

CERTAINTY IN DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHY

Stanley Tweyman, University Professor
York University, Ontario, Canada
stweyman@yorku.ca

Resumen: En el párrafo cuarto de la Tercera Meditación, Descartes insiste que él debe saber que Dios es su creador y que Dios no es engañador, “pues sin conocer esas dos verdades, no veo cómo voy a poder alcanzar certeza de cosa alguna”. Por otro lado, en las *Respuestas a las Segundas Objeciones* (párrafos 38–40), él insiste en que hay algunos reclamos, como, por ejemplo, que yo, mientras pienso existo, o que lo ya hecho no puede no haber sido hecho, los cuales no requieren de la garantía divina: “Pero, ¿qué puede importarnos, que por casualidad alguien finja ser falso a los ojos de Dios o de un ángel aquello de cuya verdad estamos enteramente persuadidos, y que, entonces, es falso en términos absolutos?... Hemos presupuesto una convicción tan fuerte que nada puede removerla, y esta persuasión es claramente lo mismo que una certeza perfectísima.”

En mi artículo examino estas dos visiones diferentes en los escritos de Descartes, con el fin de determinar cuál punto de vista es la doctrina oficial de Descartes sobre la necesidad de una garantía divina. Concluyo mi discusión con una explicación de por qué Descartes sostiene que ciertas proposiciones no requieren de la garantía divina para que podamos estar confiados de que son ciertas, mientras que otras proposiciones sí requieren de la garantía divina.

Palabras clave: Descartes, ideas claras y distintas, garantía divina, certeza, matemática

Abstract: In the fourth paragraph of the third meditation, Descartes insists that he must know that God is his creator and that God is not a deceiver, “for without a knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything”. On the other hand, in the *Replies to Objections II* (paragraphs 38 – 40), he urges that there are some claims, for example, that I, while I think exist; that what is once done cannot be undone, which do not require the divine guarantee: “What is it to us, though perchance someone feigns that that, of the truth we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an angel, and hence is, absolutely speaking, false...We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude.”

In my article I examine these two different views in Descartes’ writings, in order to determine which view is Descartes’ official view regarding the need for the divine guarantee. I conclude my discussion with an explanation as to why Descartes holds that certain propositions do not require the divine guarantee in order for us to be confident that they are certain, and other propositions do require the divine guarantee.

Keywords: Descartes, Clear and Distinct Ideas, Divine Guarantee, Certainty, Mathematics

Toward the end of the fourth paragraph in the third meditation, Descartes¹ explains that he must prove that God exists and that God is not a deceiver, “for without a knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything”. This lack of certainty prior to knowing God presumably includes his awareness that he exists as a thinking thing, which he establishes in the second meditation. On the other hand, in the *Replies to Objections II*, Descartes maintains that there are some claims, for example, that I, while I think, exist; that what is once done cannot be undone, and other similar truths, which do not require the divine guarantee: “What is it to us, though perchance someone feigns that that, of the truth of which we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an Angel, and hence is, absolutely speaking, false? What heed do we pay to that at absolute falsity, when we by no means believe that it exists or even suspect its existence? We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this

¹ All references to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* are taken from the *Philosophy In - Focus edition*, edited and with a Critical Introduction, by Stanley Tweyman, Routledge, (London and New York), 1993. An e - book edition is also available, Taylor and Francis, London, 2003. The text of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and the selection from the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections* in the *Philosophy In - Focus* volume are reprinted from the Haldane and Ross translation, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes, in two volumes*, first published 1911; reprinted with corrections 1931, 1956, 1970, by permission of Cambridge University Press. References are listed as M followed by the page number(s). All references to Descartes' other writings are taken from the Haldane and Ross two - volume edition, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Cambridge, at the University Press, 1970, cited as HR followed by the volume and page number(s). I have also included references to Descartes' writings from the Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch translation, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, in two volumes*, Cambridge University Press, 1988. References are cited as CSM, followed by the volume and page number(s).

persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude. (HR II, 41; CSM II, 103)

In this article, I examine which interpretation of his knowledge of himself existing as a thinking thing is the correct interpretation: does this knowledge of himself as a thinking thing depend, or does it not depend, on the divine guarantee? Second, I investigate why the divine guarantee is, or is not, applicable to his knowledge and certainty that he exists as a thinking thing.

Early in the second meditation, Descartes offers two proofs of his existence.

[I] was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies: was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. The without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. (M 51; CSM II, 16 - 17)

The first proof (the 'persuasion' proof) takes the following form: Descartes attempts to separate his thought of being persuaded about something from the thought of his existence, by affirming that he was persuaded of something, and simultaneously denying that he exists. The result of this thought experiment is that he can no longer think that he

was persuaded of something. This leads him to conclude that his thought of being persuaded of something and his thought that he exists are inseparable from each other, and, therefore, are necessarily connected: If he is persuaded of something, then he must exist.

The second proof (the 'deception' proof) takes the identical form: he attempts to separate his thought of being deceived about something from the thought of his existence, by affirming that he was deceived about something, and simultaneously denying that he exists. The result of this thought experiment is that he can no longer think that he was deceived about something. And, this leads him to conclude that the thought of being deceived about something and the thought that he exists are inseparable from each other, and, therefore, are necessarily connected: If he is deceived about something, then he must exist.

Four paragraphs later in the second meditation, he increases his knowledge of the self, when he comes to the realization that of everything he previously believed about himself, only that he exists as a thinking thing is indubitable:

What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. (M 52 - 53; CSM II, 18)

The thought experiment in this case is identical in form to the previous two thought experiments, discussed above. If he thinks of himself as existing, and simultaneously denies that he thinks, he can no longer think of himself as existing. From this, he concludes that his existence is inseparable from thinking. In other words, he exists as a thinking thing.

In the second paragraph of the third meditation, he reflects on the thought that he exists as a thinking thing, and asks what it is that assures him of its truth.

I am certain that I am a thing which thinks: but do I not then likewise know what is requisite to render me certain of a truth? Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state, which would not indeed suffice to assure me that what I say is true, if it could ever happen that a thing which I conceived so clearly and distinctly could be false; and accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true. (M 59; CSM II, 24)

In this passage, Descartes acknowledges that clarity and distinctness are the features which assure him that it is true that he exists as a thinking thing. However, he hesitates to generalize from this one instance to the claim that 'all things that he perceives very clearly and very distinctly are true', because, at this stage, he cannot be certain that there cannot be any instances where some matter is perceived very clearly and very distinctly, and yet is false.

Mathematics poses the most significant challenge to the connection between clarity and distinctness and truth, in light of the possibility of divine deception:

But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic or geometry into consideration, e.g., that two and three together made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to affirm that they were true? Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted, this would not have been so for

any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest. But every time that this preconceived opinion of the sovereign power of a God presents itself to my thought, I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him, if He wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. (M 59 - 60; CSM II, 25)

Given these considerations concerning the possibility of deception, he poses a challenge to himself:

But in order to be able to altogether to remove it [namely, his doubts about the possibility of divine deception regarding the clear and distinct], I must inquire whether there is a God as soon as the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything. (M 60; CSM II, 25)

In this passage, all clear and distinct ideas are subjected to doubt: without the knowledge that God exists and is not a deceiver, he cannot ever be certain of anything. Since no exceptions are listed here, presumably the requisite divine guarantee includes his clear and distinct awareness that he exists as a thinking thing.

Descartes takes a different position on God's putative power to deceive in a passage in the *Reply to Objections II*. For in this passage, he urges that perfect certitude may be attainable in some instances, even if a deceiving God exists:

To begin with, directly we think that we rightly perceive something, we spontaneously persuade ourselves that it is true. Further, if this conviction is so strong that we have no reason to doubt concerning that of the truth of which we have persuaded ourselves, there is nothing more to enquire about; we have here all the certainty that can reasonably be desired. What is it to us, though perchance some one feigns that that, of the truth of which we are so firmly persuaded, appears false to God or to an Angel, and hence is, absolutely speaking, false? What heed do we pay to that absolute falsity, when we by no means believe that it exists or even suspect its existence? We have assumed a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it, and this persuasion is clearly the same as perfect certitude. (HR II, 41; CSM II, 103)

He now proceeds to question whether perfect certitude, in fact, exists. He rules out perfect certitude in the case of sense perception:

It is indeed clear that no one possesses such certainty in those cases where there is the very least confusion and obscurity in our perception; for this obscurity, of whatever sort it be, is sufficient to make us doubt here. In matters perceived by sense alone, however clearly, certainty does not exist, because we have often noted that error can occur in sensation, as in the instance of the thirst of the dropsical man, or when one who is jaundiced sees snow as yellow; for he sees it thus with no less clearness and distinctness than we see it as white. (HR II, 42; CSM II, 103 - 104)

Descartes' point in this passage is that those who make errors in sensory judgements may experience perceptions

with the same clarity and distinctness as do those whose perceptions are accurate. Hence, the clarity and distinctness associated with the senses cannot be held to be reliable. Now, given that he possesses two putative cognitive faculties, sense perception and reason, he concludes that if certainty does exist, "it remains that it must be found only in the clear perceptions of the intellect" (HR II, 42; CSM II, 104) But, he is quick to point out (at the beginning of the next paragraph), that if certainty does exist in the clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect, it only exists in some of these perceptions.

But of these there are some so evident and at the same time so simple, that in their case we can never doubt about believing them true: e.g. that I, while I think, exist; that what is once done cannot be undone, and other similar truths, about which clearly we can possess this certainty. (HR II, 42, italics added, not in the text; CSM II, 104)

While Descartes acknowledges that mathematical ideas are clear and distinct (the fourth paragraph in the third meditation), he does not include them within the category of ideas of the intellect, which he can never doubt about believing them to be true. We saw earlier that the concern which Descartes has with the certainty of mathematics centers on the possibility of divine deception. No comparable concern arises in regard to his awareness of himself existing as a thinking thing.

And yet, in a passage in the third meditation, following his recognition that God may be deceiving him in regard to mathematical claims, he acknowledges that mathematical claims are like claims about the self, so far as he knows the self at this point, in that their denial is self-contradictory.

And, on the other hand, always when I direct my attention to things which I believe myself to perceive very clearly, I am so persuaded of their truth that I let myself break out into words such as these: Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction. (M 60; CSM II, 25)

Descartes makes the same point in Principle VII about the *Cogito ergo Sum*, namely, the denial of the *Cogito ergo Sum* is self-contradictory:

While we thus reject all that of which we can possibly doubt, and feign that it is false, it is easy to suppose that there is no God, nor heaven, nor bodies, and that we possess neither hands, nor feet, nor indeed any body; but we cannot in the same way conceive that we who doubt these things are not; for there is a contradiction in conceiving that what thinks does not at the same time as it thinks, exists. And hence this conclusion *I think, therefore I am*, is the first and most certain of all that occurs to one who philosophizes in an orderly way. (HR I, 221; CSM I, 194 - 195)

This passage aligns his knowledge of himself existing as a thinking thing with his point quoted above (from M 60; CSM II, 25) namely, that the basis of persuasion in both instances – his existence as a thinking thing and mathematics – is that he finds that if he attempts to deny these claims, a contradiction results. Nevertheless, we learned from the passages quoted earlier (HR II, 41-42; CSM II, 103 - 104), that mathematical claims are excluded from his enumeration

of claims which are clear and distinct and yet are unaffected by the consideration that God may be a deceiver. The clear and distinct awareness of his existence as a thinking thing and his clear and distinct perceptions of mathematical propositions are such that their respective denials result in a contradiction. And, from Principle VII, we learn that the contradiction he discovers when doubting that he exists as a thinking thing is sufficient to establish that he exists as a thinking thing. On the other hand, the contradiction that he discovers when denying the truth of a clear and distinct mathematical proposition (e.g. $5 = 3+2$) is not sufficient to establish the truth of that proposition, because he must still contend with the concern that God may be deceiving him in regard to mathematical claims.

Now, to attempt to understand these various matters. I begin with the *Reply to Objections II*, at the point where Descartes explains why he can never doubt that while he thinks he exists, and that what is once done cannot be undone, "and other similar truths, about which clearly we can possess this certainty (HR II, 42; CSM II, 104). As previously noted, he omits mathematics from this grouping. This is his explanation as to why he cannot doubt that 'while he thinks he exists':

For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing them to be true, the position taken up. Hence we can never doubt them without at the same time believing them to be true; that is to say, we can never doubt them. (HR II, 42; CSM II, 104)

Descartes' explanation in this passage can only be understood by recognizing that it contains three argumentative elements: two instances of the Hypothetical Syllogism argument form; the second Hypothetical

Syllogism argument is an Enthymeme, and the entire argument is a *Reductio ad Absurdum*. Setting out his explanation in more rigorous form, we get the following:

First Argument: (First Hypothetical Syllogism, and beginning of the *Reductio*):

If he doubts that 'while he thinks he exists', then he must think that 'while he thinks he exists'.

If he must think that 'while he thinks he exists', then 'while he thinks he exists' is believed to true.

Therefore, if he doubts that 'while he thinks he exists', then 'while he thinks he exists' is believed to be true.

Second Argument: (Second Hypothetical Syllogism, the Enthymeme, and the Conclusion of the *Reductio*):

If he doubts that 'while he thinks he exists', then 'while he thinks he exists' is believed to be true. (The conclusion of the First Argument is the major premise in the Second Argument.)

If 'while he thinks he exists' is believed to be true, then 'while he thinks he exists' cannot be doubted. (Premise omitted in the Enthymeme, but added here in the Second Argument.)

Therefore, if he doubts that 'while he thinks he exists', then he cannot doubt that 'while he thinks he exists'. (This conclusion, to be examined in the next paragraph, reveals the contradiction of which Descartes speaks in Principle VII and the fourth paragraph of the third meditation, when he asserts that there is a contradiction in conceiving that what thinks does not at the same time as it thinks, exists.)

There are a number of points to be made regarding this *Reductio*. From the conclusion of the Second Argument, we are able to understand that the 'contradiction' of which Descartes speaks in Principle VII and the fourth paragraph of the third meditation is in the act of doubting, and not in the proposition doubted: it is impossible for him to doubt the clear and distinct connection that he intuitively perceives between his thought and his existence. But, in the passage I cited from the fourth paragraph of the third meditation (M 59 – 60; CSM II, 25), Descartes includes mathematical propositions as well as the connection between thought and existence. In fact, there are two passages in the fifth meditation in which Descartes maintains that he cannot withhold his assent from propositions which are seen clearly and distinctly, including mathematical propositions.

And even although I had not demonstrated this, the nature of my mind is such that I could not prevent myself from holding them to be true so long as I see them clearly; and I recollect that even when I was strongly attached to the objects of sense, I counted as the most certain those truths which I conceived clearly as regards figures, numbers, and other matters which pertain to arithmetic and geometry, and, in general, to pure and abstract mathematics. (M. 81; CSM II, 45)

[I] am of such a nature that so long as I understand anything very clearly and distinctly, I am naturally impelled to believe it to be true... (M. 84; CSM II, 48)

The conclusion to be drawn from these two passages in the context of the *Reductio* that I set out above is that, not only is there a contradiction when trying to doubt the connection between thought and existence (if he attempts to doubt the

connection between thought and existence, then he finds that he cannot doubt the connection), but the same contradiction involved in doubting the clear and distinct presents itself when trying to doubt that $5 = 3 + 2$, and other arithmetic and geometric equations, given that he is naturally impelled to believe that they are true (if he attempts to doubt the connection between a [set of 5] and [= 2 + 3], then he finds that he cannot doubt the connection). In light of this finding, we need to understand why he holds that the contradiction involving the attempt to doubt the connection between thought and existence establishes the truth of this connection, but that the contradiction involved in his attempt to doubt the connection between the relata in a mathematical claim does not establish the truth of the mathematical connection.

I begin with mathematical claims, and Descartes' concern that deception in mathematics may occur, if a deceiving God exists as Descartes' creator. He considers the possibility of divine deception in mathematics in the fourth paragraph of the third meditation (quoted earlier) and in Principle V of the *Principles of Philosophy*.² In both passages, he makes the point that divine deception in mathematics can occur if a deceiving deity has created him in such a way that he will always be deceived, even in the things that he believes himself to know best. What Descartes does not explain in these passages is the nature of the deception or errors in mathematics resulting from a deceiving God, and why a comparable deception by a

²[W]e have been told that God who created us can do all that He desires. For we are still ignorant of whether He may not have desired to create us in such a way that we shall always be deceived, even in the things that we believe ourselves to know best; since this does not seem less possible than our being occasionally deceived, which experience tells us is the case. (HRI, 220; CSM I, 194)

deceiving deity cannot occur regarding Descartes' awareness of his existence as a thinking thing.

We have already seen that in the case of mathematics, he finds that so long as he understands anything very clearly and distinctly, e.g. that $5 = 3 + 2$, he is naturally impelled to believe that it is true. Nevertheless, what he is thinking may be false. But, under what circumstances would it be false that $5 = 3 + 2$? It would be false that $5 = 3 + 2$, if his thoughts do not accurately represent, or correspond to, the actual relation that exists between (5) and ($= 3 + 2$), however the relation between (5) and ($= 3 + 2$) has been brought about. Since he does not yet know whether there is an external world, his concern at this point cannot be focussed on mathematical relations between, or among, items in the external world. Rather, his concern is that, however mathematical relations are brought about, and to whatever they may apply, the way that he must think about these relations may not accurately represent, or correspond to, the truth about these relations. For Descartes, a deceiving deity would have the power to make a set of 3 and a set of 2 equal to something other than a set of 5, and yet be able to deceive Descartes into believing that $5 = 3 + 2$. In other words, in light of the possibility of divine deception in mathematics, what he is naturally impelled to believe is true in regard to mathematics may not correspond to what is true in mathematics, however truth in mathematics has come about.

In the case of the relation between thought and existence, Descartes intuits that the relata are necessarily connected, and no reasons brought forth for doubting this connection can have any plausibility, including the hypothesis that he was created by a deceiving God. But why is this so? With thought and existence, the connection

thought is the connection thought about. In other words, it is the actual relation between the relata which is being intuited, when he thinks the connection between thought and existence: "What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. (M. 18; CSM II, 18). Therefore, his reason for distinguishing the necessary connection between thought and existence from other matters which are clear and distinct, particularly in mathematics, is that only in the case of thought and existence are we apprehending the items about which we are thinking, and, therefore, only in this case is the clarity and distinctness of the necessary connection between thought and existence an indubitable guarantor of the truth of this connection. For Descartes to doubt the connection between thought and existence requires believing that the connection between these relata is not as he intuits it, even while he intuits the connection. And Descartes insists that such doubt is not possible: once his mind is freed of prejudice, what presents itself as clear and distinct is clear and distinct. The additional feature in the case of his thought and his existence is that the necessary connection intuited is the actual connection with which thought is concerned. Therefore, not only can he not doubt what he is intuiting, he also cannot doubt the truth of the connection between the relata that he is intuiting. With mathematical statements, on the other hand, to know that the connection intuited is the actual connection between the relata and, therefore, for him to know that the intuited connection is true, requires that he knows that the way in which he apprehends the connection between the items involved is the way the items must always be connected. And

for him to know this, more is involved than the knowledge that the denial of mathematical statements which are clear and distinct is a contradiction, in the manner I explained earlier.

We are now able to understand that when Descartes asserts in the last sentence in the fourth paragraph in the third meditation, that without knowing that God created him and that God is not a deceiver, he “does not see that [he] can ever be certain of anything” (M.60; CSM II, 25), we must regard this as somewhat hyperbolic; for, as we have seen, the knowledge that he exists as a thinking thing does not require the divine guarantee. Therefore, the passage on which I focussed earlier from the *Replies to Objections II* (HR II, 41 - 42; CSM II, 103 - 104), provides a more accurate account of Descartes' position on the limits and scope of divine deception.

Related Publications by the Author

“Deus ex Cartesio”, *Studia et Collectanea Cartesiana* 1, 1979, 167-182.

“Truth, No Doubt”, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 19, Number 2, July 1981, 237-258.

Descartes and Hume: Selected Topics, Caravan Books, Delmar New York, June 1990.

“Descartes' Syllogistic Proof of His Existence and the *Cogito*”, *Diálogos*, Volume XXXVII, Number 82, 2003, 109-120.

“The Two Truths that Descartes Discovers in His *Meditations on First Philosophy* that Do Not Require the Divine Guarantee”, selected for inclusion in the *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Multidisciplinary Studies (ICMS XXVI)*, December 10 – 11, 2021, Ghent.