What Were These? Clear and Distinct Perception and the Cartesian Circle

A straightforward reading of Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* seems to yield a circular argument. Descartes’ principle of clear and distinct perception, as introduced in the Third Meditation, is grounded in the existence of a perfectly good God, but it is clear and distinct perception that is used to prove the very existence of this perfectly good God. A great deal of scholarship has gone into trying to solve the problem of the so-called “Cartesian Circle,” and yet there are as many solutions as there are commentators. In this paper, I will defend Descartes from the charges of circularity by demonstrating that the issue with clarity and distinctness is merely a matter of recognition; while the veracity of clear and distinct perception is never doubted, sometimes a person may think they perceive something clearly and distinctly when they do not. To defend Descartes, I will provide a close reading of the opening of the Third Meditation. I will then give a few indications for understanding the Fourth Meditation in light of the problem of recognition.

On a first reading of the *Meditations*, Descartes’ circularity seems to emerge almost too obviously. After the Second Meditation, in which he proves he exists and is a thinking thing, Descartes begins to look for other possible items of knowledge. At this point, he posits the general rule that “whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). Descartes immediately casts this rule into doubt by introducing the possibility of a deceiving God. Thus Descartes “must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver” (CSM II 25; AT VII 36). This reading is supported both by the end of the Fifth Meditation and by a statement in the Second Replies: “I see plainly that the certainty and

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truth of all knowledge depends uniquely on my knowledge of the true God” (CSM II 49; AT VII 71) and “once we have become aware that God exists it is necessary for us to imagine that he is a deceiver if we wish to cast doubt on what we clearly and distinctly perceive” (CSM II 103; AT VII 144).

With the general rule in doubt, however, Descartes still appears to assume the truth of clear and distinct perceptions in his proof of God’s existence: “The longer and more carefully I examine all these points, the more clearly and distinctly I recognize their truth” (CSM II 29; AT VII 42); “[this idea of God] is utterly clear and distinct […] hence there is no idea which is in itself truer or less liable to be suspected of falsehood” (CSM II 31; AT VII 46); “the idea that I have of God [is] the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas” (CSM II 32; AT VII 46); and so on. If Descartes can only know that what is clearly and distinctly perceived is true on the basis of the existence and goodness of God, and if Descartes proves that God exists on the basis of clear and distinct perception, then there seems to be no doubt that he has reasoned in a circle.

Because it seems unlikely that someone as philosophically astute as Descartes would fall victim to such blatant circular reasoning, we have good reason to believe there’s more to Descartes’ argument than the above caricature. And indeed, a number of solutions to Descartes’ circularity have been proposed. These accounts, varied as they are, still for the most part seem to suppose that knowledge of the existence of God serves as a sort of “guarantee” for some perceptions that have been cast into doubt. Thus Willis Doney, in his well-known defense of the “Memory Thesis,” states “Given God’s guarantee of memory, however, he could then, and only

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3 This thesis claims that it is the memory of clear and distinct perceptions that is cast into doubt, not the truth of these perceptions at the time they are held.
then, be absolutely certain of some beliefs without attending to their proofs.”

Likewise, Peter Schouls speaks of how we make “God the guarantor of the truth of a certain class of complex ideas.”

The word “guarantee,” however, never appears in the Meditations. Might it not therefore be that the appearance of an argument for the existence of God has some role other than guaranteeing the truth of perceptions? If the general rule itself is never cast into doubt and therefore needs no guarantee, any use of clear and distinct perception in the proofs of God’s existence would avoid the charge of circularity. Jean-Luc Marion has taken up such an interpretation. Expanding on Marion’s account, I will give a reading of the Third and Fourth Meditations that not only avoids circularity but also makes sense of the numerous “proof texts” that seem to favor the traditional interpretation.

An often-unnoticed statement by Descartes in the Synopsis offers a first indication of the account I am proposing. According to the Synopsis, it is not in the Third Meditation but the Fourth that “it is proved that everything that we clearly and distinctly perceive is true” (CSM II 11; AT VII 15). If, in fact, God is the guarantee for the general rule, and if it is in the Third Meditation that Descartes proves the existence of God, how then could it be that clear and

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7 Not however, completely unnoticed. See Gewirth, Alan. “The Cartesian Circle” in The Philosophical Review, 4 (1941), 383. Gewirth argues that this statement in the Synopsis in fact proves that the general rule is derived primarily from the veracity of God rather than the cogito. No deduction, however, from God’s existence to the general rule can be found in the Fourth Meditation. It is never a matter of re-establishing the general rule, and Gewirth gives no actual textual support to suggest that it is.
8 This paragraph follows Marion’s account. See Marion, 42-44.
distinct perception is proven in the Fourth Meditation? While this passage will still remain problematic for my interpretation, in the end I will be able to account for it in a way understandings that include a “divine guarantee” cannot.

According to my interpretation, the general rule is never doubted in the Meditations after it is posited. This fact seems clear from the argument used to first discern the general rule. After becoming certain that he is a thinking thing (in the Second Meditation), Descartes stumbles upon the general rule out of the question, “Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything?” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). If Descartes knows the conditions for being certain about some idea—in this case his own existence—then he can extrapolate to a general proposition about the conditions for all knowledge. In fact, Descartes thinks that any general propositions must be reasoned from particular cases. Thus in the Second Replies he states “It is in the nature of our mind to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones” (CSM II 100; AT VII 141); likewise, in a letter to Clerselie he claims “It is certain that if we are to discover the truth we must always begin with particular notions in order to arrive at general ones later on” (CSM II 271; AT IXA 205-206). Descartes’ strategy here is to find a particular thing he knows to be true and from there to devise a general principle for truth.

How does Descartes make this movement from the particular to the general? First, he finds that he is certain of his existence because “in this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). What does Descartes mean by “simply?” A passage from the Discourse on the Method illuminates it: “there is nothing at all in the proposition ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’ to assure me that I am speaking the truth, except that I see very clearly that in order to think it is necessary to exist” (CSM I 127; AT VI 33). It is only the clarity and the distinctness of the proposition “I exist” that
makes Descartes certain. Descartes astutely notes, however, that “this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). For if something equally clear and distinct turned out to be false, how could it be that the same clarity and distinctness could produce certainty with regards to existence? The argument is thus:

1. “If it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false,” then “a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting [...] would never be enough to make me certain of the truth” that I am a thinking thing (CSM II 24; AT VII 35).

2. But a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting is enough to make me certain of the truth that I am a thinking thing.

3. Therefore, it is not that case that it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with clarity and distinctness was false.

With this argument in place, Descartes feels he can put forward the general rule.

If the general rule is to be put into doubt, then, it must be through the second premise. Either Descartes must find some other factor that makes him certain of his own existence—and nowhere in his writings is there anything of the sort—or something must also cast doubt on his own existence. Is this existence ever doubted? According to the Second Replies, it is not: “we cannot doubt [the fact that I exist] without at the same time believing [it is] true; that is, we can never doubt [it]” (CSM II 104; AT VII 146). On no other grounds can the general rule be doubted; there is therefore no necessity for God to provide some “guarantee” for the rule.

Nevertheless, Descartes next appears to immediately contradict what I have just said. “I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realized were
doubtful. What were these?” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). While a cursory read may suggest that Descartes is here doubting the general rule, a careful analysis shows that it is rather the idea that these things were “certain and evident.” Here I am following Marion when he states that the issue is “only the fact that I can take perceptions as clear and evident that do not appear clear when used.” It is not a matter of the general rule being doubted, but of the possibility of my thinking I perceive clearly and distinctly when, in fact, I do not. In short, it is a problem of recognition rather than veracity. In arguing for this thesis, I am explicitly setting myself up against Alan Gewirth, who firmly maintains that “doubt concerns only the truth of clear and distinct perceptions, not their quality of being clear and distinct.”

A few passages overwhelmingly support my interpretation. First, when Descartes initially introduces the general rule in the Discourse on the Method, he unambiguously identifies the problem: “So I decided that I could take it as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true; only there is some difficulty in recognizing which are the things that we distinctly conceive” (CSM I 127; AT VI 33, emphasis mine). This explicit statement of the problem is more than enough to back up my claim. Likewise, in the Fifth Replies Descartes responds to the following charge: “what we should be working on is not so much a rule to establish the truth as a method for determining whether or not we are deceived when we think we perceive something clearly” (CSM II 250; AT VII 361-362). Given that this deception is put in contrast to establishing the truth, it seems clear that the claim here is that Descartes should clarify whether or not we really do perceive things clearly. Descartes responds to the demand as follows: “This I do not dispute; but I maintain that I carefully provided such a

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9 Marion, 52.
method in the appropriate place” (ibid.). Descartes therefore agrees that the issue at hand is recognizing what is clear and distinct, and he believes the *Meditations* provides a method for solving the problem of recognition.

If the issue is not providing a guarantee for the general rule but rather determining when we actually have clear and distinct perception, the remainder of the Third Meditation and the Fourth Meditation will have to be understood in a new light. I take it that until the end of the Fourth Meditation, everything stated after the introduction of the general rule is to answer the question, “what were these?”—these things “accepted as wholly certain and evident […] which I afterwards realized were doubtful” (CSM II 24; AT VII 35). It is in clarifying how one can wrongly accept a perception as clear and distinct that the existence of God be proven.

Immediately after asking “what were these?” Descartes provides an initial answer: the “earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I apprehended with the senses” (ibid.). This answer is not satisfactory, for it does not get to the heart of the question, which is “what was it about them that I perceived clearly?” (ibid.). Descartes clearly perceived that “things appeared before my mind,” but he went beyond this clear perception to assert “that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas” (CSM II 25; AT VII 35). Never casting the general rule into doubt, Descartes instead points out that he never had a clear and distinct perception regarding this belief about “things outside me.” Indeed, he claims “I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so” (ibid.). At least as far as things apprehended with the senses go, the issue is always about the belief that I receive those things from something outside me, a belief which is never clear and distinct.

In the case of mathematics, the analysis is far more complicated. The crucial paragraph in which this analysis takes place is riddled with seeming contradictions and potential problems for
my thesis. First, when considering simple arithmetic like $2+3=5$, the “only reason” to doubt them was “that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident” (CSM II 25; AT VII 36). Indeed, Descartes even suggests that God could “bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye” (ibid.). Has the general rule for the first time been subjected to doubt, requiring a guarantee from God? I do not think there is any questioning of the general rule here, for Descartes is speaking only about matters that seem most evident and those matters that I think I see clearly. Once again it is a matter of whether the ideas are actually clear and distinct, not whether the general rule is true. And, in fact, here Descartes tells us a few things that are clear and distinct:

“Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction.” (ibid.)

Immediately after this sudden burst of certainty, however, Descartes seems to throw everything back into doubt. Gewirth, in speaking on this passage, claims “that even the cogito [i.e. Descartes’ existence as a thinking thing] is doubted.” Of course, if Descartes has finally doubted his own existence, the general rule will need a divine guarantee.

I do not, however, see any evidence that Descartes doubts any of the things he was previously “so convinced by.” A few textual evidences should show what Descartes is really

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doing. First, Descartes never identifies what is being doubted. Instead, he simply says “any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition [a deceiving God] is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one” (CSM II 25; AT VII 36). Nowhere does Descartes claim that a deceiving God could throw into doubt that he exists or any of the other beliefs listed in the above quotation. Instead, Descartes is saying that if there are some other things for which the deceiving God could serve as a reason for doubt, then it is only a metaphysical doubt.12

A look at the Second Replies can strengthen this interpretation. Three of Descartes’ statements show that these certain things have not been thrown into doubt. First, “in the case of our clearest and most careful judgments […] I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived” (CSM II 102-103; AT VII 143-144). Second, “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 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; AT VII 140). Third,

“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, […] 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?” (CSM II 103; AT VII 144-145)

Descartes here seems to dismiss the idea that something could cast doubt on those things like his own existence that are so clear and distinct they demand his assent. At this point in the Third Meditation, however, we have precisely those kinds of things. The deceiving God does not throw

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12 I do not think it is necessary here to explain what Descartes might mean by 'metaphysical’ doubt. What is important is that, whatever metaphysical doubt is, the aforementioned beliefs are not subject to metaphysical doubt.
into doubt any of the certainties just listed, much less the certainty of existence used to first bring about the general rule.

Descartes thus determines that he must investigate “whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver” (CSM II 25; AT VII 36). He must investigate this not to verify or guarantee the general rule, but only to remove the doubt from any possible cases in which the existence of a deceiving God is the only reason for doubt. Thus he says “if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else” (ibid., emphasis mine). Aside from the certainties he has already listed, almost any other belief seems at least to be subject to doubt from the deceiving God. Removing this metaphysical doubt is the first step toward becoming certain of all other beliefs.\(^{13}\)

The impetus for proving the existence of God now becomes apparent. Tracing the steps that Descartes makes is unnecessary here, since it is not a matter of how the existence of God is proven but why, and we already have a sufficient understanding of why. Whether or not we judge Descartes’ proofs to be successful, there should be no doubt that they are designed to remove a slight metaphysical doubt that affects neither the general rule nor such certainties as one’s own existence. I will therefore focus only on one issue pertaining to the proofs: do they remain circular?

At first glance, the proofs may indeed still appear to be circular. Even if the problem is a matter of recognition and not veracity, how does Descartes know that he has properly recognized

\(^{13}\) Marion provides a slightly different analysis on these points, using the concept of the “simple natures” as defined in the *Principles*. For what it’s worth, I don’t think his analysis is necessary in order to demonstrate the moves Descartes is making here. In fact, I even have my concerns about the move Marion makes regarding mathematical evidences when he introduces “super-‘encoding’” (see Marion, 56). Super-‘encoding’ seems to me to be precisely the sort of ‘absolute falsity’ that Descartes makes no time for in the Second Replies. While I have somewhat traced Marion’s account in asserting that the general rule is never cast into doubt, at this point I will depart from him in favor of an understanding of the Fourth Meditation that he only hints at.
the clarity and distinctness of his perceptions regarding God? Two passages can be cited to quell this objection. First, recall that “in the case of our clearest and most careful judgments […] I simply assert that it is impossible for us to be deceived” (CSM II 102-103; AT VII 143-144). While I have not shown the basis on which Descartes determines which ideas are the “clearest and most careful,” it is clear that the idea of God qualifies. For Descartes claims “the idea that I have of God [is] the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas” (CSM II 32; AT VII 46).

Since the idea of God is clearer to Descartes than even the fact that Descartes exists, his proof must fall under the simple assertion that he cannot be deceived. Descartes therefore does not fall victim to any obvious circularity in his proofs. With the issue of circularity removed, I will now turn my attention to the Fourth Meditation, where the existence of God takes on new importance.

In the introduction to the Fourth Meditation, Descartes reaffirms that the clear and distinct perceptions he has of corporeal things are miniscule compared to how much is ambiguous. This fact should call to mind once again the question, “what were these?” In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes will take up this question and provide a much fuller account for how he mistakenly took material things to be wholly evident. First, however, he recounts his certainty of God. The importance of this certainty is not, at this point, that God is not a deceiver; rather, it is the “contemplation of the true God, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and the sciences lie hidden” (CSM II 37; AT VII 53), which is undertaken after proving the existence of God. Since the fact that God is not a deceiver is important insofar as it removes the slight metaphysical doubt, Descartes does take a paragraph to remember this fact, but he quickly moves on to the positive characteristics of the existence of God, namely that “there is in me a faculty of judgement [sic] which, like everything else which is in me, I certainly received from God” (CSM II 37; AT VII 53-54).
Descartes’ argument from here is fairly straightforward and does not need to be overly rehashed. The will and the intellect are both created by God and are good when used in the proper way. Error comes about when the will is used in matters beyond the intellect. From Descartes’ account, I simply want to draw two general conclusions:

1. The answer to the question “what were these?” is simply that these were cases when Descartes lacked “a great light in the intellect […] followed by a great inclination in the will” (CSM II 41; AT VII 59). Only in the cases where there is a “spontaneity” is perception truly clear and distinct. That is, if one is not utterly convinced by a perception, then one has not perceived clearly and distinctly. With this understanding in mind, Descartes says he has “learned not only what precautions to take to avoid ever going wrong, but also what to do to arrive at the truth” (CSM II 43; AT VII 62). When, in the Synopsis, Descartes claimed he proved the general rule in the Fourth Meditation, he must have meant that he proved how to use the general rule. While the general rule could not really help Descartes move from perception to certainty as long as he had no knowledge of what was really clear and distinct, the realizations in the Fourth Meditation now allow the general rule to be employed and to yield truth.

2. Descartes’ shocking statements about atheists can be better understood when one focuses on the importance of the fact that God created the will and the intellect. In the Second Replies, Descartes claims no atheist can “be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident” (CSM II 101; AT VII 141). One way to understand this statement is to think that somehow the general rule is in doubt for atheists, and thus they cannot move from clear and distinct perception to knowledge. Yet Descartes’ use of the word “seem” appears to form the objection differently. The general rule can be known even by the atheist, but atheists can never know if their perceptions are clear and distinct. This inability to know exists
because the knowledge of what is clear and distinct can only be achieved by seeing that a perfectly good God created the will and the intellect, which therefore reliably work together to indicate when a perception is clear and distinct. It is only because God exists that “this faculty [for recognizing the truth] must tend towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly” (CSM II 103; AT VII 144). Absent God, there is no way to know the will and the intellect are at all reliable; thus even when the atheist seems to have a great inclination to believe, he or she cannot know this inclination will reliably indicate clarity and distinctness. Of course, even the atheist can know the clearest and most distinct perceptions, such as the fact that the atheist is a thinking thing and exists; as I have shown, these propositions can never be thrown into doubt.

With the general rule now both posited and ready to be used, Descartes is ready to investigate material things to “try to escape from the doubts into which I fell a few days ago, and see whether any certainty can be achieved regarding material objects” (CSM II 44; AT VII 63). In his path to this point, Descartes never employed any sort of circular reasoning. The general rule, once posited, was never placed into any sort of doubt. It was only doubted whether certain perceptions really were clear and distinct, and the Fourth Meditation revealed precisely which ones were and were not. With this careful reading of the Third Meditation, I think it is clear that the issue with the general rule is merely one of recognition and not of veracity.
Works Cited


