, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived it, there are no counter-arguments which can be adduced to make me doubt it, but on the contrary I have true and certain knowledge of it. And I have knowledge (*scientia*) not just of this matter, but of all matters which I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and so on. (II.48, my emphasis).

Descartes is saying that he can be certain of e.g. some mathematical truth if

A. he remembers that he clearly and distinctly perceived it, and

B. he remembers that he clearly and distinctly perceived that all clear and distinct perceptions are true.

At the time of achieving *scientia*, then, he is not clearly and distinctly perceiving anything, but is only remembering the clear and distinct perceptions.

This is puzzling.

Descartes is not claiming that we can be certain of past clear and distinct perceptions by *now* clearly and distinctly perceiving something which allows us to be certain of them. He is not saying that we can attain *cognitio* of God's non-deception and of the justification rule, and then infer that what we remember clearly and distinctly perceiving is true. Instead, he is claiming that merely on the basis of memory, we can have *scientia* ("full and perfect knowledge") of what we remember.

Suppose that by "*scientia*" Descartes means current certainty, of the same sort that I have of things like "there is a sensation." It seems that he lacks this type of certainty of what he merely remembers. Remembered things are not certain in

themselves, without further inference (as shown by our ability to doubt them, even when we are thinking about them). Neither – according to the above passage – is Descartes *inferring* them from something which is certain in the way that “there is a sensation” is certain. Thus, according to him, *scientia* doesn’t involve this type of certainty.

Instead, I think Descartes has something else in mind. The two types of certainty work very differently. *Cognitio* is the sort of certainty that really connects a person to the truth. We can tell when we are certain of things in this way, if we pay attention, and this sort of certainty is infallible connection to the truth. This is the type of knowledge which is akin to building a house.

Prior to the Fifth Meditation, it is possible for the house to become de-stabilized. This could happen if the meditator raises doubts which he cannot answer. By raising general doubts such as “what if not all of my clear and distinct perceptions are true?” or “what if an evil demon exists?” the meditator would be allowing the house to fall down. Though it would still be possible to rebuild the house, by thinking again of the intuition/proofs, this is a tedious process to do over and over again.

Descartes’ solution is to come to have *cognitio* – at one time – of the proof of a non-deceiving God, who would not allow any clear and distinct perception to be mistaken. Then, at any point in the future when the meditator raises doubts, he is able to think “But I have clearly and distinctly perceived that God would not allow that.”

At this point, we might wonder why Descartes would be satisfied with such a solution. When he is putting his doubts to rest, he is not actually clearly perceiving that

there is a proof that puts them to rest. It is not as if he is proving that he couldn't be deceived, or proving that all of her clear and distinct perceptions are true. Rather, he is remembering such a proof. Why does Descartes consider this enough to keep his house stabilized in the face of doubt? Why would he not continue to doubt, thinking that he might be mis-remembering, that he never clearly and distinctly perceived what he thinks he did?

The answer must be that Descartes is not concerned with *knowing* (in the sense that we know when we clearly and distinctly perceive) that he has laid a firm foundation, at all times. It is enough that his foundation is in fact firm, and that if he went to inspect it, he could again achieve *cognitio* of the proof of the justificatory rule. He is happy to merely remember "there is a foundation" to allay his doubts, and as long as there is in fact a foundation, whether or not he knows it, this is sufficient for stability.

He will not stay in his doubts, since he remembers answering them. And if he is pressed to give a proof, he will be able to. It is not necessary that he knows that he will be able to. It is sufficient that he believes he will be able to, and in fact he will be able to.

That this is what Descartes has in mind is corroborated by the Fifth Meditation passage in which he clearly says that all he needs to do is remember that he clearly and distinctly perceived the justificatory rule, without remembering the reasons for it. He then goes on to write:

For what objections can now be raised? That the way I am made makes me prone to frequent error? But I now know that I am incapable of error in those

cases where my understanding is transparently clear. Or can it be objected that I have in the past regarded as true and certain many things which I afterwards recognized to be false? But none of these were things which I clearly and distinctly perceived: I was ignorant of this rule for establishing the truth, and believed these things for other reasons which I later discovered to be less reliable (II.49).

He is arguing that any additional reasons for doubt which may come up can be answered by his remembering that he clearly and distinctly perceived that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. Rather than review the proof again, he merely points to it with memory, which is sufficient for stability.

### **III. The method**

Does Descartes' use of memory show that he is not really interested in truth, but only in stability? Is he merely interested in having something to point to which allows him to cast off doubt, whatever that thing may be?

I don't think so. Though Descartes' is not actively pursuing an infallible basis for believing the truth at the level of *scientia*, he does this when he pursues *cognitio*. *Cognitio* is certainty which connects him infallibly to the truth. *Scientia* is keeping that already-achieved knowledge stable. *Scientia* is merely safeguarding what he has already achieved, by pointing out that he remembers that he has a way of answering all doubts. It

is not necessary to actually answer those doubts, in order to safeguard his previously gained knowledge. But, we might well ask, why isn't it necessary to actually answer the doubts?

I think the best answer to this is that Descartes has multiple goals, and only by moving beyond the foundation can he achieve them. In the Conversation with Burman, he says:

A point to note is that one should not devote so much effort to the *Meditations* and to metaphysical questions, or give them elaborate treatment in commentaries and the like. Still less should one do what some try to do, and dig more deeply into these questions than the author did...it is sufficient to have grasped them once in a general way, and then to remember the conclusion (III.346).

Descartes is suggesting that we attain the truth by becoming certain of a conclusion, and thereafter we move on to other things. We are not beings who find it easy to constantly dwell on the same proof, Descartes writes in the Fifth Meditation.<sup>33</sup> Trying to continually meditate on the proof of God and the justificatory rule would be difficult, and would prevent us from gaining new certainties. Descartes' project is not limited to simply achieving certainty of one thing. He wants to gain certainties, and then be able to refer to them in memory, without either being swayed to doubt by the skeptics, or forced to constantly re-prove what he once perceived.

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<sup>33</sup> "My nature is...such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually, so as to keep perceiving it clearly..." (II.48).

Thus, he proposes that we safeguard our knowledge – attain *scientia* of it – by having a proof of God in memory. If we wanted to, we could call it up, and prove that everything we remember clearly and distinctly perceiving is true. But we need not do this constantly, or even at all.

## Chapter 4: The Creation of the Eternal Truths

The conflict between Descartes' creation doctrine – that God freely creates the eternal truths of mathematics, goodness, etc – and others of his claims is as follows. On the one hand, the creation doctrine seems to imply that there are no necessary truths. On the other hand, Descartes maintains that there are necessary truths (for instance, that God necessarily exists, that necessarily, when I am thinking, I exist, and so on). So Descartes seems to maintain both 1. there are no necessary truths and 2. there are necessary truths.

How should we respond to this seeming contradiction in his system? There are two possibilities: one is to maintain that there is an inconsistency in his system which Descartes never resolved. The other is find a way to render the creation doctrine consistent with the rest of his work; several interpreters have offered ways to do this.

Here I will begin by laying out the textual evidence which – *prima facie* – leads one to conclude that Descartes maintains both (1) and (2). Then I will consider four attempts to render Descartes' system consistent. Finally, I will argue for an interpretation on which Descartes never reconciled the creation doctrine with his claims about necessity.

### I. The Doctrine of the Creation of the Eternal Truths

The doctrine of the eternal truths stems from two of Descartes' claims concerning the nature of God. First, Descartes maintains that God's greatness entails that all beings

and even all truths depend on God. Second, he maintains that God is simple, and as a result everything that depends on God's intellect must also depend on God's will, since there can be no distinction between faculties in God. These two claims combine as follows:

1. All beings and truths depend on God.
2. Whatever depends on God, depends on God's will.

Therefore, for any true proposition  $x$ ,  $x$  is true because God wills  $x$ .

There is clear textual support for claims 1 and 2. Descartes writes:

If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and *every reason for anything's being true or good* (II.294).

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. (III.23, letter to Mersenne 15 April 1630).

Concerning the second claim, he writes:

In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (III.25).

The idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. This is well expressed by the words of St Augustine: 'They are so because thou see'st them to be so'; because in God seeing and willing are one and the same thing. (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, III.235).

From the claim that God wills to create the eternal truths, it doesn't immediately follow that there are no necessary truths. There is an additional premise: Descartes is

adamant that God has the freedom of “indifference” with respect to the truths which he wills. He writes:

...It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. (6<sup>th</sup> replies, 291-292).

Thus, this additional premise yields the conclusion that there are no necessarily true propositions as follows:

1. For any true proposition x, x is true because God wills x.
2. God freely wills everything that God wills.
3. If God freely wills x, then God could will not-x.
4. For any true proposition x, God could will not-x.
5. If God could will not-x, then it is possible that not-x.
6. For any x, it is possible that not-x.
7. If x is necessary, then it is not possible that not-x.
8. Therefore, there are no necessarily true propositions.

The creation doctrine thus conflicts with the claim that there are necessary truths, where this means that there are truths which couldn't be otherwise.

Now let's consider the evidence that Descartes maintains that there actually are necessary truths. In the Second Meditation, he says that the following conditional is necessarily true: if I think “I am, I exist,” then I do exist. In other words, it is impossible for me to think without existing. He also affirms that it is necessary that whenever he

thinks distinctly of a triangle, he must attribute to it the property of having three angles of a triangle which equal no more than two right angles (if the question arises) (II.47).

Descartes maintains that several things concerning God are necessary. It is necessary that God exists (“...it is necessary that he has existed from eternity...” II.47), that God causes the idea of God (“it was manifestly impossible to get [the idea of a being more perfect than my own] from my own...there remained only the possibility that the idea had been put in me...by God” I.128), and that God is not a deceiver (“...it is impossible that God should ever deceive me” (II.38). So, on the face of it, it seems that Descartes does think there are necessary truths.

## **II. Solutions to the Problem**

Again, the problem comes from Descartes’ maintaining both (1) there are necessary truths (i.e. truths which couldn’t be otherwise), and (2) there are no necessary truths (entailed by the creation doctrine). There are three main ways of responding to the problem: first, deny (1); second, deny (2); or third, affirm that there is an inconsistency in his system. I will now discuss four interpretations which take the first or the second route.

### **II.i Frankfurt’s view**

One way to deny (1) is to simply claim that Descartes never maintains that there are any necessary truths. This is the interpretation offered by Harry Frankfurt, who

denies that Descartes believes there *are* any necessary truths.<sup>34</sup> On his interpretation, when Descartes maintains that something is necessary, what he means is that we can't conceive of it not being the case. Frankfurt writes that because of a "contingent characteristic of our minds...we have the experience of necessity under certain conditions rather than under others..." (46). Necessity is to be understood "relative to the character of our minds" (45). None of his claims about necessary truths should be understood as *actually* necessary: they are contingent truths which we are constrained to *think of* as necessary.

I object to this as follows. Descartes claims frequently that he has demonstrated that anything we clearly and distinctly perceive is true (call this the truth rule). He also maintains that there are necessary truths which we clearly and distinctly perceive. An example of this is found in the Fifth Meditation, where he claims that he clearly and distinctly perceives that it is necessary that God exists.<sup>35</sup> According to the truth rule, this means that in fact, we know that some things are necessarily true.

Frankfurt is aware of this objection, and responds by claiming that Descartes does not maintain that anything we clearly and distinctly perceive is true in an absolute sense. Rather, the proof of God's non-deceptive nature and the truth rule is only meant to show that the "notion of a deceiving God is logically incoherent (52)..." and "to establish just

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<sup>34</sup> Frankfurt, Harry. "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," *The Philosophical Review*, Jan. 1977.

<sup>35</sup> He writes: "It is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking..." Shortly thereafter, he implies that he clearly and distinctly perceived this necessity, in writing that there is a great difference between the idea that all quadrilaterals are capable of being inscribed in a circle, and "the ideas [he] clearly and distinctly understand[s]...[e.g.] the idea of God." (II.47)

that it is irrational to deny the reliability of reason..." (53). According to Frankfurt, Descartes never means to prove that the truth rule is (absolutely speaking) true.

But clearly Descartes affirms that all clear and distinct perceptions are true (II.29, II.45, II.310, I.130, II.115). In light of his insistence that the truth rule is true (and not just that we can't help but believe that it's true), this interpretation seems false. Frankfurt has replied to this as follows: in *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen*, he interprets Descartes' "truth" as a coherentist concept of truth, rather than a correspondence concept of truth. When Descartes says that the truth rule is true, what he means is that clear and distinct perceptions will always be consistent with our other beliefs, and not that all of our clear and distinct judgments correspond to reality. However, there are passages which indicate that Descartes means "truth" to be understood as correspondence to reality, and in later writing, Frankfurt rejects his old interpretation on this basis.<sup>36</sup>

In summary: Descartes clearly maintains the truth rule, and it clearly implies that there are necessary truths (and not just contingent truths we consider to be necessary). The only way for Frankfurt's interpretation to work is if Descartes does not actually mean absolute, correspondence truth by "true." But there are passages in which he indicates that he does have this concept of truth (see, for instance, III. 130). I conclude that Frankfurt's interpretation is seriously inconsistent with Descartes' stated position.

## II.ii. Bennett's view

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<sup>36</sup> See "Descartes on the Consistency of Reason," in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, M. Hooker (1978), p. 37.

Another way to resolve the inconsistency is to read the claim that there are necessary truths in a way to render it consistent with the creation doctrine. Jonathan Bennett takes this approach.<sup>37</sup> Rather than deny there are any necessary truths, according to Descartes, he interprets “necessary” to *mean* “psychologically impossible for us to deny while we have the thing in mind.” He writes:

‘It is absolutely impossible that P’ means that no human can conceive of P’s obtaining while having P distinctly in mind... ‘no human can’ must be understood in causal, psychological terms... (647).

Bennett affirms that Descartes thinks there are necessary truths, but explains that this is not in conflict with the creation doctrine. The creation of the eternal truths implies that God is unlimited in power, such that he is not constrained to make anything the way it currently is. This is compatible with the claim that some things are necessary, where that means that we can’t deny them. In other words, instead of (1) and (2), Descartes maintains:

(1’): There are necessary truths i.e. truths which are psychologically impossible for us to deny while having them distinctly in mind, and

(2’): There are no absolutely necessary truths i.e. truths which God was constrained to make the way they actually are.

Bennett’s main support for the interpretation is a passage found in the Second Replies. In his objection, Mersenne suggests that *even if* we have made a sufficient investigation into the nature of God to perceive it clearly and distinctly, there is still

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<sup>37</sup> Bennett, Jonathan. “Descartes’s Theory of Modality,” *The Philosophical Review*, 1994.

reason to doubt that it is possible that God exists, since it may still be that the nature of God is contradictory. In response, Descartes writes:

If by possible you mean what everyone commonly means, namely whatever does not conflict with our human concepts, then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible, since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts...Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect, and so it...will undermine the whole of human knowledge (II, 107).

Bennett takes this passage to indicate that for Descartes, modality is relative to human thinkers. The phrase “possible [means]...whatever does not conflict with our human concepts” provides evidence that possibility for Descartes is subjective. Bennett claims that Descartes is interested in this “conceptualist” sort of possibility, and repudiates another notion which “relates to the object itself.” The latter Bennett interprets as an “objective” concept of possibility, and he says that Descartes is simply uninterested in pursuing it, since it would be “direly subversive” (Bennett, 648) and undermine all of human knowledge. This is the main passage Bennett uses to support his view; he then interprets other passages in a way that is consistent with this reading.

Bennett’s interpretation depends on two sentences: the first, in which Descartes says that possibility is whatever does not conflict with our human concepts, and the second, in which Descartes rejects “some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself.” He takes Descartes to be embracing subjective possibility in the first sentence, and rejecting objective possibility in the second. But there is clear evidence

that Bennett's reading of the second sentence is mistaken. A few paragraphs after this passage, Descartes discusses Mersenne's alternate notion of possibility. He writes:

All self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought, when we make the mistake of joining together mutually inconsistent ideas; it cannot occur in anything which is outside the intellect. For the very fact that something exists outside the intellect manifestly shows that it is not self-contradictory but possible (II.108).

Here Descartes is rejecting Mersenne's alternate notion of possibility not because it is subversive and uninteresting, but because he thinks that it is incoherent. Descartes is saying if something exists outside of the intellect, then clearly it is possible (or it wouldn't exist). The only way that something can be impossible is if the relevant concept contains a contradiction, and therefore fails to match anything in the world.

I conclude that Descartes is not rejecting a coherent but subversive notion of objective possibility, as Bennett claims, but is instead rejecting Mersenne's notion of possibility relating to objects themselves as incoherent. He says that simply doesn't make sense to talk about possibility "which relates to the object itself." This is his main reason for rejecting the notion.

He seems to offer a second reason to disregard any such concept. The second reason he offers is what I take to be a *reductio* against accepting any such notion – it would be absurd to question whether something which thinks does not exist, and it's equally absurd to question whether an object is impossible even though its nature/concept is possible. If we question what is certain in one case, we should question it in all cases. But, as Descartes writes, we shouldn't question our knowledge claims at all, for this would be to destroy knowledge "for no good reason" (II.108).

Now let's return to Bennett's first claim. Bennett takes Descartes to be saying that all possibility is relative to our concepts – if something is clearly and distinctly conceivable, this is equivalent to saying that it is possible (in the conceptualist sense). He gathers this from the sentence, "If by possible you mean what everyone commonly means, namely whatever does not conflict with our human concepts..." However, there is another way to read this sentence, which fits better with what Descartes says in the second half of it, namely: "...since I supposed it to contain only what, according to our clear and distinct perceptions, must belong to it; and hence it cannot conflict with our concepts..."

There is an explanation for why Descartes says that God's nature is possible which does not make use of a subjective sort of possibility. Descartes seems to understand Mersenne's objection as follows: it may happen occasionally that I become confused, and consider the nature of a bachelor who is necessarily married. I think I'm really contemplating a possible nature. But I am not – I have failed to realize that my own ideas do not allow for the possibility of such a nature. He writes that "self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion" (II.108).

Descartes takes Mersenne to be saying that he may be similarly confused about the nature of God. He may not realize that such a nature is in conflict with his concepts, in the same way that a married bachelor or a square circle would be. Descartes then denies that he is confused in this way – after all, he clearly and distinctly conceives that

all the properties which he ascribes to God must belong to God's nature. He is not making a mistake analogous to ascribing married status to a bachelor.

On my reading, Descartes is not saying that clear and distinct conceivability is the same notion as possibility. He is saying that we know a nature is possible by knowing that it is clearly conceivable. He thinks that when we clearly and distinctly perceive, we can be certain that there is no hidden contradiction in the concept. Knowing this is all that is required for knowing that a concept is possible.

There are few reasons to prefer this interpretation. First of all, the view that clear and distinct conceiving is the same as possibility is either a confusion of a mis-use of words. There is clearly a difference between X's being clearly conceived as consistent and X's being possible. For one thing, the former is a mental concept and the latter is not. It doesn't make sense to say that they're the same thing. Now, of course, this is not definitive, since a philosopher can use words as he likes. But it seems clear that the concepts are quite different, if used in the ordinary sense.

Second, it is true that Descartes writes that possibility *means* whatever does not conflict with our human concepts. However, in the *Meditations*, he clearly does not use the terms in this way. He claims that whatever we can clearly conceive to be the case, God can create, and in this way he attempts to show that whatever we can clearly conceive is possible. Bennett acknowledges that in the *Meditations* Descartes "got from conceivability to possibility through trust in God" (648), but adds that this is "compatible with his having, ultimately, an analytic basis for the move" (648).

If this were true, Descartes is being extremely misleading. In the *Meditations*, he treats clear and distinct conceivability and possibility as two distinct notions which must be bridged by God. According to Bennett, in the Second Replies and the parts of his work in which he discusses the creation of the eternal truths, he is not treating them as distinct notions. Instead, he thinks *they are the same thing*. So this means that Descartes has two notions of possibility, and shifts between them without making the shift explicit.

Third, nowhere else – that I’m aware of – does he say anything else about modality which could be taken in the subjectivist way (Bennett says this passage is the strongest evidence he has for his reading). It’s surprising, if Descartes is thinking that possibility and necessity are conceivability relative to our minds, that he does not make it clearer.

Finally, there is at least one passage which is clearly inconsistent with his reading. According to Bennett, whenever Descartes uses the terms “possible” and “impossible” and “necessary,” he is indexing them to the capacities humans now have. He is using the terms in such a way that – out of his mouth – necessity means “impossible for me and others to clearly conceive and affirm.” This allows for the reading that whenever Descartes says something is necessary, this is compatible with its not having to be the case. Bennett uses this to explain why Descartes avoids positively saying that God could have done the impossible. Descartes doesn’t say that it is possible that God make  $2+2=5$ . This is false, since on Bennett’s interpretation, Descartes uses the terms subjectively –

out his mouth, “possible” means “I can clearly conceive it.” So out of his mouth, it’s false that possibly,  $2+2=5$ .

However, there is at least one clear exception to this. Descartes writes, “God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore he could have done the opposite” (III.235). Here Descartes is saying that God could in fact do something impossible i.e. make contradictories true together. In other words, it is possible that God make contradictories true together. However, on Bennett’s interpretation of modal terms, this is false and counts at least somewhat against his view (as he acknowledges.)

Though Bennett’s interpretation renders the claims consistent, it is not clearly supported by the main passage which Bennett cites, since there is another interpretation of what Descartes says there. It is also inconsistent with one of Descartes’ claims as to what God can do. Finally, it is surprising – on Bennett’s reading – that Descartes was not more explicit about something of such central importance to his system i.e. that by possibility he means “clearly conceivable.” For these reasons, I think that Bennett’s interpretation is incorrect.

### **iii. Curley’s interpretation**

Another way of resolving the contradiction is to find a second way of reading “necessity” so as to render the claim that there are necessary truths consistent with the

creation doctrine. Edwin Curley has interpreted Descartes as having two kinds of necessity – necessary necessity and contingent necessity.<sup>38</sup> He then maintains that rather than holding (1) and (2), Descartes maintains:

(1''): There are contingently necessary truths about created essences.

(2''): There are no necessarily necessary truths about created essences.

According to Curley, the truths about created essences which Descartes says are necessary are only contingently necessary. That is, God wills that they are necessary, but could have willed that they were contingent. When Descartes says that God is free to will otherwise, Curley takes it, this means only that God could have willed that the truths be contingently true. There are certain limits on what God can will: he can't will (at any point) that something which is now a necessary truth, is false. This resolves the inconsistency: it is false that the creation doctrine implies that there are no necessary truths. Instead, the doctrine implies that there are truths which God could have willed to be contingently true rather than necessarily true.

In section 1, I argued that the creation doctrine implies that for any  $x$ , God could will not- $x$ . If it is possible that not- $x$ , then  $x$  is not necessary. How does Curley avoid drawing this conclusion from the creation doctrine?

Curley suggests that Descartes has a system of modal logic on which S5 – whatever is possibly necessary is necessary – is false. This works as follows: there are worlds “accessible” and “non-accessible” to this one. If a world is non-accessible to this one, then the events in it are possibly possible. This explains how something can be

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<sup>38</sup> Curley, Edwin. “Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths,” *The Philosophical Review*, 1984.

contingently necessary. Suppose that  $x$  is contingently necessary. Then – according to Curley’s view – there is a non-accessible world in which it is false, but there is no accessible world in which it is false. In other words, it is possibly possible that not- $x$ , but it is not possible that not- $x$ . The upshot of all of this is that for contingently necessary  $x$ , God cannot make it true that not- $x$ . God can, however, make it true that  $x$  is contingently true rather than necessarily true.

Why does Curley think that this is Descartes’ view? His main support is the following passage:

Even if God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, III.235).

There are three main problems with Curley’s view. First, earlier on in the passage cited above, Descartes seems to clearly maintain that God could do more than just make a necessary truth contingent. He could also make a necessary truth false. He writes, “...God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore...he could have done the opposite.” Descartes clearly implies that “contradictories cannot be true together” is a necessary truth, when he writes (just beforehand) that there are some things God has wished to make impossible. In this passage, he is saying that there is something which God made necessary, which he could have made false. Thus, Curley’s view is inconsistent with this passage.

Second, as Bennett points out, “Curley’s Descartes holds that God can perform the hard task but not the easy one” (661), which seems wrong. God can make it possible that  $2+3=5$  is true, but can’t make it true that  $2+3=5$ , even this were possible.

Third, as Curley admits, ascribing a system of logic to Descartes which is not fully worked out even by contemporary logicians, and which it is dubious that Descartes thought of, is a stretch. I conclude, for these reasons, that Curley’s interpretation has serious flaws.

#### **II.iv Della Rocca’s view**

One final way of attempting to resolve the inconsistency is by making another distinction between kinds of necessity.<sup>39</sup> Michael Della Rocca claims that Descartes has two concepts of freedom and necessity where “absolute freedom” and “absolute necessity” take into account God’s activity and power, and “restricted freedom” and “restricted necessity” do not.<sup>40</sup> This explains how we can be free, according to Descartes, in spite of God’s determining us, and how necessary truths can be necessary in spite of the fact that God could have made them otherwise. It is true in the restricted sense of necessity that  $2+2=4$  is necessary, though it is not absolutely necessary that  $2+2=4$ , since God could have made this false.

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<sup>39</sup> Della Rocca, Michael. In “Taking the Fourth: Steps toward a New (Old) Reading of Descartes,” presented at the Eastern APA, December 2006. He also presents many of the same ideas in “Judgment and Will,” Gaukroger, *The Blackwell Companion to Descartes’ Meditations*, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> He also says that Descartes has two concepts of truth and substance.

In order to substantiate his view, Della Rocca draws on the case in which Descartes explicitly states that he has two concepts of this sort. Descartes says that we are substances, if you ignore our dependence on God. Taking God into account, we are dependent things, and so are not substances. Della Rocca takes this to indicate that we are substances in a restricted sense, but not in an absolute sense.

As I understand it, Della Rocca is suggesting a picture on which we are free, ignoring God's power, and unfree, taking God's power into account. According to this interpretation, there is a perfectly straightforward and non-mysterious concept of freedom according to which we're free: we are free if you ignore God's power and activity. There is a second, equally non-mysterious concept of freedom according to which we're not free: we aren't free if you take into account God's power.

There really is no mystery about how we can be free, on Della Rocca's interpretation. In one sense of "freedom" (ignoring God's power) we are straightforwardly free. But then why would Descartes write: "...we cannot get a sufficient grasp of [God's power] to see how it leaves the free actions of men undetermined" (Principles I.41)? If Descartes simply has an unrestricted concept of freedom – which is freedom, ignoring God's power – then why would he write that we can't grasp how God's power leaves us free? According to the restricted notion of freedom which Della Rocca describes, we are straightforwardly free, and according to the unrestricted notion, we are not.

Likewise, according to Della Rocca,  $2+2=4$  is necessary, if you're considering the concept of "restricted necessity" which leaves out consideration of God's power, and not necessary, if you take into account God's power. Descartes thinks that  $2+2=4$  is restrictedly necessary but not absolutely necessary. He thinks that it is not restrictedly possible that  $2+2=5$ , but it is absolutely possible. We should expect to see him saying something along these lines, if this is his view.

However, Descartes does not suggest that there is a straightforward and non-mysterious concept of necessity on which  $2+2=4$  is necessary. Consider the following passage:

I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: 'that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him'. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds (III.235).

On Della Rocca's interpretation, there is a concept of modality which excludes God's power. According to this concept, it is perfectly understandable that certain truths are necessary. They are necessary, meaning they cannot be otherwise, excluding consideration of God's power. But Descartes does not acknowledge such a concept in this passage or any other one that I'm aware of. He simply says that the necessary or impossibility of various truths is incomprehensible to us, when we consider God's power.

Since we find no passages which straightforwardly support the reading that there are two concepts of necessity in Descartes, and in fact we find passages which seem at odds with this reading (see above), I reject this interpretation.

### III. Inconsistency Reading

All four of the interpretations I have discussed are at odds with the text in some way, and none of them is definitively supported by it. The interpreters would probably argue that any inconsistency of their interpretations with Descartes' writings is much less serious of a problem than the one we started with. It is better to leave out a few data points than to read Descartes as having a glaring contradiction in his work.

Though I agree that reading an author's work as internally consistent is important, I will argue that we should not do so in this case. I have two main reasons for preferring an interpretation on which Descartes does not reconcile his claims to necessary with the creation doctrine.

First, as I have argued elsewhere, it seems clear that in the *Meditations*, Descartes is aiming at infallible certainties of absolute truth. Three of the interpretations I have considered read Descartes' claim to knowledge of necessities as something other than certainty about how things must be.<sup>41</sup> They read Descartes as aiming at knowledge only of the subjective or restricted "necessity" of God's existence and of truths like "necessarily, if something is thinking, then it exists."

However, this is inconsistent with the following of his claims:

1. ...No matter who the perceiver is, nothing can be clearly and distinctly perceived without its being just as we perceive it to be, i.e. without being true. (II.310).

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<sup>41</sup> Frankfurt, Della Rocca and Bennett take this route. Curley does not, but his interpretation seems too clearly at odds with the stated creation doctrine to be correct.

2. It is self-evident [i.e. clear and distinct] that God [necessarily] exists<sup>42</sup>. (II.47)

Together, these imply that it is necessary that God exists. To read the necessity in a way which renders it non-absolute, as conforming to our minds, or in some other way, is at odds with Descartes' project of achieving certainty about the way things actually are. Any interpretation which tries to reconcile Descartes' claims about necessary truths with the creation doctrine will have to read away this claim to certainty of absolutely necessary truth. Thus, my first reason for favoring an interpretation on which Descartes simply did not resolve the conflict is that there is too much evidence that in the *Meditations*, his project is to achieve infallible certainty of how things are and must be.

My second reason for interpreting Descartes as never resolving the problem in his system is that despite the inconsistency, it seems to me to be the better view. He has certainty that it is necessary that whatever thinks, exists. If it necessary that whatever thinks, exists, then it is impossible that God make it true that something thinks but does not exist. In fact, I think we can be certain of this, and of the fact that this implies that there is at least one thing that God cannot make false.

To read away Descartes' claim to certainty, in order to render his system consistent, is to take away a true part of his view. It seems that on the basis of the argument I give in the first section, Descartes did in fact maintain that God could make

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<sup>42</sup> Descartes seems to use self-evident and clear and distinct interchangeably. On II.27, he writes, "I plainly see that it is necessary that [God] has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity," and a paragraph later writes, "What is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?" In the French version, he adds "in the idea of whom alone necessary and eternal existence is comprised." This addition in the French edition makes it clear that Descartes means to be pointing out that it is self-evident that the necessary being exists, or in other words, that it is necessary that God exists.

any truth otherwise. So he did maintain something which is false. But to interpret him as holding a false but consistent view seems less charitable than ascribing to him a view which is partly true and partly false, though inconsistent. The system with more truth in it is – at least in this case – the better view philosophically, overall.

Given that the text does not force any particular interpretation which renders the two parts of his view consistent, and given that the better view is the inconsistent one, I think that Descartes did not resolve the conflict. Why he did not resolve the conflict is something that I can only speculate about. Perhaps he thought that the argument that God is free to create any truth is certain, and yet could not deny that he was certain of some necessary truths. It is noteworthy that although he mentions the creation doctrine in other places, he omits all mention of it in the *Meditations*. The *Meditations* is the work in which he develops his epistemology, which relies heavily on the necessity of God's existence and non-deceptive nature. So, it's possible that Descartes was aware of the problem, and omitted any mention of the creation doctrine in the part of his work where he most fully expresses commitment to the certainty of necessary truths. This would provide a good explanation for why he doesn't discuss the doctrine in the *Meditations*.

Regardless of how Descartes ended up with a contradiction in his work, it seems best to read him as claiming to be certain of necessary truths. Though this leaves us with the contradiction, it also safeguards a true part of Descartes' work, which is his claim to certainty that "whatever thinks, exists," among other necessary truths.

## Chapter 5: On the Meaning of “Cartesian Certainty”

In the following chapters, I will be defending the claim that Cartesian certainty is possible.<sup>43</sup> It is natural, then, to wonder what I mean by “certainty.” Philosophers have spelled out what it means to be certain in many different ways. Since finding jointly necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic concepts has proved elusive, many have shifted to merely giving necessary *or* sufficient conditions, and I will do the same. In this way, we can characterize certainty without attempting to reduce it entirely to its components (which may or may not be possible).<sup>44</sup>

In this chapter, I will distinguish what I have in mind by “Cartesian certainty” from other concepts which have gone by the name “certainty.” Many philosophers have made a distinction between knowing and being certain, and I will be looking mainly at candidates that have been considered “certainty.”<sup>45</sup> By looking at what the concept is *not*, it will become clearer what it is. Note that I am interested merely in explicating the

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<sup>43</sup> In Part I of the dissertation, I interpret Descartes’ concept of certainty as having two concepts of certainty – *cognitio* and *scientia*. Here I limit myself to defending *cognitio*. In this chapter, I clarify what I will call “Cartesian certainty” by comparing it with a number of contemporary accounts of certainty. I will not here attempt to convince the reader that the account of certainty in this chapter is indeed Descartes’ account, since I have discussed my interpretation of Descartes extensively in Part I.

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Introduction, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> In other words, I will not exhaustively canvass the “knowledge” terrain – many who have attempted to characterize knowledge would make a distinction between knowing being certain, and would not claim that they are discussing being certain.

notion which I have in mind, and not joining a debate about what the nature of certainty really is or what people typically mean by “certainty.”<sup>46</sup>

In section 1, I will discuss a number of other characterizations of certainty and point out the difference between these concepts and the one whose possibility I am defending. In section 2, I will further clarify the concept.

## **I. What Cartesian Certainty is Not**

In what follows I will give examples of views of certainty, and explain how they differ from what I have in mind.

### **I.i. Psychological Certainty**

Some philosophers have understood “certainty” to be psychological conviction, and have read Descartes as pursuing merely a state of being firmly convinced of his belief. According to this type of view, when I am convicted, I am not necessarily *correct* in my belief, but I am convinced nonetheless that my belief is true. One might also add a condition of it being difficult or impossible for me to dislodge my belief.

A good example of such a view is that of Louis Loeb, who has defended the position that what is necessary for certainty, according to Descartes, is that “a person’s belief is unshakeable” and that this occurs “when a person possesses arguments that prevent the belief from being shaken by argument.”<sup>47</sup> His idea is that when we have

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<sup>46</sup> For my purposes in the second part of the dissertation, I will use both the words “certainty” and “knowledge” to refer to “Cartesian certainty.” What I mean by “knowledge” is probably not the same as what many philosophers mean by it, as we shall see, but I will use the word knowledge nonetheless.

<sup>47</sup> Louis Loeb, “The Cartesian Circle” in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, 202.

clearly perceived the proof that all clear and distinct ideas are true, we simply cannot (psychologically) stop believing that something that we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.<sup>48</sup> Our certainty consists in our having an irresistible belief that we are not psychologically able to give up.

Being in a state of unshakeable conviction is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of what I have in mind by “Cartesian certainty.” Someone could be certain of X, and later could stop believing X. Neither do I think that unshakeable conviction is a sufficient condition for certainty. For one thing, whenever I am certain of X, X is true. According to psychological certainty views, this is not the case. For another, I think that it may be possible to have unshakeable conviction about something which, though true, is far from certain. Suppose that I have unshakeable conviction that God exists, such that psychologically, I am unable to stop believing it. It may even be true that God exists. And yet it does not follow that I am certain that God exists, according to my concept of certainty. It follows that unshakeable conviction is not a sufficient condition for certainty.

### **I.ii Epistemic certainty**

Several other interpreters of Descartes have thought that it is not enough to be psychologically convinced. Edwin Curley and Janet Broughton each have interpretations according to which what Descartes is aiming at in the *Meditations* is “epistemic”

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<sup>48</sup> Perhaps we could stop believing, if one entirely forgot the argument that all clear and distinct perceptions are true. But it seems that Loeb is speaking of the cases in which we still remember that argument.

certainty.<sup>49</sup> For Curley, to be certain, it must be the case that the proposition compels my belief, when I think of it, and that it is *rational* for me to keep believing, because I have no *valid reason* to doubt.<sup>50</sup> Curley spells out what a valid reason for doubting is in terms of what is more or less assent-compelling. When my belief is assent-compelling, then my reason to doubt must also be assent-compelling.

According to Curley's view, I can be certain even if my belief is false. He writes, "Descartes recognizes that perfect certainty—understood as a conviction so strong that it cannot be overthrown—is compatible with absolute falsity. But he regards the demand for anything more than his perfect certainty as quixotic."<sup>51</sup>

Likewise, Janet Broughton holds that what Descartes aims at is "certainty" of propositions, which amounts to belief that cannot be thrown into doubt through the application of a skeptical scenario. In other words, S is certain of P if S believes P and S is unable to doubt P via the construction of a skeptical scenario. A skeptical scenario is an imagined situation in which everything seems the same to S as it does now, even though S's beliefs are mistaken. Like on Curley's view, on Broughton's view, we can be certain of X as long as it can't rationally be doubted.

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<sup>49</sup> E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptic* and Janet Broughton, *Descartes' Method of Doubt*.

<sup>50</sup> Curley explains what he means by "valid ground for doubt" as follows:

Someone has a valid ground for doubting a proposition, p, if and only if he can think of some other proposition, q, such that

(i) q is incompatible with p or with some principle, r, which provides the basis for his assent to p;

(ii)(a) if either p or r is not assent-compelling, then he can think of no assent-compelling proposition incompatible with q.

(b) if both p and r are assent-compelling, then so is q.

(iii) q explains how he might have erroneously thought p. (122).

<sup>51</sup> p. 108.

On both views, we can be mistaken of things, even if we are “certain” of them, since certainty is defined in terms of what we can or cannot rationally doubt, and makes no reference to the truth. My view of certainty differs from theirs in two respects. First, on the sort of certainty that I am defending, if we are certain of something, then we cannot be mistaken about it. Second, what is required for certainty is more than just a state of rational assent. Instead, what is required is connection to the truth.<sup>52</sup>

### **L.iii Frankfurt’s Coherentist View**

Harry Frankfurt’s early interpretation of what is required for Cartesian certainty takes certainty to be a state of having clear and distinct perceptions which we have no reason to doubt. The difference between his view and Curley’s is that on Curley’s view, Descartes thinks of “truth” as a matter of correspondence to reality. On Frankfurt’s view, by “truth” Descartes means coherence among beliefs. Frankfurt writes, “Descartes’s most basic and insistent preoccupation is with certainty itself, and he tends to be rather indifferent to the question of whether the certain corresponds or fails to correspond with the real...certainty is his fundamental epistemological concept, and he defines truth in terms of it. Now certainty is for him essentially a matter of the coherence of evidence. It is a coherence theory of truth, accordingly, which most authentically expresses the standards and goals of his inquiry.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, Frankfurt argues that we can be certain of the

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<sup>52</sup> See section II for a discussion of what I mean by “connection to truth.”

<sup>53</sup> Harry Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen*, 26.

truth of our beliefs when they are clear and distinct, and we have no reason to doubt their consistency.<sup>54</sup>

When I discuss whether certainty is possible, what I have in mind is whether our beliefs correspond to reality, and what our epistemic status is with regard to the question. Thus, I do not mean to consider – as Frankfurt’s Descartes does – merely the question of whether our beliefs cohere with one another.

#### **I.iv Incorrigible Belief**

Another concept that one might associate with certainty is the concept of a belief which cannot be mistaken. Keith Lehrer discusses such a theory. Suppose that for P to be known, it is necessary that P be incorrigible, where:

S has an incorrigible belief that p if and only if it is logically impossible that S believes that p and p is false.<sup>55</sup>

Problems immediately arise. First of all, according to this analysis, every necessary truth would be known, if believed. This is incorrect: if I believe that Fermat’s last theorem is true because I see a message to that effect on a wall, I do not know that it is true, even though it is incorrigible.

Suppose we change the analysis to only cover knowledge of contingent truths.

That is:

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<sup>54</sup> Frankfurt later changed his view, due to key passages on truth found in the text. See chapter 2 for further discussion.

<sup>55</sup> Keith Lehrer (1974), 81.

So has an incorrigible belief that p if and only if (i) it is contingent that p and (ii) it is logically impossible that S believes that p and it is false that p.<sup>56</sup>

There are still problems. According to this definition, I think it would be impossible for us to be certain that we are having a red sensation. It seems possible that we should make a mistake in what our sensations are, under particular circumstances. Suppose that I am multi-tasking in a room with flashing colored lights. I might form the belief that I have a fleeting red sensation, though it is orange, and be mistaken. Yet this does not prove that I could *never* be certain that I have a red sensation.<sup>57</sup> I conclude that one could be certain and yet fail to have an incorrigible belief, so the two are not equivalent concepts.

#### **Liv Van Cleve's Circular Justification**

James Van Cleve agrees that Cartesian certainty is more than psychological or epistemic certainty. His concern is to find out how to achieve certainty, considered as a state entailing truth (i.e. whenever I am certain, my belief is true). He starts with a problem. Suppose that in the *Meditations*, what Descartes is up to is this:

Whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is certain.

I am perceiving clearly and distinctly that P.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>57</sup> For more discussion, see Chapter 8 on Williamson's anti-luminosity argument.

Therefore, P is certain.<sup>58</sup>

If the only way to get certainty that P is through an inference like this one, such that the argument is a *ground* which I must have in mind, in order to become certain that P, there would be big problem for the proponent of Cartesian certainty. In order to be certain that P, I would have to be certain of the two premises. But how could I be certain of them? Only through a further argument. And so on.

Van Cleve's solution is to deny that the premises serve as grounds for my certainty. Instead, I can be certain if they *are* true. There is no further requirement that I *know* that they're true. He writes:

The fact that I clearly and distinctly perceive a proposition does not serve as a *ground* for accepting it. It is a *source* of knowledge, but not a ground....Rather, it is a *fact* that enables knowledge to get started. (We can authenticate this fact later if we wish, but need not do so in the beginning)...<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Van Cleve is arguing that a particular class of beliefs *are* certain, whether or not we *know* this. Since they are clear and distinct perceptions (which are always true), they are true. We don't have to have further assurance in the form of an epistemic principle, in order for them to be certain. They just *are* certain, by virtue of being of this type. The fact that all clear and distinct perceptions are true "is a fact that enables knowledge to get started."

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<sup>58</sup> Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles and the Cartesian Circle," 69.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 69.

The way that Van Cleve is thinking about it, the clear and distinct perceptions get their epistemic worth in virtue of *being* clear and distinct, whether or not we *know* that this gives them epistemic merit. From the inside, as far as we can tell initially, they *have* no epistemic merit. But this doesn't mean that in fact, they have no merit. Later on, we may be able to derive from these starting points an epistemic principle (i.e. all clear and distinct perceptions are true) which will enable us to justify them to ourselves. As Van Cleve writes, once one knows the epistemic principle, "it enables him to vindicate his starting point. It gives him an answer to the critic who says, "I grant that your procedure is not circular, but I don't see how you can escape the charge of arbitrariness in your first premises. What is the justification for starting from just the premises you did?"<sup>60</sup>

My view of how we achieve certainty is more similar to Van Cleve's than to any other position that we have looked at so far. I agree with Van Cleve that certainty is more than indubitability, that it requires connection to the truth. I also agree that we can have certainty on the basis of our perceptions, without the fulfilling the further requirement that we be certain that beliefs of a particular kind (e.g. clear and distinct) are true.

However, I disagree with Van Cleve as to how we are able to come to be certain that we are certain. According to Van Cleve, until we prove an epistemic principle which affirms that our starting points are true, they are arbitrary *to us*. That is to say, they are not objectively arbitrary, but as far as we can tell *from the inside*, they are arbitrary. We

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 72. For another proponent of this type of circular-justification view, see William Alston, "Two Types of Foundationalism."

have no ground for believing that our starting points are true. In order to attain a ground, we must derive an epistemic principle from the starting points, which we can then use to affirm to ourselves that they are true.

The problem with this is as follows. IF our starting points have no epistemic worth *as far as we can tell from the inside*, then nothing derived from them has epistemic worth from the inside either. Thus, if we derive an epistemic principle from subjectively-worthless starting points, this principle cannot be used by us as a ground for certainty about those starting points.

My objection to Van Cleve's view, then, is two-fold. First, assuming that he is right, and that as far as we can tell from the inside, our starting points are arbitrary, then I argue that they cannot *stop* being arbitrary from the inside by way of an epistemic principle *derived* from them. Second, I don't think that he is right; I think that we can tell that our starting points have epistemic worth from the inside. Furthermore, I think that we can become certain that we are certain of these starting points, not by way of an epistemic principle, but directly, by considering our starting point.

Take the following example. I clearly and distinctly perceive that there is a red sensation, and so I believe it. According to Van Cleve, this starting point is justified because there is a true principle undergirding it (unknownst to me), viz. all clear and distinct perceptions are true. I agree that this starting point is justified (and in fact certain) because of the sort of perception that it is. But I think that merely by reflection on my belief, I can tell from the inside that it is certain, and so become certain that it is

certain. I can do this without any further epistemic principle. So, when I reflect on my belief that “there is a red sensation,” at the time that I am aware of the sensation, I can become certain that I am certain, without reference to any epistemic principle of the form “all X-type beliefs are true.”

I characterize the difference between Van Cleve’s and my own by way of a difference in what is accessible from the inside. On Van Cleve’s view, we can justify our starting points to ourselves only by way of a principle derived from them. On my view, we can justify our starting points to ourselves merely by reflecting on our beliefs and what we are aware of (e.g. our belief that there is a red sensation and our awareness of the red sensation).<sup>61</sup>

### **I.v Chisholm’s View**

According to Chisholm, there is a difference between what is certain and what is known. His definition of certainty is as follows:

$h$  is certain for  $s = Df$   $h$  is beyond reasonable doubt for  $s$ , and there is no  $i$  such that accepting  $i$  is more reasonable for  $s$  than accepting  $h$ .

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<sup>61</sup> At this point, many have found it natural to object that I need to some further reason to think that I am not mistaken. It is not enough to just to reflect on my belief and what I am aware of, to be certain. I must have some reason to think that things couldn’t seem *this way* to me and yet nonetheless, my belief be false. See chapters 6-9 for variations of this objection, and responses.

Beliefs that are certain are propositions such as “I seem to see a man standing before me” as well as some propositions of logic and math.<sup>62</sup> He thinks that beliefs which are known are “evident,” which are ultimately justified by beliefs which are “directly evident,” which are certain.

Chisholm’s category of the “evident” includes beliefs which might be mistaken. He writes “If we say that it is possible for an evident proposition to be false, then we are able to assure ourselves that there are evident propositions about external physical things...we cannot assure ourselves that every evident proposition is true. This conclusion is something expressed by saying that knowledge involves an element of “animal faith.”<sup>63</sup>

My concept of certainty does not include beliefs that lack assurance, and is thus different from Chisholm’s concept of knowledge. That is, when we have a belief which is certain, the manner in which the belief is formed ensures that we are not mistaken. I am not saying that when we are certain, our belief is such that it could never be someone’s belief and yet be false. I am saying that when we are certain, there is no gap between our belief and the truth – meaning that there is no element of “animal faith” that Chisholm refers to. If there were such an element, then when we were certain, there would still be some possibility that we are wrong. But there is no such possibility – the awareness of the truth that we have when we are certain makes this impossible.

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<sup>62</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (1977), 10-11.

<sup>63</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (1966), 49.

Let's go back to Chisholm's "directly evident" beliefs. According to Chisholm, these beliefs are certain. He describes these beliefs as the "unmoved movers." These are the beliefs for which there is no further justification. He asks the question of what we are to say, when pressed to answer the question of what justifies us in believing these starting points. His answer is as follows: "What justifies me in counting it as evident that a is F is simply the fact that a is F."<sup>64</sup>

He discusses the difference between justifying directly evident beliefs (which are beliefs about how things appear to us, our thoughts, etc) and beliefs about other matters as follows:

To the question "What justification do you have for counting it as evident that there can be no life on the moon?" it would be inappropriate- and impertinent- simply to reiterate "There can be no life on the moon." But we can state our justification for certain propositions about our beliefs, and certain propositions about our thoughts, merely by reiterating those propositions. They may be said, therefore, to pertain to what is directly evident."<sup>65</sup>

Bracketing what is "evident" and only considering Chisholm's "directly evident" states, can we be certain that a is F when it is directly evident to us and that our justification is the fact that a is F?

Two remarks. First, if Chisholm is thinking that all of our beliefs about our own inner states are certain, I disagree with him on this point. It is not merely the fact that a belief is about an inner state, but also the manner in which the belief is formed, that makes it certain for us. I think that I could be mistaken, and so I am not certain, about some beliefs about my inner states, for instance, ones that are formed

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 28.

when I am not really focusing on my sensations, and so I am not clearly aware of them. Or I may form the belief that my sensation is of eight dots, when it is in fact seven. So merely the fact that a belief is about my inner state does not ensure that it is certain.

Second, Chisholm argues that whereas it's appropriate to re-iterate a proposition as a justification in cases of beliefs about our inner states, this is inappropriate in cases involving outer objects, etc. Why is it appropriate in one case and not the other? I think that it is because in the cases of (some of our) inner states, we are directly aware of those inner states and are certain that we are aware in this way. Then, when asked for the justification for our belief, I think what we should say is that our justification is that we are directly aware of our inner states. But we are not aware in the same way that there can be no life on the moon. Thus, I think that our justification is not the fact, but our awareness.

To conclude: it seems that Chisholm's concept of certainty includes all beliefs about inner states (all of which are "directly evident" to us) and derives justification about directly evident matters through "the fact that a is F." My concept excludes beliefs about inner states under some circumstances, and the justification for beliefs about inner states is our awareness of our sensations/concepts/etc, not "the fact that a is F."

## **II. Direct Acquaintance**

As we have seen, my concept of Cartesian certainty is not merely that of unshakeable conviction or rational indubitability. It is not the concept of logical infallibility or of incorrigible belief. Nor does it depend on having starting points which are justified by the *facts* which they describe.

So what *is* my concept of certainty, if none of these? The philosopher who comes closest to describing what I think about Cartesian certainty is Richard Fumerton. His view of knowledge is that it is founded ultimately on our acquaintance with facts. We have inferential beliefs which are justified through our further beliefs. Eventually, the chain of justification terminates in non-inferential beliefs. We are certain of those beliefs when we are directly acquainted with their truthmakers.

Three points on Fumerton's formulation of this view. First, he takes thoughts and sentences expressing them to be the bearers of truth. They are true if they correspond to facts. A fact is "a nonlinguistic complex that consists in an entity or entities exemplifying properties."<sup>66</sup> Second, "acquaintance" is – according to Fumerton – a relation between a self and a thing, property or fact. Third, one is noninferentially justified in believing that P when one has the thought that P and one is acquainted with the fact that P, the thought that P, and the relation of correspondence holding between the thought that P and the fact that P.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Metaepistemology and Skepticism, 73.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 75.

There are three aspects of Fumerton's theory that I'd like to look into more closely. First, how are we to understand what "acquaintance" is? Second, why does Fumerton have the condition that for non-inferential justification, one must be acquainted with the three things listed above? Third, is it necessary to posit a realm of "facts" if one holds a view like this, or would it be possible to have a similar theory on which we are acquainted not with "facts" but with ideas and sensations?

About the nature of acquaintance, Fumerton writes:

Because the relations of acquaintance and correspondence that the above account appeals to are *sui generis*, there is precious little one can say by way of trying to explain the concept to one who claims not to understand it. Because acquaintance is not like any other relation, there is no useful genus under which to subsume it... When one is acquainted with a fact, the fact is there before consciousness. Nothing stands "between" the self and the fact...<sup>68</sup>

Fumerton uses the term "direct awareness" as a synonym for "acquaintance."<sup>69</sup>

When one is acquainted with a fact, one is directly aware of it.

Let us look more closely at what Fumerton says is necessary for being certain. One must be aware not just of the fact in question, but of one's thought and the fact that one's thought corresponds to the fact. The reason that Fumerton gives for thinking this is that when one is aware of all three things, "everything that is constitutive of a thought's being true is immediately before consciousness, [and] there is nothing more that one could want or need to justify a belief" (75). What makes a thought true is a fact about the world and a fact about the thought's correspondence to the fact about the world. So, Fumerton thinks, when we are aware

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<sup>68</sup> Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, 76.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, 75.

of both facts (plus the thought), we are aware of truth of the belief. This awareness is what makes non-inferential beliefs justified (and certain).

Fumerton's idea, in bare bones form, is that what fills the gap between belief and the truth – what connects the belief to the truth – is awareness of that which makes the belief true. Since we are directly aware of what makes the belief true, there is no further question to ask about what justifies our belief. What justifies our belief just is our awareness of that which makes the belief true, and nothing more can be given to justify a belief.

In its essentials, I agree wholeheartedly with this idea. I think that we can be certain, and it seems to me that it is something about our awareness which makes us certain. The awareness fills the gap between our belief and the truth.

In spite of my overall agreement, I object to one aspect Fumerton's account. I find it doubtful that we are aware of a realm of "facts," as he suggests. This awareness of facts is – according to Fumerton – an awareness that we have in common with animals, who nonetheless don't have the conceptual or linguistic capacity to realize that they are aware of facts. I take it that this awareness is not just awareness of entities like sensations and concepts. Facts inhabit a realm of their own. They "consist in an entity or entities exemplifying properties." According to Fumerton, there is a world of facts "out there" in addition to the existence of physical things and concepts and so on. Presumably, if all thoughts are true by correspondence to facts, then there is are conjunctive and disjunctive facts, like

“Either  $2+2=5$  or there were once dinosaurs.” So, according to Fumerton, there are infinite facts.

My main objection to this picture of the world is that I don't see it as necessary to posit a realm of facts, in order to explain 1. what makes thoughts true, or 2. how we can be certain. The correspondence theory of truth doesn't seem to require facts. The bearers of truth (whether these are thoughts or propositions or both) can be true by virtue of correspondence to actual objects. When I have the thought “snow is white,” this can be true if snow is white. I don't need to posit that snow is white *and* there is a fact that snow is white.

Similarly, it seems that we can develop a coherent theory of direct awareness which explains how we can be certain of some things, without positing a realm of facts. I agree with Fumerton to some degree: when I am certain, I am aware of three things. When I am certain that there is a red sensation, this is because I am aware of 1. my thought “there is a red sensation,” 2. the red sensation, and 3. the correspondence between the thought and the sensation.

One might object that I could falsely believe that I am aware of these three things. For instance, I could believe that I am aware that my thought corresponds to what I am aware of, when really it does not. But notice that this is an objection aimed at both Fumerton's version of certainty and mine. I respond to this type of objection in the chapters which follow (preview: I think it's possible in some cases that I am mistaken, but argue that this does not negate the possibility of certainty).

I agree with Fumerton that my awareness of the red sensation (or on Fumerton's theory, the fact that there is a red sensation) on its own is not enough for certainty. I could be aware of a speckled surface with fifteen dots, and think "there are fifteen dots," and yet not be certain. It is necessary in addition that I am aware that my thought corresponds to my objects of awareness. In the case of "there are fifteen dots," this rarely happens (at least it rarely happens to me). I am aware of something, but am not aware that my thought corresponds to what I am aware of. Awareness probably varies from person to person. Someone else may be able to become aware of the correspondence in the 15 dot case, just as I am aware that my thought "there are two dots" corresponds to what I am aware of, in some cases.<sup>70</sup>

## **II.i Objections to Certainty through Direct Awareness**

There are a few remaining questions and worries about this theory that I want to address here. First, one might wonder how my theory of direct awareness can account for the certainty of other sorts of propositions, for instance, of analytic a priori truths. I have described a case in which I am aware of a sensation, but how do

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<sup>70</sup> In *Epistemic Justification*, p. 137, Ernie Sosa discusses this case, and suggests that some further causal or counterfactual connection is needed, in order to distinguish cases in which one believes truly (but does not know) that there are 48 speckles, from cases in which one foundationally knows that there are 3 speckles. I think that what distinguishes the cases is our awareness that our concept corresponds to what we are experiencing. We are not aware of that correspondence in the 48 speckles case. This, and not externalist factors (such as "safety"), is what permits knowledge of the sort that I am discussing in one case but not the other.

I explain our certainty (supposing that we have certainty) of things like “all bachelors are unmarried”?

Here I think that we can be certain if I we are aware of the concept “bachelor.” Our awareness of bachelor is awareness of a concept which conceptually contains the concept of unmarried man. It is through this awareness of the concept “bachelor” that we can attain certainty. An objection immediately arises: it seems that in many instances, we are aware of the concepts through which we understand the objects of our beliefs without being thereby certain of those judgments, *even if* they are analytic a priori judgments. For instance, I believe that a triangle’s internal angles sum to 180 degrees, I am aware of the concept of a triangle when I make this judgment, and yet I am not certain of it. If I am aware of the relevant concepts, why isn’t this enough to give me certainty? What distinguishes these cases from cases in which I’m certain?

The difference between “all bachelors are unmarried” and “A triangle’s internal angles sum to 180 degrees” is that the first case, I am aware that two concepts are necessarily related in this way whereas in the second case I am not. Although I believe the second proposition, I am not aware of the conceptual relation between the two concepts. So, although I am aware of the concept “triangle” when I make the judgment, I am not aware of the concept’s conceptually containing “internal angles sum to 180 degrees.” An illustrative way to put this point is as follows: the concept of triangle is before my mental gaze, where certain aspects of it

are opaque to me and others are transparent. Transparent properties include: has three sides, has three angles, and so on. Opaque properties include: internal angles sum to 180 degrees, and so on. With more thought, I may be able to make formerly opaque properties transparent. But for now, the claim about the internal angles is opaque. When I believe it, I am not believing it because I am aware that this is so, but because I remember reliable testimony. This reliable testimony is not enough to make me certain, though, since it is not transparent to me that reliable testimony of this sort is true.

A second objection is as follows. According to the direct awareness theory, what makes us certain is our awareness of the relevant sensations or concepts. But we do not have to be aware that we are aware, in order to be aware. So the conditions for certainty are conditions which we do not know to be fulfilled, even if they are fulfilled. But if we do not know whether the conditions for certainty are fulfilled, how can we be certain? For all we are *aware* that we are aware at the time of certainty, we could be mistaken.

I think this objection confuses what it takes to be certain with what it takes to be certain that we are certain. We can be certain without being *certain that we are certain*. In order to become certain that we are certain, we must be aware that have

the relevant awareness. This is a further step, and it is possible to fulfill the awareness condition without fulfilling the further step.<sup>71</sup>

So, to summarize: when we are certain of something, we are aware of our thought, our perception (of sensations and/or concepts) and the correspondence between our thought and those perceptions.

Two notes on this concept of certainty. First, when we succeed in being aware of these three things, our belief will always be true. This is because we can't be aware in this way of the correspondence between our thought and our perceptions unless there really is such a correspondence i.e. unless our thought is true. Second, it is possible to think that we have the requisite awareness and so believe that we are certain, without this being true. However, as I argue in Chapters 7 and 8, this does not prevent us from being certain when we *do* have such awareness.

### **III. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have clarified what I mean by “Cartesian certainty” by first ruling out a number of concepts. I then introduced Fumerton’s concept of direct acquaintance, and modified it to include awareness of concepts and sensations rather than facts. Next I will turn to a defense of the claim that certainty is possible. There are a number of objections against the view that we can be certain, and the ones that I will look

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<sup>71</sup> A condition which requires certainty that we are certain, in order to be certain, would in any case make certain impossible. Fumerton expresses this sort of idea well (*Metaepistemology*, 81), and I discuss it further in Chapter 6.

at in the following chapters do not target a Fumerton-type view in particular, but are leveled against anyone who says that we can have certainty. Some of the objections, as we shall see, are aimed at a different conception of certainty than the one I have introduced, and I will respond by pointing out the mis-conception of certainty in those cases.

## Chapter 6: A Defense of Cartesian Certainty

We can have Cartesian certainty of at least some things. For instance, I now have Cartesian certainty that there is a sensation. The way that I understand Cartesian certainty is like this: I can have Cartesian certainty of a proposition when I see that it is true, or when I see that it is entailed by things that I see to be true. “Seeing” is obviously a metaphorical expression, but it gives something of an idea of what is involved: direct awareness of the truth of a proposition, either by intuition or by deduction from things I directly intuit.<sup>72</sup>

A defender of Cartesian certainty quickly comes under attack by what I will call the radical skeptic. The radical skeptic says, “Becoming certain requires overcoming radical doubt. Radical doubt is of the form, “It is epistemically possible that an evil demon is deceiving me in any of my perceptions whatsoever, and/or that my faculty of reason is defective, such that all my beliefs are false. How do you overcome this radical doubt?”<sup>73</sup> In response, I answer, “I overcome the doubt by actually becoming certain of something!”<sup>74</sup>

The radical skeptic thinks that there is something seriously wrong with my claim about how I gain certainty and overcome doubt. First, the skeptic thinks that in order to

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<sup>72</sup> See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>73</sup> The “radical” skeptic is different from a Cartesian skeptic, in that he questions the possibility of certainty through the use of general criteria for certainty. As will become clear, I do not think that Descartes has a criteria for certainty (*cognitio*) of this sort.

<sup>74</sup> See Chapter 7 for a discussion on begging the question.

become certain, I must fulfill some requirement of certainty (to be specified shortly).<sup>75</sup> I haven't fulfilled this requirement, and so it is impossible that I am certain of anything. Second, the skeptic says that my claim – made as a response to skepticism - is useless dialectically. The skeptic claims that I am not certain of anything; my response is simply, “I *am* certain of something!” The skeptic will maintain that this is a bad response dialectically, as it fails to give my opponent anything which could or should persuade him to change his mind.

I want to look more closely at the skeptic's response to my claim that I am certain. First, is my claim philosophically defective in some way i.e. is there reason to believe that the skeptic is right in claiming that I'm not able to become certain unless I fulfill some requirement? What is that requirement? Why should we take that requirement seriously? I will argue that there is no reason to take it seriously, because the skeptic can't provide any reason to do so.

## **I. Cartesian Certainty**

First, I want to be clear about the structure of Cartesian certainty.<sup>76</sup> Then I will briefly discuss why I am calling my view – that we can be certain of some things directly, by seeing that they are true – a defense of *Cartesian* certainty.

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<sup>75</sup> The radical skeptic, as distinguished from the Pyrrhonian skeptic, makes claims about the conditions of certainty.

<sup>76</sup> I could equally well use the expression “Cartesian knowledge” here; I use them interchangeably.

Cartesian certainty is foundationalist, in that each certain belief is either 1. a non-inferentially justified belief which constitutes the foundations, or 2. an inferentially justified belief which is justified either mediately or immediately by non-inferential foundational beliefs. Inferentially justified beliefs are justified by an appeal to further beliefs, whereas non-inferentially justified beliefs are not justified by any further beliefs.

Consider inferentially justified belief which is certain. If my belief is certain, it's not enough that there IS some reason which justifies my belief. I must actually *have* a further belief which justifies my belief. Furthermore, it is not enough for Cartesian certainty that I merely have a further belief which justifies my belief. I must also *have* the belief that the further belief justifies my belief. This belief must also be justified. So, in order to have an inferentially justified belief Y, I must also have 1. a belief X which justifies Y, and 2. a belief Z that X justifies Y, where X and Z are also justified beliefs. For Cartesian certainty, all the relevant beliefs (X, Y, and Z) must be beliefs which I am presently aware of. It is not enough to have dispositional beliefs. Nor is it sufficient to merely remember that I once had a belief which justified my current belief. I cannot be certain in the sense that I see the truth of X when I merely remember having perceived the justification for X (but do not currently see that it is true on that basis).

This description of what is required for Cartesian certainty is one which everyone can accept. Since I am not trying to describe the conditions under which we can know/be certain of things in the ordinary sense, it cannot be objected that these requirements on knowledge are too strict. There may well be an ordinary concept of knowledge according

to which we actually do know what we commonly think we know. I will not attempt to rule on that here. (For an explanation of why I think that Cartesian certainty is a valuable sort of knowledge to have, see chapter 9).

Let's go back to what I said at the beginning. I can be certain that there is a sensation. Moreover, I can be certain of this without first becoming certain that there is no powerful being deceiving me, or that my faculties are reliable, or that all perceptions of a particular kind (e.g. clear and distinct) are true. This is not a view which everyone would call "Cartesian," since it is common to read Descartes differently than I do. I will briefly explain how I read Descartes, in order to explain why I take the view of certainty I am defending to be "Cartesian."<sup>77</sup>

Everyone initially learns to read Descartes as follows. I clearly and distinctly perceive X. But I can't be certain of X, since there is a source of doubt: I can't be sure that I am not deceived by a powerful being or in some other scenario in which it seems to me that my belief is true, when in fact it is false. So, I must prove that God exists and would not allow me to be deceived. Then I can be certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true, and derivatively, that X is true.

Just after learning to read Descartes this way, everyone realizes (or is told) that there is a problem of circularity. If in order to be certain of anything whatsoever, I must first prove that God exists, then it is impossible for me to be certain of anything. This is because I must have certainty of at least the premises used to prove God's existence, if I am to be certain of the conclusion. And yet it's already been asserted that I have no

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<sup>77</sup> I argue for this reading in Chapter 1.

certainties at all prior to proving that God exists. So, if this is Descartes' picture, I can't become certain of anything.

The way that I read Descartes avoids the circularity problem, and also fits well with how Descartes says he avoids the problem.<sup>78</sup> Descartes has two levels of certainty. Call these *cognitio* and *scientia*. *Cognitio* is the sort of certainty that I have been referring to as "Cartesian certainty." It is the certainty I can have at the present time, when I "see" that what I believe is true. When I have *cognitio*, I am not relying on memory at all.

The second kind of certainty is what Descartes refers to as *scientia*. *Scientia* is what we might call unshakable or long-lasting certainty. I gain *scientia* when I am certain that all clear and distinct perceptions are true (hereafter the "truth rule"), on the basis of *cognitio* that God exists and does not deceive. Once I am certain of the truth rule, I can then be certain of things I remember having clearly perceived, even when I am no longer perceiving the demonstration by which I came to know them. I can also be certain that generally, everything I clearly and distinctly perceived is true. *Scientia* plays a different role than *cognitio* in truth-attainment. Whereas I have *cognitio* when I am actually infallibly connected to the truth via clear and distinct perception, I have *scientia* when that certainty is made secure by remembering by I have proved the truth rule. When I remember that the truth rule is true, I have no reason to doubt what I remember having clearly and distinctly perceived. Thus, my certainty is rendered stable.

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<sup>78</sup> See, for example, the Second Replies, CSM II.100, and Fourth Replies, CSM II.171.

Having explained *cognitio* and *scientia*, I will put *scientia* aside. When I talk about Cartesian certainty, what I mean is *cognitio*. That is, certainty which I can have of a proposition at a time, when I see that it is true. Since I am not certain of the rule that all clear and distinct perception is true, I will not defend the view that we can retain stability of our certain beliefs via the rule.

## II. The Alleged Impossibility of Cartesian Certainty

Let's now return to the radical skeptic. Though he and I both started with radical doubt, we have parted ways. He has remained in a state of total uncertainty, maintaining that it is possible – for all he knows – that a powerful being could be deceiving him in all of his perceptions. I have quit the state of total doubt on the basis of what I claim is a certain belief. Now the skeptic objects to my claim: it is impossible that I am certain, as I claim, because I haven't fulfilled a condition of certainty.

What is that condition? I can think of at least four conditions that the skeptic might have in mind. The first possible condition is being certain that I am certain.<sup>79</sup> The skeptic might suggest that in order to be certain of anything, I must be certain that I am certain. This condition is not simply a requirement that I become certain that I am certain, *after* I am certain of something. Rather, this condition on certainty is the demand that I be certain that I am certain, as a requirement of merely being certain.

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<sup>79</sup> Mersenne argues that we must know that we know, in order to know (Fifth Replies, CSM II.278).

It seems fairly clear that this condition is incoherent. If this were a condition, I could not yet be certain until I am certain that I am certain. But if I am not yet certain, then I simply *can't* be certain that I am certain. There is no prior certainty for me to become certain *about*.<sup>80</sup>

A second possible condition that the skeptic could be thinking of is the following. In order to be certain, I must be certain that my beliefs have a particular property P and also be certain that beliefs with P are always true.<sup>81</sup> This is a requirement in keeping with the initial, mistaken reading of Descartes. The only way that I am able to be certain of X is by being certain that X is clear and distinct, and that clear and distinct perceptions are all true.

A third possible condition is that of being certain that my belief is formed by an infallible belief-forming faculty. Unless I can be certain that my faculty is functioning so as to invariably deliver true beliefs, I can't be certain that this particular belief is true.<sup>82</sup>

A fourth condition is that of being certain that I am not in any skeptical scenarios. Unless I can rule out for sure that I am being deceived by a powerful being, or in possession of a faulty belief-forming faculty, I can't be certain that my current belief is true, no matter what it is.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Fumerton makes a similar remark about having such an "access requirement" for being justified in one's belief in *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Before becoming an internalist, Bonjour argues that this is a condition of internalist justification, and would probably have made the same argument against the possibility of Cartesian certainty (*The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, 1985, p. 31-32).

<sup>82</sup> Martha Bolton suggests that this is a criterion of being certain (in conversation).

<sup>83</sup> Bourdin argues that we must know there is no evil demon deceiving us before we can be certain of anything (Sixth Replies, CSM II.308).

The radical skeptic may have any of these requirements in mind when he asserts that I have failed to fulfill a requirement of being certain. If one of these conditions is in fact a condition of being certain, then certainty is impossible. Consider the second condition. If in order to be certain that X, I must be certain that my belief has property P, and that whenever a belief has P it is true, I will never be certain of anything. This is impossible for a familiar reason: there would have to be an infinite regress of beliefs. Take any belief X, where Y is a belief which justifies X and Z is the belief that Y justifies X. I must be certain of Y and Z in order to be certain of X, and I must also be certain of Y' and Z' in order to be certain of Y, and Y'' and Z'' in order to be certain of Z, and so on. At every level of certainty, a further level (with a greater number of beliefs) is required, so that in order to be certain of my initial belief, I must have infinite other certain beliefs.

In order to reject this as a possibility, it is not necessary to deny that it is possible to have infinite beliefs. Perhaps we *can* have infinite beliefs, where such beliefs are to be understood as dispositional beliefs i.e. dispositions to affirm the thing in certain circumstances. For Cartesian certainty, what is required is not just belief, but belief which is present to the attentive mind. It is much more doubtful whether we can have infinite beliefs of greater and greater complexity *presently in mind*. At least, even if we can't rule out the possibility, it is not a stretch to say that it is improbable that we could ever entertain infinite occurrent (i.e. explicit) beliefs. It is difficult enough just to entertain three or four beliefs at once, let alone an infinite number.

The same is true for the first condition. As re-formulated, it is the requirement that if I am certain, then necessarily I have an additional certain belief: I am certain that I am certain. This entails that I have infinite beliefs, and given that the relevant beliefs for Cartesian certainty are beliefs present to the attentive mind, it entails that I have infinite beliefs present to my mind.

Certainty is also impossible, even more obviously, on the third and fourth conditions. If it is a condition of certainty that I have to be certain of some further thing – whether it is the reliability of my faculty or that I am not in a skeptical scenario – in order to be certain of anything whatsoever, then certainty is impossible. In order to be certain that my faculty is reliable, I must already be certain that my faculty is reliable (otherwise I couldn't be certain that my faculty is reliable, according to the condition). But this is impossible. Likewise, if I must be certain that I am not in a skeptical scenario in order to be certain of *anything whatsoever*, then I must be already be certain that I am not in a skeptical scenario, in order to become certain that I am in a skeptical scenario, which is impossible. To make the point even clearer: on the third and fourth conditions, certainty is *obviously* impossible, because in order to be certain of X, I must already be certain of X. This is even worse than the first and second conditions, which only say that in order to be certain of X, I must be certain of Y, and so on to infinity.

Thus, on all four of the proposed possible conditions of certainty, becoming certain of anything is impossible. If it true that certainty requires the fulfillment of one of these conditions, then my claim to certainty must be mistaken.

### **III. The Ground of the Skeptic's Objection**

How should I respond to the skeptic? There are at least two ways to respond. One way is to simply re-affirm that I AM certain of X (for some specified X). Therefore, there is no condition of certainty on which all certainty is impossible. I think this is a viable response, and I will give it in Chapter 7.

A second response is to consider whether the skeptic's claim has any force as an objection to certainty. What sort of position is the skeptic in, when he affirms that one of the conditions is required for certainty? If I show that he has no reason to believe that his claim is justified, then I may be able to undermine his position.

My tactic, then, will be to question the epistemic status of the skeptic's claim. Since the skeptic is denying the possibility of certainty in affirming one of the four conditions, it can't be that he is certain (or claiming to be certain) that any of the conditions is necessary for certainty. So if his is right, his belief isn't certain. What is the epistemic status of his belief, if it is not certain?

#### **III.i Uncertain Justification**

Is the skeptic's belief about the condition of knowledge justified? If so, what sort of justification is involved? There are three main possibilities: 1. The skeptic has

internalist justification for the belief which is fallible i.e. justification which one can have for a belief which is false; 2. the justification is of the externalist type; 3. the belief is practically justified i.e. the skeptic has some practically beneficial reason to believe. These options, in other words, are: fallible internalist justification, externalist justification and practical justification.<sup>84</sup>

I will deal with the second and third options first. Suppose that the skeptic's belief is in fact justified in the externalist sense. That is, it is a belief which is the result of a reliable belief-forming process, or it is a belief which tracks the truth in close possible worlds, or is the result of a faculty designed to attain true beliefs, operating in an environment in which it was designed to operate.<sup>85</sup>

I would like to completely put aside the question of *what justification is*. I will not argue that externalist justification isn't really justification. Rather, I will offer a reason that we shouldn't care about such justification, at least in this context.

The current context is one in which the skeptic is making a claim which, if true, would render certainty impossible. So I ask how the claim is justified. If the skeptic responds that the claim is justified IF it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process or if it tracks the truth in close possible worlds or fulfills some other externalist condition of justification, then I ask what reason the skeptic has to believe that he is in fact in one of these fortunate situations. I am not demanding that he be justified in believing that he IS

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<sup>84</sup> As Richard Fumerton (*Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, 1995. 60-66) points out, it isn't very clear what is meant by internalism/externalism. At least some ways of distinguishing the two don't seem to work. By the terms, I will mean "justified by some conscious state" vs. "justified at least partially by some state of affairs other than a conscious state." I hope this will suffice for my purposes here, though to be perfectly precise I would need another explanation of the difference.

<sup>85</sup> Here I'm citing externalist views held by Alvin Goldman, Robert Nozick and Alvin Plantinga.

in such a situation, in order for his belief to be justified. Rather, I merely point out that unless he has a reason to believe that he has a belief which is justified in this way, neither of us has a reason to take his claim seriously.<sup>86</sup> It may or may not be justified. In any case, neither of us is in a position to discern whether it is. So his claim presents no threat to certainty.

Turn to the third option. Perhaps the skeptic's belief is justified because it is beneficial to believe it. It's difficult to see how this could be true (if anything, it seems better to believe that we can be certain of things than to deny it). But suppose that it is true that the skeptic's belief is justified practically. Now I ask a further question: what reason does the skeptic have to think that his belief is practically justified? In other words, how is the belief that it's practically beneficial justified? Either it's certain (ruled out) or it's justified in the externalist sense (see reply above), or it's fallibly (internally) justified. So, if I am to have reason to change my beliefs on this basis<sup>87</sup>, I will have to see that the belief is justified in the sense that there is some fallible evidence that it is true. This sort of justification is thus subsumed under the first type of justification—fallible justification—which I will discuss next.

### **III.ii Fallible Inferential Justification**

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<sup>86</sup> I'm assuming that he doesn't have such a reason. But suppose that he does – in that case, it must be justified in another sense, either certain or fallibly justified. The former is ruled out, and the latter I discuss shortly.

<sup>87</sup> I'm sidelining the question (here) of whether it would be possible for me to change my belief on this basis, even if I ought to do so.

Fallible (internalist) justification consists in a belief which is either inferentially justified or non-inferentially justified. Consider the first option first. If the belief is inferentially justified, then either it is a step in an infinite chain of justified beliefs or the chain comes to an end somewhere. Suppose that it is part of an infinite chain. The skeptic will probably wish to avoid committing to an infinite number of beliefs which I am presently aware of. Instead, he may assert that it is only necessary that I have infinite dispositional beliefs, not infinite beliefs which I am currently aware of. Since we are not talking about Cartesian certainty, but only justification, this is acceptable: I don't need to be currently aware of all relevant beliefs in order to be justified.<sup>88</sup>

It may be that the skeptic has an inferentially justified belief of this sort. Now consider the following two possibilities. First, it's epistemically possible that the infinite chain of potential justifying beliefs goes on and on forever, with beliefs ever available to justify earlier beliefs.<sup>89</sup> However, it's also epistemically possible that the chain ends at some point. If it ends, then the final belief in the chain is either non-inferentially justified, or it is arbitrary (unjustified). If arbitrary, none of the beliefs in the chain is justified.

Suppose that the skeptic claims that his inferentially justified belief is justified by being a step in an infinite chain of justification. The question is: does the skeptic have any reason to suppose that this chain goes on forever, rather than coming to an end in an

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<sup>88</sup> I am not discussing here a further option: someone might claim that he does have infinite actual occurrent beliefs. This seems unlikely given our capacities; however, I don't have an argument that it's impossible, other than to deny that it's the case when (in fact) I am certain that there is a sensation.

<sup>89</sup> Though considering the usual length of our inference chains (countable on one hand) and the seeming difficulty of continuing them any further, I doubt this is the case.

arbitrary belief? If the chain did end in this way, then all of the beliefs in the chain would also be arbitrary. If the skeptic doesn't have a way to rule out this possibility, then he doesn't have any more reason to believe that his belief is justified than that it is unjustified. Moreover, since he has no reason to believe that it is justified, it seems that he is not in a position to *claim* that his belief is justified.

It seems that there is no reason to think that the chain of reasons goes on forever rather than stopping at an arbitrary belief.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, I take it that even if his belief is justified by way of an infinite chain of potentially available reasons, the skeptic cannot give me (or himself) any reason to think so, and there is no reason to take the objection seriously.

### **III.iii Fallible Non-inferential Justification**

Consider the remaining two possibilities of how the belief is justified (in the internalist sense). The claim in question is either inferentially justified by a chain which comes to an end in a non-inferentially justified belief, or it is itself non-inferentially justified. Either way, we may consider the status of the skeptic's non-inferentially justified belief. If a belief is non-inferentially justified, then there are two possibilities for the epistemic status of the belief. Either it is a Cartesian certainty. Or is it merely probable i.e. a belief which is merely likely to be true.

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<sup>90</sup> The chief defender of this view – Peter Klein – says as much in “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons,” 316.

Since certainty is ruled out, it must be a merely probable belief. I'll grant for the sake of the discussion that it is possible that the belief is probable. But now I ask: what gives the skeptic a reason to *think* that it's probable? If there is no reason to believe that it's likely to be true, there is no reason to take it seriously as an objection. So, what reason does the skeptic have to believe that it's likely to be true?<sup>91</sup>

There are three options. First, the skeptic may believe that it is probable on the basis of another belief, on which it is likely to be true. An example of this is my belief Y: I will not roll four 6s when I roll four fair dies. I have reason to believe that Y is probable because 1. I have a further belief X about probabilities (i.e. the chance of rolling one six is 1/6 etc) and 2. a belief Z that X makes Y likely to be true. The second option: the skeptic might claim to directly grasp that the belief is probable, where the grasping is itself only probable and not certain. Call this sort of grasping "probable grasping." Third, it might be certain that it is probable. However, this option is ruled out for the skeptic who denies the possibility of certainty.

I will respond to the second option first. According to this possibility, the skeptic says that he directly grasps that X is probably true. My question in response is: what does directly grasping that X is probable amount to? If it means that the skeptic is simply seeing that X is probable, with no further justification, then this seems to me to amount to saying that it is certain that X is probable. But the skeptic, of course, will deny that he is claiming to grasp that "X is probable" is certain.

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<sup>91</sup> Notice that I'm not making a "level-confusion" i.e. demanding that one have a justified belief that one is justified *in order to* be justified at the first level. [Point well made in "Level-confusions in epistemology," William Alston].

The skeptic, without recourse to certainty, may claim that he probably grasps that he probably grasps. This isn't a state of being certain, but instead it's a state of it appearing with probability to him that X is probable. However, I can ask further why he believes that he probably grasps that he probably grasps. Rather than respond that it is certain that he probably grasps that he probably grasps, he may respond that he has infinite probable graspings (he probably grasps that he probably grasps that he probably grasps, and so on). My response to this is: why suppose that this is so? Perhaps he has infinite probable graspings, but it's impossible to ascertain that this is the case. For all we can tell, his chain of probable graspings ends in an arbitrary belief (i.e. he does not probably grasp that he probably grasps, instead, he just has an unjustified belief that he probably grasps).

Let's return to the first option i.e. that the skeptic believes that the belief is probable on the basis of other beliefs. Supposing that the skeptic's reason for believing that Y is probable is further beliefs X and Z, we can again ask whether X and Z are inferentially or non-inferentially justified. Eventually we will come to a belief which is non-inferentially justified. Of that belief, we can ask: what reason does the skeptic have to believe that it's probable? At which point the process will repeat. This questioning can and must be repeated over and over again, if the skeptic's claim that certainty is impossible is to be taken seriously. And yet it is possible – for all the skeptic can tell – that at some point there will be no further available reasons to justify the claim that the non-inferential belief in question is probable. If this is the case, then all of the foregoing

claims are arbitrary (since, as we have seen above, the skeptic does not have recourse to the claim that it is certain that he probably grasps X).

In short, as long as foundations are thought to be merely fallibly justified, one can always ask *why* one believes that the foundation is true. The proponent of Cartesian certainty will be able to respond: I am certain of the foundational belief (see chapter 7) in response to such questions. But the skeptic has no such recourse. He can't claim to be certain that a foundational belief is true or probably true. He can only claim that it is probably true that it is probably true. And yet the skeptic can't provide infinite such responses.<sup>92</sup> So ultimately, all of the skeptic's attempts to justify the claim that the belief is probably true end in failure.<sup>93</sup>

The skeptic may respond: why do I have to give any reason at all for thinking that the belief is probable? If it IS probable, then the belief is non-inferentially justified, and I am rational to believe it, assert it in argument, etc. Such a response would allow us to retain and rely on a wide range of beliefs we think of as justified and as beliefs we are reasonable to have and affirm.

I allow that these beliefs might well be justified in this (externalist) way. I do not challenge the claim that this sort of justification is good in some ways. Nor do I insist that we are unreasonable to hold beliefs that are justified in this way, even in the absence of reasons for thinking that the beliefs are in fact so justified. I think that there is a

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<sup>92</sup> Tim McGrew makes an argument much like this one against the proponent of "moderate foundationalism" i.e. anyone who claims to have fallibly justified foundations. He argues that this is what C.I. Lewis has in mind when he writes "If anything is to be probable, then something must be certain." For his discussion and excerpts from Lewis, see *The Foundations of Knowledge*, 70-72.

<sup>93</sup> Again, I am not claiming that the skeptic can have no justified beliefs. I am claiming that the skeptic has no reason for thinking that his beliefs *are* justified.

perfectly good sense of rationality and reasonability in which we are rational and reasonable in making inductive inferences and holding perceptual beliefs, etc.

But my point is this: the skeptic is making a claim about the conditions for certainty. It may be that his claim is justified in any number of ways. But what I want to know is: how can he *tell* that his claim is so justified? What reason, accessible from the inside, does he have to believe that his beliefs are justified? If he has none, then there is no reason to pay attention to his claim in the context of his making an argument against the possibility that I am certain: neither of us has any reason to think that his claim is true or likely to be true.

Backtrack to the beginning of this discussion. I aimed to answer the question of whether the skeptic's belief is either inferentially or non-inferentially justified. I have argued that even if it IS inferentially justified or non-inferentially justified, we have no reason to believe that it is. I conclude that the skeptic has no reason to believe that he does in fact have a justified belief. Given that he is in no position to put forward his claim as true or likely to be true, it isn't necessary to take it seriously as an objection.

#### **IV. The Dialectical Fallout**

Even apart from any philosophical problems, my opponent may say, one who responds to the skeptic by claiming that he is certain fails to say anything dialectically useful.

A claim or argument is dialectically useful if it presents the interlocutor with a consideration or series of considerations which would move him to change his beliefs, if he were rational. For instance, if someone points out a contradiction in my beliefs, I will change them if I am rational, since no rational person wittingly believes contradictions. Another dialectically useful move is to present the interlocutor with an argument. The interlocutor – if rational – will consider the argument at length. If, after much reflection, the interlocutor can't find anything wrong with either the argument's structure or with its premises (the argument seems valid and sound), then he will accept the conclusion.<sup>94</sup>

My claim (says the skeptic) is dialectically useless because there is nothing – neither argument nor contradiction-finding – which might serve to advance the dialectic. The skeptic denies that certainty is possible. I then respond by saying that in fact, I have become certain of some things, and I give some examples. The claim of certainty alone can do nothing to rationally persuade the skeptic to change his position. So the conversation ends where it started, with no progress.

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<sup>94</sup> This might be much more complex than I will discuss here. A few possible complexities: 1. what if the conclusion is something that one is psychologically unable to believe? 2. what if the argument seems valid and sound, and yet the conclusion contradicts something one is certain of? 3. what if the conclusion is completely insane-seeming e.g. there is no motion?

I agree. On its own, a claim to certainty has no effect on the disagreement with the skeptic. However, I have two comments on the situation which may help clarify the significance (or insignificance) of this dialectical inertia.

First, some seem to think that the fact that my claim fails to move the skeptic as a major fault of my position. Is it that somehow my failure to shift the skeptic indicates that I am wrong to hold my position and affirm it? No - I could be perfectly justified in my belief that I am certain, even if my affirmation has no effect on the dialectical situation. Think of the person who affirms in a single instance of a color experience that she is having this experience.<sup>95</sup> This on its own will not (and ought not to) have an effect on the dialectical situation with the color-blind person. Is it true that anyone who IS certain should be able to convey their certainty to others, such that the failure to convey it indicates a lack of real certainty or lack of justified belief that one is certain? This seems false. Think again of the case of a color-sighted person affirming the single color experience to a color-blind person.

Second, though I don't think a failure to make dialectical progress would indicate there is something wrong with my position, I think it is unsettled whether over time, it would be possible to change the skeptic's position. In section three, I presented a series of considerations which should (I think) persuade the skeptic that he doesn't have a reason to maintain that his claim concerning the conditions of certainty is justified. This might go some way to weakening his skeptical position, without yet getting him to be

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<sup>95</sup> I set the case as a single case because it's probably true that over time, the color-sighted person should be able to persuade the rational color-blind person that he/she is missing something.

certain of anything. In addition to this, it might be possible to give advice on how to become certain of something. Descartes gives advice to his readers, for instance that they should concentrate carefully on simple things, clarify their concepts, and avoid reliance on preconceived notions (i.e. beliefs about the physical world, or beliefs they derived from childhood authorities). It may be that following this advice will lead the skeptic to become certain of something.

So, to summarize: I don't think that merely failing to move the skeptic indicates that there is anything seriously wrong with my position. Furthermore, I am optimistic: the dialectic is not as inert as it may seem to be. First, I have a way of undermining the skeptic's reasons for believing that I am not certain. Second, there may be ways of trying to persuade the skeptic to change his mind.

## Chapter 7: When Not to Avoid Begging the Question

Suppose that I claim to be certain of something. I claim, for instance, that I am certain that there is a sensation, when I am aware of the whiteness of this paper.<sup>96</sup> That is, I can tell for sure, at a time, that there is a sensation. The radical skeptic – one who claims that certainty is impossible - doubts that I am certain. Here I will give the general form of the skeptic’s objection. I will then argue that (assuming that I am certain) it is an acceptable response to the objection is to re-assert that I am certain, “begging the question” against the skeptic.

### I. The Meaning of “Certainty”

Let me first clarify what I mean by “certainty.” I am interested in defending the kind of certainty which is “infallible” and “internalist.” Infallible certainty is certainty based on infallible justification. Infallible justification is justification which entails the truth of the belief, as follows:

**Infallibism:** If I am certain of p and have justification J for my belief, then  
whenever I have J, p is true.

There are two kinds of justification: inferential and non-inferential. Inferential justification is a reason for belief inferred from some other belief. Non-inferential

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<sup>96</sup> This isn’t a claim that the physical paper exists – it’s a claim that there is some sensation as of it existing, whether or not it really exists.

justification, which is the kind I have when I am certain that there is a sensation, is justification for a belief which is not based on any other belief.

There is a problem: the above condition for infallible beliefs will also hold for belief in necessary truths, no matter what justification I have for them. For now, let's bypass that problem by limiting the condition to contingent truths. This will at least distinguish having infallible certainty of X from failing to have infallible certainty of X, for all contingent truths.

Second, the certainty I am discussing is internalist. The way that I am conceiving of internalism, this is defined as follows:

**Internalism:** If I am justified in believing p, there is no subjectively indistinguishable state in which my belief that p is not justified.

That is, I am not discussing certainty according to which "causal" or "reliability" conditions affect whether or not my belief is justified. For instance, suppose that a condition for my having a justified belief that there is a table in front of me is the fact that an actual, existing table played a causal role in my perceiving a table and coming to believe that there is a table. In that case, things could seem to me to be in all regards the same, and yet my belief could be unjustified (suppose that I am dreaming or in the Matrix). According to my internalist condition, such a belief could not be justified in any scenario (and so would not be certain), since there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which my belief that p is not justified.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Notice that this condition does not make all justified belief certain. That is, I could have a justified belief such that there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which my belief is false. This condition merely

A bit more explanation of what “subjectively indistinguishable” means: I take two mental states to be subjectively indistinguishable from each other if one would not be able to tell them apart, were they are both (simultaneously) present to awareness, and were one to focus on them. It may be that for many states, it is not in fact possible to compare them in this way, since they are not available to awareness at the same time. But one can still consider the question of whether one *would* be able to tell them apart, were one to focus on both of them at once. If one could not tell them apart under such circumstances, then they are subjectively indistinguishable.

Together, these two conditions (infallibility and internalism) combine to form what we might call infallibilist internalist certainty. If I am in this state, then I fulfill the following condition:

**Infallibilist, internalist certainty:** If I have infallibilist, internalist certainty, than whenever p is certain for me, there is no subjectively indistinguishable state in which my belief is false.<sup>98</sup>

When I discuss the possibility of certainty, I am interested in the possibility of infallibilist, internalist certainty.

## II. The Skeptic’s Objection

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states that if I have a justified belief, there is no state such that everything seems the same to me, and yet my belief is unjustified (as would be the case with “externalist” justification).

<sup>98</sup> Again, this condition is limited to contingent truths, since it is automatically fulfilled for all beliefs in necessary truths.

The skeptic I have in mind need not be a radical skeptic, like Sextus Empiricus. I am taking the skeptic to be anyone who makes the objection that certainty is impossible. This includes many who claim that we do have “knowledge” of things, where knowledge is taken to mean something other than infallible, internalist knowledge.

There are many possible objections. Here is the gist of some of them:

- A People have been mistaken in the past about things they thought were certain.
- B Your belief-forming faculty may be fallible.
- C You might be deceived by an evil demon.
- D Perhaps you’re mis-applying your concepts.
- E You’re relying on memory, and memory might be mistaken.
- F If it were true that you’re certain, there wouldn’t be so much disagreement.
- G Conviction is subjectively identical to certainty, but convictions may be wrong.

All of these objections are essentially the same. Each easily lends itself to an argument of the following form.

1. It is epistemically possible<sup>99</sup> that there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which the belief that P is false.
2. If it is epistemically possible that there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which the belief B is false, then B is not certain.
3. (1) and (2) are true for every case of belief.
4. Therefore, certainty is impossible.

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<sup>99</sup> Epistemically possible that X for S = S does not know not-X.

Each of the objections is a way of arguing for premise (1). For example: people thought they were certain before, though their belief was false. That is, it is epistemically possible that there is a state in which my belief is false, which is indiscernible by me from the state in which it's true. The skeptic then concludes: given that the state with the false belief might seem just the same to me as the state with the true belief, I don't know that my belief is true.

### **III. Begging the Question against the Skeptic**

Since all of the objections are merely different ways of pushing premise (1), I will respond to the general argument, and in doing so will be responding to all of them at once. First, I believe that the argument is valid. Second, I think that premise (2) is true. If (in fact) it is epistemically possible that there is a state which is subjectively indistinguishable from mine, in which my belief is false, then I am not certain.

My response, then, is to attack premise (1). I think that premise (1) is false in the cases in which I am certain. That is, my response is to the claim that where I am certain (for instance, I am certain that there is a sensation in a particular case), premise (1) is false.

Thus, I argue that the way to respond to the argument is: "I *am* certain that there is a sensation, and so premise 1 is false." To make the dialectic clear, let's consider a conversation between the skeptic and proponent of certainty which goes as follows.

A: There is a sensation- I'm certain of it.

B: Nothing is certain (gives argument).

A. Since I am certain, and I would not be certain if the first step of the argument were true (i.e. if it were epistemically possible that there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which my belief is false), I deny the first step.

B. That's just what I'm arguing against – my claim is that you're not certain.

A. No, I really am certain.

In response to the skeptic's argument, A merely re-asserts the claim against which the skeptic is arguing. A does not provide any other reason to think that "I am certain" is a true claim. Since A simply re-asserts the thing that the debate is about, it seems that this is an example of begging the question. Let's agree that re-asserting the claim which is in question is an instance of begging the question against the skeptic. Is it the right response to make, nonetheless?

In order to answer this question, I will first discuss other ways that one might respond. I will then argue that in this sort of case, begging the question by re-assertion is a good and acceptable response, where one really is certain.

### **III.i Alternate Responses**

The skeptic argues that it is epistemically possible that my belief is false, and hence that I am not certain. There are several available responses. First, I can undermine

the argument by objecting that the skeptic has no epistemic justification for his premises. I make this response in Chapter 7. Second, I can try to respond by giving an *argument* that I am certain, with premises that are certain. Third, I can try to respond by giving uncertain justification that certainty is possible. Fourth, I can respond by re-asserting that I am certain. Let's take a look at the latter three responses.

Suppose that I attempt to give an argument that I am certain. Suppose further that I claim to be certain of these premises, and of the fact that the premises jointly entail the conclusion that I am certain. One way that someone might try to do this is to claim that there is some property of belief such that whenever a belief has it, the belief is certain. For instance, one might argue that whenever a belief is clear and distinct, it is true. If the belief "I am certain of X" is clear and distinct, then one could use the further claims that 1. all clear and distinct perceptions are true and 2. "I am certain of X" is clear and distinct in order to provide further evidence that a belief is certain.

This response to the skeptic, however, seems on a par dialectically with merely re-asserting that X is certain. Since the skeptic's conclusion (as I have presented it) is that all certainty is impossible, any further claim of the form "I am certain of \_\_\_\_" amounts to begging the question against the skeptic, by affirming precisely what is at issue in the debate (i.e. that certainty is actual, and hence possible). I conclude that providing a further argument and claiming to be certain that it shows that I am certain is no better or worse than merely re-affirming that I am certain of a particular claim. We will look at the re-affirming response shortly.

Another response which one might attempt to make is to claim, in response to the skeptic's objection, that "I am certain that I'm certain." The dialogue here goes:

A: There is a sensation- I'm certain of it.

B: Nothing is certain (gives argument).

A. Since I am certain, and I would not be certain if the first step of the argument were true, I deny the first step.

B. That's just what I'm arguing against – my claim is that you're not certain!

A. I am certain that I'm certain.

This might seem, at first, to be better than just re-asserting that I am certain. However, it suffers from the same problem as the first failed response. The skeptic will be likely to challenge the claim that I'm certain that I'm certain, giving the same argument that certainty is impossible. At that point, I can either re-assert, or I can ascend further. If I re-assert that I'm certain that I'm certain, I might as well re-assert on the first level. On the other hand, if I ascend further, I run into the same challenge *ad infinitum*, with the added difficulty of holding all of the iterations in my mind.

A second possible response is to give justification that I am certain, but to refrain from claiming that I am certain that this argument shows that certainty is possible. For instance, I might point out that there have been philosophical greats who have claimed to be certain of things, and argue that this constitutes grounds for believing that certainty is possible. In this response, I would not claim to be certain that the premises are true, but

would instead claim that the premises are probable. My argument (as an example) might go something like this:

1. Philosophical greats have claimed to be certain of things.
2. They were very good at philosophy.
3. If someone is very good at philosophy and claims to be certain, this is evidence that certainty is possible.

Therefore, there is some evidence that certainty is possible.

At this point, the dialectic would be as follows. The skeptic has presented an argument for the impossibility of certainty, with uncertain premises. The anti-skeptic has presented an argument for the possibility of certainty, with uncertain premises. Now, one might suppose, the conversation might continue in trying to discern where the greater evidence lies.

However, my position on the above argument, as well as the skeptic's argument, is that neither argument can give us any actual epistemic justification. I present an argument against fallible justification (i.e. justification for a premise which is less than certain) in Chapter 6. The argument is that unless *something* is certain, nothing is merely probable for us (see Chapter 6). For this reason, I consider an attempt to argue for the possibility of certainty on grounds that are uncertain to be epistemically worthless.

Despite my view that uncertain grounds are epistemically worthless, I do think that giving uncertain justification for the possibility of certainty may be practically useful. Supposing that the skeptic has dismissed certainty entirely, arguing in the manner

suggested above may persuade him to give more attention to the possibility. That, in turn, may lead to the skeptic's becoming certain of something (and aware that he is certain of something). Thus, though I would not present the uncertain justification as epistemically substantive, it is not a bad tactic dialectically.

#### **IV. What's Wrong with Begging the Question?**

The final response that I will consider is begging the question against the skeptic. "Begging the question" in this situation consists in either 1. re-stating that one is certain, in response to an argument that certainty is impossible, or 2. calling upon further premises of which one claims to be certain, in order to argue that certainty is possible. Many philosophers have considered begging the question to be a bad thing in an argument. Claiming that one's opponent has begged the question is considered a devastating objection.

Notwithstanding common practice, I think that begging the question in this situation is an acceptable response to the skeptic. As we have seen above, giving uncertain justification may be useful but is not epistemically valuable. Calling upon further certainties (rather than simply repeating oneself) is also to beg the question, since one is claiming to be certain, albeit of other things. If I re-assert that I am certain, I am not being helpful dialectically; however, if it is true that I am certain (and I am aware that I am certain), I think this is the correct response.

Let's say that I am certain that there is a sensation. There are various arguments meant to show that for all I know, there is a subjectively indistinguishable state in which I'm wrong. In other words, I am pushed to concede that I'm mistaken about my certainty. Should I agree? Well, if I really am certain, why should I agree? Isn't the correct response, if in fact I am certain, to insist that I am certain? It seems to me that this is, in fact, exactly how I should respond.

If this response is right, why does it seem wrong? Someone challenges my certainty, and I respond "I'm certain." Many would judge there to be something wrong-headed about such a response.

There are at least two reasons that it may seem wrong. First, we're accustomed to justifying our beliefs by further considerations. If someone asks how we know something, most of the time we respond, "I know it because..." It is rare that we respond "I just know it," unless we are trying to shut down a line of inquiry, and in many cases this is premature. (Suppose someone asks how I know it will be hot outside tomorrow).

The reason that we rarely answer "I just know it" is because it's rare that we discuss the sorts of things that we can know through themselves. In everyday conversation and most of the time in philosophy, we are discussing the sorts of things that we can give further justifying reasons to believe. It seems bad to answer "I just know it," in part because we're so un-used to hearing this sort of response.

Second, re-asserting "I am certain" is awkward conversationally. If someone gives an argument, it seems most appropriate to argue back. That way, we can jointly

consider the reasons and decide as rationally as possible on that basis. However, in this case, it just isn't possible to give reasons. However good it is to be cooperative conversationally, it isn't possible in this case.

Infrequent use and conversational awkwardness make this response *seem* wrong, but they don't make it wrong. Neither does calling it "dogmatic" make a difference to whether it is the right response. To say that someone is being dogmatic is to say...what? That he is asserting something without giving further reasons? Exactly! The question is whether he is really certain of the thing; if so, then he should assert it without further reasons.

## VI. G. E. Moore

Some take G.E. Moore to give this type of response to skepticism<sup>100</sup> i.e. his answer to skeptical arguments concerning the physical world is: he knows that "[h]ere is one hand... and here is another..."<sup>101</sup>

Though this has the same form as the response I give, I don't think it works. The reason for this is simple: I don't think we're certain that there is a (physical) hand in front of us.<sup>102</sup> If Moore thought that he knew this, he was either making use of a different

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<sup>100</sup> In "A Reply to My Critics," *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (1942), he denies that he meant to give this as a response to skepticism. So instead of saying that G.E. Moore gives this response to skepticism, let's just suppose that someone were to give this response.

<sup>101</sup> "Proof of an External World," in *G.E. Moore: Selected Writings* (1993), 166.

<sup>102</sup> At least not if "physical" is meant in the usual way – to indicate something spatial, whose existence does not depend on the mind. Of course, if "physical" just means whatever "this" (pointing) is, I'm happy to admit that we can be certain of its existence.

concept of knowledge than I am, or he was mistaken about what he knows. Since he claims that “Here is a hand” is a paradigmatic case of knowledge, it seems likely that he is using another concept of knowledge e.g. fallible knowledge, which is not the kind of knowledge I have been discussing.<sup>103</sup>

Of course, I’m not claiming to be certain that G.E. Moore wasn’t certain that there is a physical world. I’m not certain of this. But neither am I certain that he was right in his claim to certainty. The point here is that even if one person is in fact certain, and is correct in making this response to skeptical arguments, this doesn’t imply that everyone who makes the same type of response is correct to make the response. The person who re-asserts must actually be certain of the things that he claims to be certain of.

## **VII. Conclusion**

I have argued that the correct way to respond to the objection that it is epistemically possible that I have a false belief is simply to repeat that I am certain. There are two other possible ways to respond which I discuss elsewhere, namely arguing that the skeptic’s claims are unjustified (see Chapter 6) and trying to lead the skeptic to become certain of something. This does not imply that those who are uncertain should be convinced by my re-assertion that I am certain. If they are uncertain, they are right to doubt. They are right to doubt that I am certain, and I am right to claim that I am certain in spite of their doubt.

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<sup>103</sup> To be more precise: since he admits that it could appear to us the same way even though we’re dreaming, he can’t be saying that we have infallible, internalist knowledge of “Here is a hand.”

## Chapter 8: Objections to the Possibility of Certainty

In this chapter, I wish first to turn our attention to a set of objections to the possibility of certainty, each of which calls attention to the possibility of error of a particular kind. I will first look at three objections which call into question the possibility of certainty. Each objection points out that error is possible in some cases, and then questions how we can be certain in *any* case, given the possibility of error.

Keith Lehrer argues that we can easily imagine someone who believes that she is experiencing a pain, when in fact it is only an itch. This he takes to show that in any case of belief about inner states, it's possible that we are mistaken. Aune argues that as long as memory is fallible, we might be mistaken about what counts as an instance of a concept, and thus go wrong in our judgment. Williamson makes a Sorites-type argument to show that we can never be certain that we are not making an incorrect judgment. I will respond to each objection in turn. Finally, I will examine a Humean-type argument presented by Bonjour which purports to demonstrate that all infallible certainty is impossible, since it is always logically possible that belief occur even in the absence of truth.

### I. Certainty, Incorrigeability and Lehrer's pain-itch case

Keith Lehrer conceives of “foundation theories” are ones which take basic (i.e. foundational) beliefs to carry with them a guarantee of their truth. He writes that if basic beliefs could be mistaken, “they provide no foundation.” He thus takes the defender of Cartesian Certainty, who holds a foundation theory, to maintain an “incorrigibility” thesis.<sup>104</sup> He considers several versions of the thesis, and comes to the conclusion that the following best captures what the proponent of such a theory must have in mind.

S has an incorrigible belief that p if and only if (i) it is contingent that p and (ii) it is logically impossible that S believes that p and it is false that p.<sup>105</sup>

So, if my belief that “I am in pain” is incorrigible, it must be the case that whenever I have this belief, it is true.

Lehrer argues that it is possible to make a mistake about whether one is in pain, and so attempts to refute such a theory. His example is as follows.

Imagine that a not very enlightened lady goes to her doctor to complain of a disagreeable sensation. Imagine that the sensation is something distinctly one of pain and at other times distinctly one of itching. Moreover, suppose this person greatly admires her doctor and is inclined to believe what the doctor says even when his medical deliverances are somewhat preposterous. The lady is told by her doctor that it is not surprising that her sensation is sometimes one of pain and sometimes one of itching because itches really are pains. All itches, he says, are pains, though some are very mild. Such is the authority of the man, and such is the credibility [sic: credulity] of the lady, that his word is taken as a creed. From that moment on she never doubts that itches are pains, and, though they feel different, she firmly believes that she is in pain whenever she has the slightest itch. When she itches, therefore, she erroneously believes that she is in pain. Thus, [her] believing that she is pain does not logically imply that she is in pain.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Lehrer, *Knowledge*. See p. 76-78 where he calls Descartes’ view a “foundation theory” which takes “basic beliefs to guarantee their own truth.”

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

What does this case show? Let us suppose for the moment that it shows that we may be mistaken in some of our beliefs regarding our internal states, and so these beliefs are corrigible. As Lehrer writes: “any belief about what I think or belief about any sensation or feeling is corrigible and subject to correction.”<sup>107</sup> This result threatens the possibility of Cartesian certainty about internal states only if Cartesian certainty is taken to consist in incorrigible beliefs.

So, why anyone would think that being certain *is* a matter of having incorrigible belief? One might argue that one can’t defend claim to certainty without defending incorrigibility, as follows:

- (1) We can be mistaken about our internal states in a particular case.
- (2) If we can be mistaken about our internal states, then we are not infallible with regard to them.
- (3) If we are not infallible with regard to our beliefs about internal states, then we cannot be certain in *this* case that we are right.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore, we are never certain that our beliefs about our internal states are true.

Does this argument prove that we cannot be certain about our internal states? If so, then this is a serious blow to proponents of Cartesian certainty, who may hope to include some certainties about internal states among the foundations.

I do not think that this argument works. I agree with premises 1 and 2, but reject premise 3. My reason for rejecting premise 3 is that it is not true that if we are mistaken

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>108</sup> “This case” is meant to refer to any case in which we have a belief about an internal state.

in *some* cases, we should believe that we could be mistaken in *all* cases. Think about a case like this: as I am jogging, listening to Bach with headphones, and text-messaging, I have the thought that I smell lilac. I believe this for a moment, but the thought quickly passes and I don't examine it very closely. As it happened, I falsely believed that I smelled lilac; I saw a lilac bush at some distance, and supposing that I would be able to smell the flowers, I formed the false belief.

This case seems perfectly possible to me. Supposing that it is possible, does it show that I could be mistaken about *any* of my sensations, no matter how clear they seem to me? I don't think so. Just because one instance of this case of belief is mistaken, this does not give us reason to think any of them could be mistaken, no matter how clear they seem to us. There are cases where I am very intensely focusing on my sensations and am not distracted, in which I can be certain that "there is redness" is true, even if I cannot be certain that "there is lilac scent" is true in the instance described. This is because there is a difference between the two cases: in one I am really paying attention, and in the other I am not.

The reason that I reject incorrigibility as a requirement for certainty, then, is because certainty does not depend merely on the belief formed, but the conditions under which it is formed. In one circumstance, I form a belief about my experiences without much attention, in passing. In another, I form a belief while focusing intently on my sensations, not letting my mind jump from topic to topic. The crucial claim that a proponent of certainty must make is that I could not be mistaken when I am forming the

belief in this particular way, and not that I could never be mistaken about this belief, no matter what the circumstances are.

There are two possible reasons for which someone might disagree with me. First, one might insist that our certainty of a particular sensation depends on our knowledge of the our certainty of the incorrigibility of beliefs about sensations in general. One might argue that this is the case if one has a picture of introspective certainty which is like this: I am certain that I have a particular internal state only *because* I am certain that all introspective awareness yields true beliefs. That is, I am not certain that there is a red sensation directly, by being aware of the red sensation, but instead I reason as follows:

1. It seems to me that there is a red sensation.
2. All beliefs about one's own internal states are true.
3. Therefore, there is a red sensation.

Suppose that the only way to become certain of (3) were to be certain of (1) and (2), as well as the fact that (1) and (2) entail (3). If this were the only way to arrive at certainty about one's internal states, then the proponent of Cartesian certainty would have a problem. There are many reasons to doubt the deduction above. First, it seems possible to have a belief about an internal state and yet be mistaken (as Lehrer points out). Second, how would we ever come to know premise (2) in the example above? It's a necessary truth, and so cannot be learned through experience. And yet *a priori* reasoning doesn't seem to help, since it is far from evident that any set of beliefs with a

particular content would always *have* to be true.<sup>109</sup> Beliefs about introspection are just beliefs with a particular subject matter, and they considered as a group, they seem no more *guaranteed* to be true than beliefs with, say, geometry as their subject matter.

The fact that we have such direct access to our own inner states does make it seem more likely that we are right about them than about other domains. However, there is no reason to rule out cases of overly hasty judgment, like the one I described, in which our beliefs about our inner states are false.

In conclusion, I conclude that Lehrer is partially right. We *can* be mistaken about our inner states. There is no reason to think that someone's having a belief about their mental content "logically implies" that their belief is correct. But I do not think that a further moral about the possibility of certainty can be drawn from this message. Our being wrong in some cases does not render certainty impossible in others, even in the same domain (i.e. introspective belief). This is because certainty we have about our own states is not drawn from a generalization about how such beliefs are always right, but is instead attained by the clear awareness that we have in particular instances. In the cases where we have such clear awareness, it is impossible that we be mistaken.<sup>110</sup>

Before moving on, let's look at a second reason that someone might take incorrigibility to be necessary for certainty. People are sometimes mistaken in their beliefs about their internal states. How, then, can I be sure that I am not in the same

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<sup>109</sup> There may be exceptions, such as when one believes "this exists" (where "this" is referring to a sensation) or "I have a belief." In these cases, it may be that whenever one believes them, they are true. But even so, I would not limit certain beliefs to beliefs like these.

<sup>110</sup> See chapter 5 for further discussion of clear awareness. See Chapter 7 for further discussion of the fact that such certainty doesn't *derive* from further certainty that all beliefs of a particular kind are true.

position that they are? In other words, if it *possible* to be mistaken about one's internal states, how can I tell that I am not mistaken? I am in the same position – from the inside – as they are. In other words, things seem the same way to them as to me; our states are epistemically indiscernible. Since this is the case, I can't be certain (merely) by introspection, that I am in the state that I believe myself to be in. Put into argument form:

- (1) People are sometimes mistaken in their beliefs about internal states.
- (2) Their states are epistemically indiscernible from my own.
- (3) If A and B are epistemically indiscernible, and B is false, then A is not certain.

Therefore, I am never certain in my beliefs about internal states.

Such a line of thought would only be persuasive if we could ascertain that those who have had false beliefs have been in a state which is epistemically indiscernible from my state. Even knowing that this is a *possibility* would be enough to run the argument.

But in fact, even though (1) is true, and people make mistakes, this gives us no reason to maintain that (2) is also true. This is no reason to believe that someone who mistakenly believes that they smell lilac or see a red flash – when these judgments are made without much attention or the supposed sensations are faint – are in a state which is epistemically indiscernible from someone who is focusing at length on a particular sensation, and who finally makes a circumspect judgment. IF such cases were epistemically indiscernible from cases of mistaken belief, then I agree that certainty is impossible. But it seems that there is no reason to think that there *are* such cases. In fact,

I think that I can be *certain* that there is no such epistemically indiscernible case in which my belief is false, when (for example) I am certain that there is a red sensation.

A final note on Lehrer's argument. Several philosophers have doubted whether his pain/itch case is a case of genuine error. For example, Timothy McGrew writes that it is natural to take the woman in the scenario to be simply using the word "pain" differently from the way we use it.<sup>111</sup> She is using the word "pain" to refer to things that feel like pains *or* that feel like itches. She is not thereby mistaken in her judgment, since her word "pain" really does describe her itch.

Lehrer responds by saying that the woman describes pain as "throbbing, stabbing, and so forth," and does not seem to have a new, different use of the word. She is not making the trivial claim that "pains" are either pains or itches. Instead, "when she says 'I am in pain', she means it" (Lehrer, 98-99).

Yet, as McGrew points out, it seems that the most plausible readings of the case are either 1. when the woman gives the conditions for being in pain ("throbbing, stabbing, and so forth), she has one definition, and when she uses "pain" to describe her itches, she has another, or 2. she simply has a new definition of pain (which includes itches) though she doesn't realize it. In these cases, the woman is mis-applying a term, given its conventional meaning, but is not mistaken about her inner state, given the way that she is using the word. The alternative is that she has the "bizarre belief" that she *is* in a state where she is experiencing throbbing, stabbing, and so forth, when in fact she is not.

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<sup>111</sup> Timothy McGrew, *Foundations of Knowledge* (1995), 106-107.

I agree with McGrew that the most likely explanation of the woman's behavior is that she has simply adopted a new meaning of the word pain, and so her belief is not really mistaken (taking into account her usage of the word). Just as she is right in saying that her itch is a "pain," I would be right to say that my steaming tea is "tepid" if by "tepid" I mean hot.

However, I think that not much stands or falls with this example, since it seems as if there are other (less controversial!) examples of mistaken introspective beliefs. Cases where judgments are hasty or ill-considered, and/or apparent sensations are fleeting or faint are ideal candidates. And yet, as I argue above, even such cases of mistaken belief do not threaten the view that we are *sometimes* certain of our inner states.

## **II. Aune's memory objection:**

Another type of objection is voiced by Bruce Aune:

The admission that memory is fallible is...extremely damaging to the idea that phenomenal identifications could not possibly go wrong. There is plainly a sense in which memory is involved in all judgments of identification. To judge that a phenomenal occurrence has the property F is to assert that it belongs to the class of F's, that the property it has is just the property that is possessed by other F's. But how could one know this infallibly, if one's memory is intrinsically fallible? – if one may well misremember the peculiarities, the distinguishing features, of F's generally? If it is replied that every assertion of the form "This is an F" is really an immediate matter, involving no reference whatever to other F's or to their distinguishing features, then the assertion evidently amounts to no more than "I shall call this 'F'." But if all phenomenal identifications have this import, and only this import, then it would be impossible to establish any generalizations, let alone infallible ones, relating different phenomenal items. Indeed, there would be no bona fide identifications at all; each so-called

identification would turn out to be nothing more than a kind of ceremonial announcement or verbal baptism, something very different from an out-and-out claim to knowledge.<sup>112</sup>

The objection amounts to the allegation that we can't make any statement about our inner states without using concepts. However, any reliance on concepts involves reliance on memory. If someone judges, for instance, that a sensation is red, this will require that he remembers past sensations which had the same feature, and that he compares his current sensation to the ones that he remembers. Since memory is fallible, so is any judgment which uses a concept.

There are two possible responses to this objection. The first response is to reject the theory of what is required for concept application which it presupposes. There is a straightforward reason for doing so, given by Roderick Chisholm, which is simply that if we need past instances in which the concept applied to apply a concept now, then we could never begin to apply concepts at all.<sup>113</sup> We do apply concepts, and so it must not be a requirement for concept application that we remember other instances in which we applied the concept.

But might there not be instances in which, when I apply a concept, I am in fact relying on memory in my understanding of the concept? The above consideration shows that I can form a concept and apply it based solely on one instance of the sensation in question, and do not need multiple instances in order to really have the concept. And yet,

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<sup>112</sup> Bruce Aune, *Knowledge, Mind and Nature* (1967), 35.

<sup>113</sup> Roderick Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (1982), 141.

might I not be remembering past instances of experiences like this and rely on that memory when I claim that my current sensation is an instance *like these other ones*?

I think the following consideration shows that we always have a concept in mind independently of any memories of similar instances. Let's take a particular case.

Suppose that I bite into an apple and think "The taste of a Fuji apple, sweet with a hint of grape." Here I've used many concepts to describe my experience. According to Aune, I am reaching into my memory bank when I do this, and I'm saying to myself: "My experience is like those other (remembered) experiences in these regards." But there's a problem with this picture. If I am to reach into my memories for experiences, I will be reaching for various concepts. In order to reach for those concepts, I must know which concepts to reach for, and this can only be the case if I now have the concepts in mind, independently of my memories.

An objector might respond by saying that *I* don't have to "reach" for concepts at all. Instead, my mind just automatically selects past instances in which I applied with similar features, and having before my mind these resembling instances, I am able to form the concept of the features which is common to these instances. I then apply my concept to the instance at hand. So, this is an automatic process, not a conscious and voluntary one, and I don't have to have the concept in mind, in order to call up past instances where the concept would apply.

Two replies. First, it doesn't seem as if this process ever really occurs. When I judge that the fruit is tangy, I don't experience an explosion of instances in my mind,

enabling me to think “what I mean by tangy is like these others instances.” Second, even if this were what happened when I apply concepts, this picture wouldn’t be able to explain why this set of instances gives me the ability to think and apply the concept “tangy.” Imagine that I have the sensation of tanginess. Three remembered instances appear in my mind: all are instances of yellow-colored pineapple. Why would these instances allow me to think and apply the concept “tangy” rather than the concept “yellow”? There seems to be no explanation. It must be that if I single out the tangy commonality rather than the yellow one, as the material for my concept “tangy,” this is because I already have the concept in mind, independently of the instances.

One final reply to Aune’s objection. Even granting the view on which we need remembered instances in order to think and apply concepts, it isn’t clear why mistakes of memory would impugn our judgments. Let’s suppose I taste the pineapple before me, and immediately three other instances pop into mind. Two of them were really instances of tangy fruit, but one is an instance of coconut – not an experience of a tangy fruit. I am mis-remembering my experience of coconut as one similar to my current sensation.

There are two pictures in keeping with the concept-memory view. One is that what is relevant to whether memories give me the concept which correctly applies in this instance is whether the memories accurately portray how my experiences were. This is apparently Aune’s view. But there is another possibility, on which what allows me to think and apply a concept in the current instance is that it *seems* to me that my memories are of the relevant sort of experience. Suppose that it seems to me now that my three

memories are of the tangy sort. That is, when I think of my experience of a coconut, I (falsely) remember my taste buds tingling and stinging a bit. On this latter view, the fact that I mis-remember has no bearing on my correctly applying the concept “tangy.” It doesn’t matter what my experience really was like, it matters how I seem to remember it. Even in the case that this view of concept formation and application is right (and above I have argued that it is not), there is no reason to prefer the first rather than the second version of it. In other words, there is no reason to think that it matters what my actual experiences were like. It merely matters how they appear to me, in remembering (or misremembering) them now. Thus, I conclude that as far as I can tell, Aune’s objection carries no weight about the view that certainty about at least some internal states is possible.

### **III. Williamson’s anti-luminosity argument**

Let us turn to another argument which calls into question certainty about internal states. In *Knowledge and its Limits*, Williamson argues against the claim that we are ever such that we can know whenever we are in a particular mental state.<sup>114</sup> That is, he argues against “Luminosity,” which he defines as:

(L) for every case  $\alpha$ , if in  $\alpha$  C obtains, then in  $\alpha$  one is in a position to know that C obtains.

His argument that there are no luminous conditions is as follows:

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<sup>114</sup> Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 96-106.

- (1) If in  $\alpha_i$  one knows that one feels cold, then in  $\alpha_{i+1}$  one feels cold.
- (2) If in  $\alpha_i$  one feels cold, then in  $\alpha_i$  one knows that one feels cold.
- (3) In  $\alpha_i$  one feels cold.
- (4) In  $\alpha_i$  one knows that one feels cold.
- (5) In  $\alpha_{i+1}$  one feels cold
- (6) In  $\alpha_0$  one feels cold.
- (7) In  $\alpha_n$  one feels cold.

Williamson argues for premise 1 by describing a case in which I begin cold and gradually grow warmer, until I am hot under the noon sun. If each change is very slight, then I may not be able to tell when I shift from being cold to no longer being cold. My confidence that I am cold in some borderline case  $\alpha_i$  is mis-placed, since in a nearly identical case, I would be nearly as confident and yet I would be wrong. In such a way, Williamson argues that knowledge that I am cold must be reliable, in the sense that I could not easily mis-judge whether I am cold. For this to be true, it must be the case that when I know that I am cold, I am not in a state adjacent to another state which seems almost the same to me, but where my belief is false.

Premise 2 is true if Luminosity is true, as follows. According to the luminosity condition, when I am cold, I am always in a position to know that I am cold. Suppose for the example that I am actively considering whether I am cold. If I am cold, and am in a position to know that I am cold. Furthermore, since I actively consider the question in the instances in question, I know that I am cold.

Together, these premises yield the conclusion that for any condition  $\alpha_0$  in which I feel cold, it is also the case that I feel cold in  $\alpha_n$ . But this is false, since in the case specified, I am not cold but hot in  $\alpha_0$  (noon). Since he thinks premise (1) is clearly true, Williamson concludes that it is false that my judgment that I am cold is luminous. In other words, it is not always the case that when I am cold, I am in a position to know that I am cold.

Let's suppose for the moment that the argument is sound. Is it a threat to the possibility of certainty?<sup>115</sup> The key question here is: must a proponent of Cartesian certainty also defend the claim that our states are luminous?<sup>116</sup>

In my reply to Lehrer above, I argued that the claim that we have certainty of internal states in *some* circumstances does not require the further claim that we are *always* correct in our beliefs about our internal states. Certainty does not require incorrigibility. If our internal states were luminous, this would mean that whenever we reflect on what our state is and form a belief, we believe correctly. But I can imagine a case in which I am distracted and unfocussed, and as a result I falsely believe that I have some sensation. Likewise, I think it's possible that in some cases where I believe that I am cold, I am mistaken, particularly in borderline cases.

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<sup>115</sup> It's not clear to me whether Williamson thinks that this threatens certainty, or whether it is merely an attack against the claim which has sometimes been thought to accompany a claim to certainty i.e. that we never make mistakes about our internal states.

<sup>116</sup> Many people assume that Descartes held that our mental states are luminous. But this seems doubtful to me. For one thing, Descartes affirmed that there are some people who are never certain of anything for as long as they live. Presumably he thought that such people sometimes reflected on whether they were cold. So this means that he thought that sometimes, people reflect on whether they are cold, and yet do not become certain that they are. One way that they could fail to be certain is if, for example, they were thinking that it's a necessary condition of being cold that something outside of your mind is causing the coldness.

Does the possibility of error destroy the prospect of certainty about *any* state? I don't think that it does. Take two cases of a red sensation: R1 and R2. R1 is distinctly red, so much so that we could call it a paradigm case of red. R2 is very close to orange, to the extent that when I experience an orange sensation O1 at the same time as R2, I have much trouble distinguishing them and only do so some of the time. (That is, it takes power of concentration to note the difference, and given only a hasty vision of the two, I sometimes think that they're the same). I do not want to insist that I am certain that R2 is red. And yet this doesn't prevent me from being certain that R1 is red under the right circumstances.

As I noted in my reply to Lehrer, someone might think that my lack of certainty about R2 indicates that I cannot be certain about R1 if they take certainty to depend on the infallibility of a set of judgments sharing similar content. That is, they might take the defender of certainty to be attempting to *infer* that the belief that R1 is red, as follows:

- (1) R1 seems red.
- (2) The condition of being-appeared-to-redly is luminous (i.e. whenever I am in this condition, I am in a position to know it.)
- (3) Therefore, I am certain that R1 is red.

If this is how someone attempts to justify the claim that R1 is red, then I agree that Williamson's argument against luminosity is a problem. But this is not why I think that I am certain that R1 is red. I think that I am certain that R1 is red not because of any

further claim about how belief with such-and-such a content are always true, but merely because of how things currently seem to me.

Someone might object further by saying, “Ah, so you think that you are certain that R1 is red *because of the way it appears to you*, but this means that you think there IS a set of beliefs with such-and-such a content, which you think are always true.” In other words, one might object that I am guilty of claiming luminosity for a very particular set of beliefs, namely beliefs about red-appearances-within-a-certain-narrow-range-of-redness. Call this very-red beliefs.

If I were assuming that very-red appearances are such that when I reflect, I can always know that they are very-red appearances, then I would be claiming luminosity for these states. In that case, Williamson’s argument would have force against my claim to be certain that I am experiencing a very-red appearance. But in fact, this is not what I am doing. I am *not* inferring that I am certain through an argument of the form:

- (1) It seems that I am experiencing very-red sensations.
- (2) Very-red is a condition such that whenever I am in it, I am in a position to know that I am in it.
- (3) Therefore, I am certain that I am experiencing very-red sensations.

Instead, I am certain merely through my experience of redness now, and not by way of any assumptions such as (2). I do think that when my sensation seems to me as it does now, I will never be mistaken in my belief.<sup>117</sup> But I am not *arriving at* my certainty

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<sup>117</sup> Williamson argues that my evidence for a belief can be different in case 1 and case 2, even when things seem the same to me in both cases. But here I am not talking about having the same “evidence” in

about being in a red-seeming state by way of a general claim about my inability to be mistaken in beliefs with a particular content.

It would be possible for someone to reply like this: the meaning of “red” is just “predicate applying to cases  $P_1$ -  $P_n$ .” If you don’t know, in any case  $P_1$ -  $P_n$  whether that case is an instance of red, then you don’t know the meaning of “red.” And if you don’t know the meaning of “red,” then you don’t know that “ $R_1$  is red.”

I think the most straightforward way to reply to this objection is to respond by saying that the meaning of a term is not its extension. Instead, the term has the extension that it does *because* of its meaning (which is something different from its extension). I can know the meaning of a term, and be able to apply it, even without knowing all of the instances in which it applies. Take the term “turquoise.” I can know that *this* (referring to my sensation) is a case of turquoise, without knowing every single case that turquoise applies to.

#### **IV. Bonjour/Armstrong’s Argument against Infallibility**

A final argument against certainty is given by Bonjour.<sup>118</sup> He writes:

Consider the state of affairs of a person A having a certain allegedly infallible basic empirical belief B; call this state of affairs  $S_1$ . B will have as its content the

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Williamson’s externalist sense, but rather I am talking about how things seem to me phenomenologically. Perhaps he would argue that I do not know that “how things seem to me phenomenologically” is the same in two cases. I would dispute this, but I think that doing so would take us far afield.

<sup>118</sup> Bonjour, Laurence, *The Structure of Empirical Justification*, p. 27. He credits Armstrong as the originator of the argument.

proposition that some empirical state of affairs  $S_2$  exists. Now it seems to follow from the logic of the concept of belief that  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  must be distinct states of affairs. Beliefs may of course be about other beliefs, but beliefs cannot somehow be directly about themselves. My belief that I believe  $P$  is distinct from my belief that  $P$ ; the content of the latter is simply the proposition that  $P$ , while the content of the former is the different and more complicated proposition that I believe that  $P$ . And thus it would seem to be logically quite possible for  $S_1$  to occur in the absence of  $S_2$ , in which case, of course belief  $B$  would be false. A proponent of logical infallibility must claim that this is, in the cases he is interested in, not logically possible, but it hard to see what the basis for such a claim might be, as long as  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are conceded to be separate states of affairs.

Though Bonjour is discussing basic *empirical* beliefs, we can extend the argument to cover any case in which we claim to have an infallibly certain belief about a contingent matter, for instance, "There is a red sensation." The argument goes:

- (1)  $S_1$  is the state of affairs in which  $A$  has belief  $B$  that empirical state of affairs  $S_2$  obtains.
- (2)  $S_1$  and  $S_2$  are distinct states of affairs.
- (3) It is logically possible that  $S_1$  occur while  $S_2$  fails to occur.
- (4) Therefore, it is logically possible that  $B$  is false.
- (5) Therefore, there is no belief  $B$  about a contingent matter in which  $B$  is infallibly true.

Two replies are in order. The first is that it is not clear that premise (3) is true, for all states of affairs  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ . There are two types of cases in which it seems to be false. Consider the case in which A believes, “A has a belief.” In this case, it is not logically possible that  $S_2$  is false while  $S_1$  obtains. As long as A has this particular belief, it is true that “A has a belief.” The second case is one in which I have a belief that “This exists,” where “this” demonstratively refers to a current sensation. Here, “this” gets its meaning from successful reference. If I believe “this exists,” where “this” picks out a current sensation that I have, then the meaning of “this exists” ensures that the sensation exists. In other words, it will never be true that “this” has the content that it does in my belief, where my belief is false.<sup>119</sup> So in this type of case, premise (3) is false as well.

But I do not want to limit the range of things that we can possibly be certain of to these two types of cases. Instead, I want to be able to include beliefs such as “This color is brighter than that color” among the candidates for certainty, and the truth of this statement doesn’t seem to be guaranteed merely by the content of the terms themselves. One might think that I could judge that “this color is brighter than that color” and be wrong about it.

Does Bonjour/Armstrong’s argument succeed in showing that it is impossible to be certain about this type of case? I don’t think so. My response runs along the same lines as in previous sections. I think that even if premise (3) is true for such beliefs, this does not show that we cannot be certain. According to my view of certainty, our beliefs do not need to be incorrigible in order to be certain. In other words, even if it’s possible

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<sup>119</sup> Timothy McGrew points out this sort of case, see *Internalism and Epistemology* (2007), p. 123-124

that I am mistaken about  $S_2$ , in the right circumstances I can still be certain of it. This is because I do not become certain by way the impossibility of ever being wrong about a belief with this sort of content. There are a few beliefs which may be of this sort (see above). But I do not wish to limit what we can potentially become certain of to this type of belief. Rather, I can become certain of things by virtue of my awareness of the truth of the belief.<sup>120</sup> This is the case, in spite of the fact that in *other* circumstances, I may be unaware of the truth and believe falsely.

## V. Conclusion

All of the arguments which we have looked at in this chapter have pressed the point that appearances can be mis-leading. We can have false beliefs about our internal states, among other things. The objectors have wanted to drive home the message that there is no sacred ground where the Cartesian can rest. There is no realm of belief in which we can feel secure that we couldn't have gone wrong.

I have agreed that there is no region of belief – defined purely in terms of what the beliefs are about (i.e. our internal states) – where we can rest. However, I have argued that the Cartesian does not require such a resting place. Cartesian certainty is not certain in virtue of what the beliefs are about. Rather, certainty comes from a clear awareness of the truth, and one may have much or none of this, even as regards one's beliefs about internal states

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<sup>120</sup> See Chapter 5.II, for details.

## Chapter 9: The Possibility of Strong Rationalism

Many have dismissed Descartes' claim of infallible certainty, for many reasons. Some reasons have to do with a mis-understanding of what he is up to, believing that he lands himself in a circle. But others have to do with any view that claims there is a foundation of infallible certainties. A solution which keeps the foundationalist structure and the claim to justified rational insight which Descartes proposes, but does away with infallibilism, is what Bonjour calls "moderate rationalism," contrasted with Cartesian "strong rationalism." Bonjour argues that there are definitive reasons for rejecting the latter, reasons which do not touch his more moderate foundationalist picture.

If he is right, we should give up hope of achieving infallible certainty of anything. So what are these reasons? I will consider three reasons that he gives: past error, disagreement, and dogmatism.

I will argue that there are viable answers to these objections, and that they do not destroy the hope of Cartesian certainty. Critics may respond that even if I manage to defend Cartesian certainty from Bonjour, further devastation awaits: it is unlikely that we can have Cartesian certainty of things that we commonly take ourselves to know. We know much more than Descartes allows, and so his picture of knowledge is mistaken. I will conclude by arguing that even if it is true we know more than the Cartesian picture permits, this is unproblematic for the view.

## I. Moderate versus strong rationalism

Bonjour's *In Defense of Pure Reason* provides his defense of rational insight, which he takes to be an act of intuition which is a. direct or immediate and b. intellectual or reason-governed. Such intuitions are "rationally self-evident" meaning that their "very content provides, for one who grasps it properly, an immediately accessible reason for thinking that it is true" (102). Examples of such insights include:

1. Nothing can be red all-over and green all-over at the same time.
2. If A is taller than B, and B is taller than C, then A is taller than C.
3. There are no round squares.

According to Bonjour, such rational insights, however clear they may seem, are not *infallible*. That is, he is not claiming that we have "insight...that is not capable of being mistaken." Although he does want to count as *genuine* only those insights which are actually true, he thinks that our genuine insights are all still capable (as far as we can tell) of turning out to be false. Thus he writes: "It is apparent rational insight (and...apparent self-evidence) that provides the basis for a priori epistemic justification. Such justification will thus...be fallible, since it will be possible that the apparent insight that justifies a particular claim is not genuine" (113).

Strong rationalism is the view that there are rational insights which are incapable of being mistaken. "Incapable" here is used in the epistemic rather than the metaphysical

sense. Obviously, any belief about a necessary truth which is correct is incapable of being mistaken in the metaphysical sense. If true, the claims 1-3 above are necessarily true and so incapable of being mistaken. “Incapable” has a second, epistemic meaning: as a first pass, take that meaning to be infallibly known to us. That is, according to strong rationalism, there is at least one insight which- when we have it- we can be certain that it couldn’t possibly be false.

Bonjour presents a number of reasons for thinking that “strong rationalism” is impossible. His conclusion is that there is the claim that we have infallible certainties is “indefensible” and that “it is quite possible for a proposition that *seems* necessary and self-evident to a particular person, even after careful reflection, and thus that *seems* to be the object of a rational insight, to turn out nonetheless to be false (111-112).” I will discuss each of his arguments in turn.

## **II. Argument from past error**

One reason that Bonjour doubts the existence of infallible certainties is the existence of error. First, there have been examples of things about which people claimed to have rational insight that turned out to be mistaken. Examples include the claim of naïve set theory and the claim that Euclidean geometry describes any space. Second, Bonjour cites “routine errors in calculation, proof and reasoning” as grounds for doubt.

He claims that even if there was a level of attention which would prevent error in reasoning, there's no way to tell that such a level of attention has been exercised.

Let's look at each of these objections in turn. Consider the first type of case: there have been people who have claimed to have rational insight which proved false. Take the case of a pre-twentieth century philosopher or geometrician who claimed that parallel lines will never intersect. The truth of this claim is questionable, given the seeming possibility of non-Euclidean geometry. As Bonjour writes, "there are claims in mathematics and logic which though universally regarded as self-evident by the leading minds in the field in question at the particular time have subsequently proved to be false..." (111).

What conclusions can we draw from this? According to Bonjour, cases such as these show us that "it is as clear as anything philosophical could be that the claim of infallibility...is false and completely indefensible" (111). Is this true? Do cases of past error conclusively refute the claim to infallible certainty? I will argue that they do not.

Let's look more closely at the argument. It seems to be:

1. People have been wrong in their claims about what is self-evident.
2. If people have been wrong in the past about what is self-evident, it's epistemically possible that I am wrong now.
3. It's epistemically possible that I am wrong now.
4. It is not epistemically possible that I am wrong about an infallible certainty.
5. Therefore, I am not infallibly certain.

My response to the argument is to deny the second premise. Before explaining why I deny it, I will mention another way of challenging the argument, which is to examine the cases, one by one, and claim that for all we *know*, the claims were right. For example, in his discussion of the parallel lines case, Bonjour argues that the consistency of non-Euclidean geometry does not demonstrate the possibility of such a space. He also discusses the fact that the use of non-Euclidean geometry in the Theory of General Relativity does not demonstrate that space is non-Euclidean.<sup>121</sup> So, despite the changes in the way that space is viewed in the past century, it still may be the case that the only metaphysically possible space is one in which two parallel lines will never meet.

However, this approach fails if any two people have made contradictory claims about what is self-evident. If, for instance, one person has claimed that it is self-evident that everything must have a cause, and another claimed that it is self-evident that there could be something *without* a cause, this is enough for there to have been someone whose claim to having insight into a self-evident truth was mistaken. Since it seems likely that this has happened, this way of objecting to the first premise fails.

I take the best objection to the argument to be the following. The second premise of the argument is “If people have been wrong in the past about what is self-evident, it’s epistemically possible that I am wrong now.” But this is false. What if these people gave very little thought to what they were saying, or simply repeated some slogan that they had heard? Let’s suppose that I am not doing those things when I claim to find something

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<sup>121</sup> Appendix A

self-evident. Then there would be an explanation of why they went wrong, which could not also be an explanation of how I am going wrong.

What is necessary for the argument to work is that *how things seemed to them* when they were wrong in their claims and how things seem to me when I claim to make my claim is subjectively indiscernible to me. In order to be sound, the argument would have to be instead as follows:

1. People have been in states which are subjectively indiscernible from mine and have been mistaken in their beliefs about self-evident truths.
2. If there is a state of believing subjectively indiscernible from mine in which the belief is false, it's epistemically possible that I am wrong now.
3. It's epistemically possible that I am wrong now.
4. It is not epistemically possible that I am wrong about an infallible certainty.
5. Therefore, I am not infallibly certain.

What do I mean by the expression "state which is subjectively indiscernible from mine"? I mean that I wouldn't be able to tell the difference between the two states *in a relevant regard* i.e. as regards the seeming self-evident truth of the belief. Suppose that thinker A believes that two parallel lines will never intersect and that as it turns out, this is a false belief. I believe that  $1+1=2$ . Now, obviously, the beliefs have different content, and they seem different in that regard. But there is another regard in which one might suppose that they are indiscernible to me – it may seem just as clear and obvious and self-evident to thinker A that his claim is true as it seems clear and obvious and self-evident to

me that  $1+1=2$ . That is, when it comes to the true-seemingness of our beliefs, there is no difference as far as I can tell.

Perhaps a better way to put this would be: were I in thinker A's position, considering his claim, A's belief would seem just as clearly true to me as  $1+1=2$ , and I would have the same tendency to affirm it as self-evident. In that case, the two beliefs are subjectively indiscernible. But, the argument goes, A's belief turned out to be false. If a false claim could seem just as true to me as my current claim, then I am not infallibly certain of my current claim. It's epistemically possible (however unlikely-seeming to me) that the claim is mistaken.

Let's consider whether this revised version of Bonjour's argument proves its conclusion. The place that it goes wrong, I believe, is in the first premise. Is it true that there have been people who have been in states subjectively indiscernible from mine but who have had false beliefs? If this is true, then I grant that I cannot have infallible certainty of anything.

But why think it's true? First, I want to give a particular case of certainty which I believe myself to have. I believe that when I focus on a sensation (any color or texture or feeling of any kind) and think "there is a sensation," I can become infallibly certain that there is sensation.<sup>122</sup> Notice that I am not making any particular claim about what the sensation is, or whether it corresponds to something in a mind-independent world, or

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<sup>122</sup> This is not a guarantee that one always will be certain when one thinks "there is a sensation." It is not the content of the belief alone, but the manner of coming to hold the belief that determines whether one is certain i.e. carefully paying attention to the sensation and the judgment, understanding "sensation" in the appropriate way, etc.

whether it is caused by me or something else. Rather, I am simply noting the existence of a sensation, where sensation means nothing more than this object of awareness (whatever it is).<sup>123</sup>

This claim does not tell me much about the world, and it is seemingly insignificant. But if I'm right, and if I can be infallibly certain that there is a sensation, then it's false that for any state of mine, there is a subjectively indiscernible state in which my belief is mistaken. In other words, we are forced to make a choice. Either A. I can be infallibly certain that there is a sensation right now, or B. For any of my states, there is a subjectively indiscernible state in which the relevant belief is false. Because I take A to be true, I take B to be false.

At this point, I think that the two sides reach a stand-off. Either I am right and I AM infallibly certain, which case I can also be certain that there is no subjectively indiscernible state in which the belief is false. Or Bonjour is right, and there IS always such a state, which means that I am NOT infallibly certain of anything.

### **III. Argument from routine error**

Perhaps rather than insist on the existence of past error, my interlocutor would turn to an argument which puts pressure on me to admit the possibility of routine errors in

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<sup>123</sup> Bonjour is only considering a priori insights when he defends moderate rationalism, and does not include things like "there is a sensation." But he does not believe we can be infallibly certain of anything, including "there is a sensation," and so I will take him as an opponent to the view that "there is a sensation" is infallibly certain.

reasoning. It is always a possibility that no matter how careful we are, we slip and make an error. Bonjour writes, “Even the most powerful minds are susceptible to...slips. ...There is no reason to think that a degree of care that would ordinarily be taken to be adequate will make mistakes impossible” (112).

I agree that if I was adding a column of fifty different numbers or even twenty, it would be unwise to claim to be infallibly certain of the result. In fact, I wouldn't claim to be certain of this, even if I took a lot of care in my calculation. So I think this is a good point, when we are dealing with tasks such as that one.

But does this argument show that infallible certainty is impossible? The form of the argument seems very like the previous argument. The gist is that we have reason to believe that there are subjectively indiscernible states in which it seems very clear to us that we are right, but we are wrong. If there is such a state, then I am not infallibly certain in the current case, because it is not impossible (as far as I am aware) that I am mistaken.

As in the last argument, my response is to point out that I AM certain that there is a sensation. If the claim made in the argument were true, I would not be certain of this. Therefore, I dispute that claim. Again, there is a stand-off.

But Bonjour says more, which may be turned into a further argument. He writes, “Even if there were a degree of care and attention that would avoid all such mistakes, there would obviously be no way to be sure that it has in fact been exercised in a particular case and thus no reason to regard any particular case of alleged rational insight

as infallible” (112). I take his thought to be as follows. Let’s say that we regard ourselves in some case as immune to routine errors (as I do in the sensation case). In order to be actually have a case of infallibly certainty, we would have to have a way of separating out the cases in which we CAN make routine errors (like the number-adding case) from the case in which we CAN’T make such errors (like the sensation case). That criterion of distinguishing the two would then provide the basis for my claim that whereas I can ordinarily be mistaken, I cannot be mistaken in my case of certainty. However, he concludes, there is no such “subjectively accessible criterion” (112) and so, no basis for claiming that this is a case of infallible certainty.

In the next section I will give my answer to this further objection. It requires making a methodological point that is key to my defense of certainty.

#### **IV. No criterion possible**

Again, the claim that Bonjour is making is that unless one can give a criterion for distinguishing cases in which one can be mistaken from those in which one cannot be mistaken, infallible certainty is impossible. The thought underlying the demand is something like: *how* can I know that I couldn’t possibly be wrong? Especially when so much of the time, my hastiness or the imperfection of my mortal mind (or etc) makes me prone to error?

The problem is that a moment's thought reveals that even if I *could* give such a criterion, it would be no help. The question would immediately arise again: could I be mistaken in thinking that this criterion separates the wheat of certainty from the chaff of uncertainty? If not, *how* can I be so sure? Again, the demand for a further criterion arises.

In other words, the general demand for meta-justification is impossible to satisfy. Bonjour makes this very point on behalf of moderate rationalism. Were there a need for a meta-justification for rational insights *in order for each of them to be justified*, then the picture on which we can have justified rational insights turns out to be impossible. This is because, as stated above, there would be no way to satisfy it. Even if a meta-justification for accepting an insight could be given, "the same problem would arise as to how this version of the meta-justificatory premise is itself to be justified, and the available alternatives would be no more palatable to the rationalist than before..." (144).

Bonjour's defense of his moderate rationalism is to repudiate the demand for meta-justification as question-begging. He writes, "...according to the moderate rationalist position, each instance of apparent rational insight or apparent self-evidence...should be construed as *epistemically autonomous*, as dependent on nothing beyond itself for its justification" (146). If the critic demands a meta-justification, he is simply "refusing to take rational insight seriously as a basis for justification...which is thus question-begging" (145).

Why does strong rationalism require a meta-justification, according to Bonjour, but moderate rationalism does not? A strong rationalist position is one which claims: there is at least one thing which is infallibly certain i.e. which cannot possibly be false. According to Bonjour, for this position to be true, we would have to have some principle which would allow us to separate true certainties from merely apparent ones. As we have seen, IF this were true, then infallible certainty would be impossible. Even if I had some principle which purported to allow me to distinguish between true and false cases of certainty, the question would immediately arise: how can I be sure the principle is correct? So the demand for meta-justification and the claim to infallible certainty are incompatible.

My response to the demand for meta-justification is the same as Bonjour's response on behalf of moderate rationalism. The demand begs the question against the strong rationalist. Of course, IF there were strong independent reason for the demand, then perhaps I should concede that infallible certainty is impossible, because it is impossible to satisfy the conditions for it. But I see no strong independent reason to accept the demand for meta-justification. Particularly in light of the fact that I DO think I have infallible certainty in the case of "there is a sensation," it seems reasonable to reject the demand which would render this case of certainty impossible.<sup>124</sup>

## **V. Trivial claim?**

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<sup>124</sup> Also see Chapter 7 for a repudiation of the demand. If Bonjour claims that certainty requires a meta-justification, this claim ought to be justified. In Chapter 7, I argue that the only way it could be justified is if certainty is possible.

Bonjour makes the point that the thesis that there are infallible certainties (or at least one) would be a trivial claim if it were as follows. Every time I have a mistaken insight, I could say – after the fact – that it doesn't refute the claim that there are infallible certainties, because it wasn't a *genuine* insight. This trivializes the claim to infallibility, because it makes the claim that all genuine insights must be true. I can affirm this is the case, but without a way to *discern* the genuine insights from the pretenders, the claim that there are certainties which are incapable of being mistaken doesn't amount to much.

Bonjour's claim here is that unless we have a "workable criterion of genuineness," our claim that all genuine insights are true "does nothing at all to establish that any particular case of apparent insight that we may be interested in is in this sense genuine and thus fails to secure infallibility in any epistemologically useful sense" (113).

Consider the claim "There is a sensation and this couldn't possibly be false." When I claim to have an infallible certainty, I am claiming that this proposition is true (at the time that I affirm it). Bonjour's objection is as follows. I couldn't be justified in believing the claim "there is a sensation and this couldn't possibly be false" unless I have a criterion of genuineness which would enable me to pick out genuine insights from pretenders. But, as we have seen in the previous section, that demand is impossible to satisfy, since a new demand would immediately arise. So, IF I can be justified in believing "there is a sensation and this couldn't possibly be false," there is no such

demand. My response is to claim that that I am certain (and hence my belief is justified), so there is no such demand.

## **V. Argument from disagreement**

Bonjour takes the mere possibility of persistent, unresolved disagreement to be definitive reason to reject infallible certainties. He writes, “Persistent disagreement...shows beyond question that rational insight cannot be regarded as infallible and would therefore constitute a decisive objection against those strong versions of rationalism that made such a claim” (142).

The argument from disagreement does not add much to the argument from past error, since it is simply a particular instance of error. Where two thinkers disagree about a particular claim – and when they each claim infallible certainty of their contradictory positions – then one of them must be wrong. This provides fodder for the argument given in the first section; if both are great thinkers and both claim to be certain, then it is possible that there are two subjectively indiscernible states where one of the believers is right and the other wrong. My response to the argument is the same as in section one: I deny the premise which claims that there is such a subjectively indiscernible state to mine when I claim “there is a sensation” in which the belief is false.

But one might wonder: what is my justification for privileging my own state in claiming to be certain? If I claim to be infallibly certain of X, and another person claims

to be infallibly certain of not-*X*, what is my ground for dismissing their claim as inferior to my own?

First, I might point out that this situation does not arise for the thing that I claim to be certain of i.e. “there is a sensation” (affirmed when I am focusing on a sensation). Whether one can become certain of things beyond the mere existence of some appearance-to-self, I am not *sure*. But since I do want to allow the possibility of certainty of a wider range of claims, I will give another sort of response.

The demand for a further justification, one separating the case in which someone believes mistakenly that he is certain and the case in which the claim to certainty is correct, is mis-guided. Even if a meta-justification of the “sorting rule” kind could be given, it would spawn another such demand. To make such a demand is to demand something incompatible with the possibility of certainty. My response, as in the previous section, is that such a demand begs the question against the proponent of infallible certainty. Absent strong reason to accept the demand (which I do not have), I reject the demand in favor of the view that I am infallibly certain of at least one thing.

## **VI. The charge of dogmatism**

Bonjour raises the concern that a particular claim may be the product of bias or dogmatism rather than genuine insight. He believes that one could never be sure that this isn't the case, though he sees no reason to think that such cases are common. Bias or

dogmatism is not a threat to the moderate rationalist view, he claims, because it is just another way in which all insights are defeasible, while still retaining a degree of justification.

Does the possibility of bias and dogmatism threaten the view that we can be infallibly certain of some things? I concede – again – that IF there were a requirement that we rule out any possibility of bias or dogmatism *as a prior condition for* becoming certain of something, then this would make it impossible to become certain of anything. After all, the question would arise how I could be certain that I am correct in ruling out the possibility of bias, and so on.

But I do not think that it is a condition of becoming certain that “there is a sensation” that I rule out the possibility of bias or dogmatism. Instead, once I recognize that I am infallibly certain in this case, I can be certain that I have not formed a biased false belief or a false belief which I am dogmatically affirming. The question is: can we be certain of anything? And again, it would be question-begging to require – without strong independent grounds – that we become certain that there is no bias involved, as a condition for certainty.

## **VII. Too little knowledge?**

It has become clear, generally, how I respond to the threat raised by Bonjour’s objections. But there is another commonly-made objection to the view that there are infallible certainties, usually couched as a response to Cartesian skepticism.

The objection is not an objection merely to the claim that there are infallible certainties. It is an objection to the view that anything that we know must either be a self-evident, infallible certainty OR something which is derived from such a certainty by deduction. The objector points out that not much knowledge remains, on this view of knowledge. Claims like “there is a sensation” do not seem likely to provide the basis for deducing the existence of the physical world or the veridicality of memory, and yet we have knowledge of the physical world and the past. Descartes tried to get the world back through his reliance on God’s non-deception, but can we be certain that God is not a deceiver? Can we be certain that God exists at all, through Descartes’ arguments? Even if we are not exactly certain that Descartes’ premises are false, we simply don’t grasp them to be true in the way that Descartes claimed he did. As a result, barring some other method of deducing the existence of the physical world from what we have non-inferential certainty of, much of what we ordinarily claim to know is not known.

Those who are “particularists” (i.e. those of favor of reliance on particular cases of knowledge rather than general criteria of knowledge in their understanding of what knowledge is) may decide that systematic skepticism *must* be wrong, because it excludes so much of what we know. Instead of yielding to it, they continue to maintain that they know there are hands, that they ate lunch yesterday, that there will be a sun-rise tomorrow, and so on.

I will cite only one case of this type of objection, though there are many. Ernest Sosa writes:

...Radical foundationalism suffers from a fatal weakness that is twofold: (a) there are not so many perfectly obvious truths as Descartes thought; and (b) once we restrict ourselves to what is truly obvious in any given context, very little of one's supposed common sense knowledge can be proved on that basis....Note that in citing such a "fatal weakness" of radical foundationalism, we favor particularism as against the Methodism of Descartes and Hume. For we reject the methods or criteria of Descartes and Hume when we realize that they plunge us in a deep skepticism. If such criteria are incompatible with our enjoyment of the rich body of knowledge that we commonly take for granted, then as good particularists, we hold on to the knowledge and reject the criteria.<sup>125</sup>

I understand this response, and have – in a sense – used it myself in my response to Bonjour. Where Bonjour called upon demands for a criteria of infallible certainty, I responded by affirming that I DO have infallible certainty in at least this one case, and so in that way rejected his demand.

I say that I have used this response only in a sense, because I think that there are two different issues here. In what follows, I will make a distinction between asking the question of what knowledge is and asking whether I have a particular kind of "knowledge." I think it is possible to separate the two questions, such that one can specify and pursue a particular kind of "knowledge," without asking what knowledge is. When Descartes' project is seen as the latter pursuit, rather than the former, the "too little knowledge" objection does not have fatal or even damaging implications for it.

## **VII. The nature of knowledge**

Oftentimes, the focus in epistemology is on the nature of knowledge. There are many competing answers. Their proponents often justify them through the use of

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<sup>125</sup> "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," 5-6.

intuitions and the attempt to find a theory of knowledge which best fits the most compelling intuitions. There is a similar debate concerning the nature of justification.

I *could* object to this project in various ways. Stephen Stich objects to armchair conceptual analysis by citing evidence which he takes to show that the concept of knowledge varies from culture to culture (Those of East Asian descent apparently respond differently to Gettier cases than others do).<sup>126</sup> Another objection would be that even in the same cultural milieu, we have *many* possible things we could mean by justification/knowledge, and so the debate is really a failure to note that we are talking about different targets. This is what William Alston argues in his book *Beyond Justification*, in which he writes that in attempting to describe “justification,” the disputants “are using ‘justified’ to pick out different properties of beliefs...[and so] they are arguing past each other.”<sup>127</sup>

But I am not convinced by these objections that it is futile to try to use intuitions to get at what we ordinarily mean by knowledge or justification. Perhaps the project – though difficult – is possible. Perhaps we could get to the point where we have such a good range of actual paradigm cases of *the* ordinary concept of knowledge or justification, that we would be able to diagnose it.

But even if this is one viable project, I want to distinguish it from another possible project, one that I think is more in keeping with Descartes’ aims in the *Meditations*. Instead of trying to figure out what we ordinarily mean by the word knowledge, we can

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<sup>126</sup> In Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich & Jonathan Weinberg, "Meta-Skepticism: Meditations on Ethno-Epistemology."

<sup>127</sup> Alston, William. *Beyond "Justification": Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*, p. 26.

pinpoint some property of belief or type of belief which we are most interested in. We can then look to see whether there are any actual cases instantiating this property or type.

The goal here is not to find paradigm cases which are instances of an ordinary concept, but rather to find something valuable by *specifying* a feature of it and to ask whether we have any of *that*. In Descartes' case, I think that his project was to begin by specifying the type of belief which he was most interested in locating, is possible. The type of belief is an infallible one – a belief which could never turn out to be mistaken. This would then be a fitting foundation on which to build everything else.

Given this distinction between asking “what is knowledge?” and starting with a specification of something that one values or desires for some reason, it is possible to see why the “too little knowledge” criticism need not damage the Cartesian project. In fact, it doesn't succeed in touching the project, as I have described it, because the goal of the project is not to correctly describe the thing that we normally call knowledge. We can refer to the firm foundation as “knowledge,” but it may be clearer to simply choose a new term for it, such as Cartesian certainty (which is what I have often done in these pages). If Cartesian certainty has little in common with knowledge, so be it. There is a valuable thing – having an indefeasible foundation – which Descartes is pursuing. He does use the word knowledge in describing what he is pursuing, but because he has an idea of what he means by this, it doesn't really matter if it turns out to not be knowledge.

I anticipate several objections. The first is that epistemology has been in pursuit of the answer to the question “what is knowledge?” since Plato, and Descartes is typically

seen as part of this tradition. My answer is that I do not see Descartes as being in this particular tradition, though he is trying to answer a closely related question i.e. “Do we have a valuable epistemic good called “knowledge”? The second is: we have the strong belief that knowledge is valuable (whatever it turns out to be). But why think this “Cartesian certainty” is valuable?

This is a good question. It is a question at the beginning of a different conversation than the “what is knowledge?” inquiry. The conversation is not about what knowledge is, or about how Descartes mis-identified knowledge, but it is rather about what we care about. Do we care about infallibility? Or do we only care about reliability? Do we care only about truth? Or do we also care about our internal access to the truth, independently of the truth itself? There are many questions here, and perhaps the answer is that we value all of these things, but to different degrees, and in different ways (some intrinsically, others instrumentally).

I will conclude by suggesting that Cartesian certainty *is* valuable, and that even if we can only have a bit of it, the pursuit is worthwhile. Cartesian certainty – infallible belief – has the potential to root us in the truth. However much I try, I do not have the infallible and self-evident belief that there is a mind-independent computer in front of me. It’s possible – as far as I am absolutely certain - that I am in a skeptical scenario. Insofar as I entertain those scenarios, I am thrown off balance by the possibility. I can be placated by returning to the billiard table. But as a thinker, I remain unsatisfied. Wherever possible, I want to be rooted in the truth beyond all doubt, not because I am

psychologically convicted beyond doubt, but because I am infallibly aware of the truth.

Perhaps I will never have certainty, regarding the existence of the physical world. But if I can have certainty in *anything*, I would find it to be valuable.

At this point, if we come to have a disagreement, we are disagreeing about what is valuable. Others may claim that what is really valuable is having true beliefs that are reliably formed, or having beliefs that are responsibly formed, or just having true beliefs in whichever way. This is an interesting debate; in the attempt to specify what we find to be valuable, we may learn more about the nature of goodness and about ourselves.

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## Curriculum Vita

Stephanie Larsen Wykstra

### **Education:**

Yale University, B.A. in Philosophy

1999-2003

Rutgers University, PhD in Philosophy

2003-2008

### **Positions:**

Rutgers University, Fellow in the Department of Philosophy

2003-2006

Rutgers University, T.A. in the Department of Philosophy

2006-2008