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CHAPTER ONE

Descartes's Pyrrhonian Virtue Epistemology

A. The Method of Doubt and Its Objectives

What is Descartes up to in the *Meditations*? On one level at least, he is *not* engaged in a project of determining what he should believe, what it would be reasonable for him to believe. Consider, for example, the following two passages:

> [When] it is a question of organizing our life, it would, of course, be foolish not to trust the senses, and the skeptics who neglected human affairs to the point where friends had to stop them falling off precipices deserved to be laughed at. *Hence I pointed out in one passage that no sane person ever seriously doubts such things*. But when our inquiry concerns what can be known with complete certainty by the human intellect, it is quite unreasonable to refuse to reject these things in all seriousness as doubtful and even as false; the purpose here is to come to recognize that certain other things which cannot be rejected in this way are thereby more certain and in reality better known to us.[1]

> My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. *I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions—opinions*

[1] *Replies to the Fifth Set of Objections*, Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch [CSM], eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (3 volumes), II: 243 (Cambridge University Press, 1984); emphasis added.

> *which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny*. In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. (First Meditation, CSM II: 15; emphasis added)

If we take Descartes at his word, then, no one sane *ever* seriously doubts his habitual opinions, which are *much* more reasonably believed than denied.

What else might be involved in the Cartesian method of radical doubt beyond *pretending* our customary opinions to be doubtful and even false? Let us examine the method more closely. Here, first, is a crucial passage:

> [Those] who have never philosophized correctly have various opinions in their minds which they have begun to store up since childhood, and which they therefore have reason to believe may in many cases be false. They then attempt to separate the false beliefs from the others, so as to prevent their contaminating the rest and making the whole lot uncertain. Now the best way they can accomplish this is to reject all their beliefs together in one go, as if they were all uncertain and false. They can then go over each belief in turn and re-adopt only those which they recognize to be true and indubitable. Thus I was right to begin by rejecting all my beliefs. (*Replies to the Seventh Set of Objections*, CSM II: 324)

Near this passage Descartes invokes the famous apple-basket metaphor. Upon discovering some rot in one's basket, what is one to do? His answer: dump out all the apples and readmit only those that pass inspection. Only thus can we be sure that no rot will continue to spread undetected.

The apples are beliefs or opinions, among them old familiar ones, stored since childhood. Once the beliefs in our basket are found to contain the rot of error, we are to dump them *all*. But

how do we understand this metaphor? What is it to "remove" a belief from the basket? What is it to *reject* a belief?

In a familiar view, to reject a belief is to give it up, to withhold or suspend judgment on its content.[2] In any case, it would be to replace believing with *not*-believing. The ground by the empty basket would then be free of *believings*, because in the present view to dump a believing is to destroy it. Strewn there would be found *believables*, contents earlier believed. Concerning all of those contents, the subject would now be suspending judgment. That is the view.

That view is highly problematic for several reasons. For one thing, rejecting all our beliefs that way would entail believing nothing, replacing belief universally with unbelief. What would that require? Could one bring up each content separately, replacing acceptance of it with suspension? Surely not. The contents would need to be handled in manageable clusters, for collective suspension in one fell swoop.

Suppose, accordingly, that we identify the beliefs in question indirectly, as for example "beliefs I hold" or "old and customary opinions learned since childhood." If we pick them out only so generally, however, no mental operation available to us would seem to result in the desired universal suspension. It is doubtful that we can suspend judgment *de re* on *each* content thus picked out—just as, say, "long-held opinions"—simply by taking it *de dicto* that these contents are all doubtful or supposing that they are all false.

And there is a further reason why Descartes's "rejection" cannot plausibly amount to suspension or withholding. Recall how the process is supposed to go. The beliefs dumped out of the basket must undergo inspection. Only those that pass will be readmitted. But the relevant inspection will have to involve some

[2]Of course one might also reject a particular belief not by suspending judgment but by believing the opposite. But this could not be a sensible way for Descartes to reject *all* of his beliefs, since it would be to acquire an opposing, equally numerous set of beliefs, one that would be even more doubtful than the rejected set. Far more sensible would be the less committal sort of "rejection" that requires only suspension. But we shall find even this to be highly problematic.

process of reasoning. It is through such reasoning that we will determine whether a certain condition is satisfied, which will earn that belief readmission. And how could we possibly perform any such reasoning while deprived of beliefs? Note well: the reasoning in question cannot be just conditional. The desired conclusion is that the belief under examination passes inspection. Thus would we obtain the assertoric basis for a practical syllogism that warrants readmission. An asserted conclusion (an asserted categorical, not something unasserted or conditional) requires asserted premises, however, explicit or implicit. That is to say, we can attain epistemic status for such an assertoric conclusion through a bit of reasoning only if our reasoning has premises with such assertoric status of their own.

We have found three weighty reasons to think that Descartes has no intention of "rejecting" his beliefs by abandoning them all, replacing the attitude of belief with that of suspension. First, we have seen his outright statement that *no one sane would* ever *do such a thing*. Second, doing so *de re*, for each belief in turn, lies beyond our psychological capabilities. Third, if he *were* to accomplish such universal suspension, he would necessarily block his own project! His project requires inspecting the "rejected" beliefs so as to determine whether they deserve readmission. And this inspection, this determination, must be done through reasoning that, in turn, would seem to require beliefs.

Given how problematic it is to understand rejection as abandonment, let us set aside that view of rejection and explore an alternative.

Descartes's project is, I submit, on the second order. Taking a belief out of the basket is declining to endorse it epistemically in a certain way. (This is the "rejection" that he performs while "pretending" that the rejected beliefs are false. This pretense is itself on the second order; it picks out clusters of beliefs under a certain description and under that description pretends, about them generally, that they are false.) Whether one had earlier endorsed them or not, one now declines to do so. But what *is* the relevant way in which Descartes declines to endorse his "rejected" beliefs? Recall the special importance of the status of *certainty*, whereby one is in no doubt whatsoever that one's belief is true. *Here* is per-

haps the key to how we should understand endorsement. Proper Cartesian endorsement of a belief requires one to have no reason, not the slightest, for any doubt about its truth. This is, then, the proper endorsement of a belief as *doubtless* true.

Cartesian rejection, when proper, would thus involve forbearing from such endorsement: that is, from endorsement of a belief as doubtless true, not just as true. To dump a belief from one's basket of beliefs is to forbear from thus endorsing it. One may or may not have previously endorsed it. One may have failed to so much as *consider* whether to endorse it. In any case, the belief is dumped when one now forbears to endorse it. And now the dumping of a belief, its relevant "rejection," seems compatible with undiminished confidence in its content. So we would surmount two of the three key problems encountered earlier. If our account is correct, Descartes need not reduce his confidence in order to engage in his project of Cartesian doubt. Nor must he be deprived of beliefs in terms of which to conduct the inspection. On our account, Descartes retains sufficient confidence on the first order that his first-order beliefs can all remain in place, even when on the second order he forbears consciously endorsing those first-order beliefs. By retaining his first-order action-guiding animal confidence, he can sanely go on about his everyday business, adroitly avoiding deadly jumps off high cliffs, and he can continue to engage in first-order reasoning in terms of those retained beliefs.

However, we still face the third of our problems. How can Descartes access his beliefs individually *de re* so as to reject (forbear endorsing) them or, eventually, so as to endorse them? The answer is that his project requires no such distributed access to his beliefs separately, one by one. He explicitly notes how hopeless that would be.[3] The relevant *rejection* and the correlative *endorsement* must be *under a description*, *de dicto*. We must be able to pick out beliefs in clusters so as to reject them or endorse them as "those that satisfy condition C" for some given condition. Thus, for example, if we find that doubt inevitably clouds any belief based (directly or indirectly) on perception, then we may be able to dump all "beliefs

[3]See the second paragraph of Meditation One (CSM II: 15).

based essentially on perception" by forbearing to endorse them under that description. That is perhaps how the project is supposed to go. But we must next consider a further twist.

B. Credence versus Judgment

Recall Descartes's insistence that no one *ever* seriously doubts the deliverances of the senses and that his habitual opinions are highly probable opinions that it is much more reasonable to affirm than to deny. But how, then, could he ever "reject" such opinions as doubtful, or false, even when engaged in the project of determining the extent of possible human certainty?

Well, there *is* something he clearly *can* do. He can "feign" anything he likes while still harboring his old and customary opinions with undiminished assurance. In the second passage considered above (from Meditation One), *feigning* is what he explicitly proposes to do (from the Latin *fingem*, French *feignant*). Moreover, he can still use his belief that not-p in reasoning he performs even while making believe (feigning) that p. Thus, at the movie theater I can appropriately forbear shouting a warning even when I make believe that I see someone about to be hit over the head from behind. Here I seem to rely through implicit reasoning on an assumption that no one within earshot really needs any such warning. And this action-guiding reasoning can be perfectly appropriate despite my concurrent feigning of the contrary. Make-belief is one thing, real belief quite another.

That does, however, bring up a further question. Why should Descartes have thought that pretending that not-p would help him resist the temptation to continue to believe that p while endorsing one's belief? It helps here to distinguish between two attitudes that might be called "belief." One is an implicit confidence that suffices to guide our action, including action on practical options, such as whether to shout a warning. The other is an act of judgment made freely and voluntarily or a disposition to so judge upon considering the relevant question. In his philosophical meditation, Descartes is clearly concerned with the second of these. He emphatically distinguishes two faculties. There is *first*

a faculty of understanding, whose deliverances, received passively, are "perceptions" with some degree of clarity and distinctness. And there is *second* a faculty of judgment based on the subject's free will.

A possible explanation thus opens up as to why Descartes may have thought that by pretending that p one might be helped to avoid believing that not-p. At the theater one might feign (through visual imagination) that someone is about to be hit with a hatchet. Surely one would *not* then also freely *judge* that no-one is about to be hit. In particular, one is unlikely to judge consciously that the scene before one is unreal. The "suspension of disbelief" involved in such imagination tends to block one's consciously disbelieving by *affirming* the opposite of what one imagines (the two of which may even fail to cohere).

Note, however, that this can leave one's underlying subconscious credence still in place with undiminished confidence. One certainly does not lose one's confidence that one is sitting in a darkened theater viewing a screen (and not seeing a gory murder instead). Despite making it harder to *judge* that not-p, moreover, pretending that p does not constitute an *insurmountable* obstacle. That might thus be how Descartes thought pretense would help in his project. It would counteract our normal automatic tendency to judge in line with our stored credences, but it would not make it *impossible* for us to so judge. However, we would now be more free to judge in line with true reason and not just custom.

Accordingly, we can also see how our everyday guiding attitudes, such as the appearances of the Pyrrhonists, can remain in place below the surface of consciousness and do their guiding, even if one forbears endorsing them, and also suspends conscious assent. One can sustain highly confident credence that p even while suspending any conscious endorsement of that attitude, and even while suspending any correlated conscious judgment that p.

Consider the Cartesian "perceptions" that can have various degrees of clarity and distinctness. These are not just *sensory* perceptions. Indeed, the most clear and distinct of them include a priori intuitions involving rational rather than sensory awareness. These are rather *seemings*, including not only sensory seemings but also a priori seemings. Moreover, we should focus not just on *initial*

seemings that might enter into conflicts to be resolved through pondering or deliberation. We should focus rather on *resultant* seemings, *credences* involving some degree of confidence, representable through the unit interval.

Based on the testimony of a friend, for example, it might initially seem that p until contrary testimony from a more trusted and trustworthy friend shifts the balance, so that now, both things considered, it seems that not-p. If no other factor is rationally relevant, then, one's resultant seeming is a seeming that not-p. This is a "credence," then, or, in other words, it is a confidence, however slight, an all-things-considered seeming that not-p. Credences may thus be viewed as simply resultant seemings, with a degree of confidence representable through the unit interval.

Such seemings will, then, come with some degree of clarity and distinctness, but their apparent degree is not necessarily their real degree. In order to qualify as *really* sufficiently clear and distinct, such seemings must satisfy epistemic requirements, and we might incorrectly take a seeming to be thus clear and distinct even when it falls short.

As did the Pyrrhonian skeptics long before him, Descartes believes that we can guide our lives practically through such confident-enough seemings or appearances, ordinary opinions that it would be laughable to put in serious doubt as one navigates an ordinary day. Such beliefs are *never* put in serious doubt. Some gain the status of sufficient clarity and distinctness, moreover, *not* through direct, unaided intuition but only indirectly, through deductive reasoning. It would appear, then, that we reason through such "perceptions," resultant seemings, Pyrrhonian "appearances." We rationally make our choices based on what seem to be the pertinent potential risks and rewards, costs and benefits, *all things considered*. We rationally take into account even resultant seemings of relatively low intensity or degree of confidence.

Consider the Pythagorean theorem, which is not immediately and obviously true, in the way of simple logical truths such as the principle that nothing is self-diverse or that no proposition is both true and false. That theorem is nonetheless provable with great simplicity and persuasiveness. It *becomes* clearly true with the help of that proof. In a more humble example, someone carefully mea-

sures a one-inch line that looks like this: <———>, and believes accordingly. Suppose a second line is then unveiled right below that one, looking like this: >———<. If not wise to the Müller-Lyer illusion, he might then conclude immediately that the second line was longer than one inch. Here he will have put together two strong resultant seemings and will have arrived thereby at his highly confident additional resultant seeming, to the effect that the second line is longer than one inch. Each of the three seemings is a resultant seeming; our subject is not aware that an illusion is in play and hence arrives as he does at his all-things-considered credences (or all-things-considered seemings).

Just as did the Pyrrhonists, Descartes can continue to inquire, and to guide his daily life, through the use of such credences (including propositional perceptions) even once they have been put in doubt.[4] To put them in doubt is *not* to disable them from functioning in the guidance of action or even in the reasoning required for inquiry. Compatibly with a belief's retention of its animal or *cognitio* status and its ability to provide the guidance that we expect of such beliefs, the believer might nonetheless refuse to endorse his belief when it is brought to consciousness for rational inspection.

C. The Project of the *Meditations*

Consider how it goes in the early meditations leading up to the *cogito* passages. Descartes argues that *cogito* propositions at long last give us what we want: contents that we *can* believe with proper endorsement. These offer absolute safety from deception. In arguing for this, he must, of course, make use of certain premises. These are the premises in the reasoning that shows cogito beliefs to pass Cartesian inspection. Among these premises is the assumption <If I think that I am, then I am>. Take a skeptic who puts in doubt simple truths of arithmetic and geometry. Take one in doubt not

[4]There is more on Pyrrhonism in section D of chapter 9. A fuller interpretation is offered in chapter 10 of my *Judgment and Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

only as to what 3 and 2 add up to, how many are the sides of a square, or whether there really are any shapes at all. No such skeptic is likely to grant us without question knowledge of the following: *if I think that I am, then I am*. The reasoning by which Descartes means to underwrite his certainty of the *cogito* can thus be seen to have a certain limitation: namely, that it relies on a premise also subject to skeptical doubt.

Descartes aims to establish that our beliefs with certain contents or with certain sorts of contents would be *bound* to be correct (and to do so without blatant bootstrapping or any other type of vicious circularity). However, his reasoning turns out to be *open to skeptical challenge*. *Provided* I know <If I think that I am, then I am>, I can thereby underwrite that I could not possibly go wrong in affirming that I exist, which protects my affirmation from radical deception. But the radical skeptic of Meditation One has put in doubt even the simplest a priori truths of arithmetic and geometry. No such skeptic will allow Descartes to just help himself to the premise that if he thinks he exists, then he does exist. This conditional seems no less dubitable an a priori claim than the simple a priori truths that Descartes's skeptic already puts explicitly in doubt in the early meditations.

Accordingly, Descartes will need to consider whether *such assumptions*—the ones he needs in order to underwrite even cogito thoughts—can themselves be upgraded in the sort of way he tries to upgrade cogito thoughts (with the limited success we have observed). Taking his cue from Meditation Two, he needs some way to legitimate such assumptions, to endorse them properly. This, I submit, is what sets up the project in the rest of the meditations. Descartes goes in search of reasoning that will satisfy certain specifications:

(1) that it raise key beliefs to the required superlative level, even those that are now in some slight metaphysical doubt;
(2) that it do so while avoiding the *blatant* bootstrapping of assuming as a premise the very conclusion to be argued for; and
(3) that the beliefs so raised include the ones that enable him to endorse cogito propositions.

This project he pursues through the rational theology prominent in the later meditations. It is through such reasoning that he thinks he can upgrade his relevant beliefs. He can show them to have the required status because he can reach, through proper reasoning, the conclusion that his clear and distinct perceptions will reliably enough provide deliverances he can properly trust. And this reasoning will avoid *blatant* bootstrapping.

Let us back up a bit. What has put Descartes's beliefs in such slight doubt? Recall the skeptical scenarios of Meditation One: the dream scenario, for example, and the evil demon. In some of these we retain a normal set of beliefs about the world around us based on perceptual evidence, as is normal for such beliefs. Although we are there radically deceived, it is hard to see how we can possibly rule out those scenarios. If we cannot do so, however, then we can hardly be *certain* in our beliefs. Those are scenarios wherein our beliefs are false and hence *not* known to be true. Unless we can rule out that we are now so deceived, therefore, we cannot be sure we really know that our present beliefs are true.

That is one way of constructing a dream scenario, but there is also a second way with similar skeptical import. According to the first way, in the dream scenario we dream that p *while it is false that p*. According to the second way, we dream that p *whether it is true or false that p*. That this second case has for Descartes similar skeptical import is suggested by his fourth skeptical scenario. In that scenario there is no God to create us or sustain us; we emerge through "fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means [other than Divine agency]" (First Meditation, CSM II: 14). Under that supposition, there is no metaphysical grounding for our assured competence. With respect to any question we take up, we might or might not be well enough constituted and well enough situated that we would not go wrong while properly using our faculties (our epistemic competences or abilities).

Note the strength of what Descartes requires, as suggested by the status he gives to that scenario: In order to attain *true certainty* on a question whether p, we *must* be so constituted that we *can* not go wrong (given adequate care and attention). Absent a powerful and benevolent enough creator and sustainer, however,

we will *not* necessarily be so constituted. Descartes accordingly requires not just the aptness of one's belief but its *superlative* aptness, which also includes its "security." A belief is thus secure only if the competence manifest in its truth is so safely in place that it cannot possibly have been missing.[5]

D. A Deeper Problem

Our proposal meets the three objections to the naïve view of the way Descartes addresses his epistemological problematic: (1) that he emphatically affirms that no one sane would *ever* put ordinary beliefs in serious doubt so as to reject them, (2) that it is hard to see how he could manage to put his vast corpus of ordinary beliefs in serious doubt so as to reject them individually and seriatim, and (3) that if the rejection involved is withholding—or, equivalently, suspension—of belief (and disbelief), then he deprives himself of the wherewithal required for the inspection to which rejected beliefs must be subjected before they can be properly readmitted into his body of beliefs.

Our proposal distinguishes between animal beliefs that can continue to guide us subconsciously in the everyday and the consciously reflective beliefs that are not needed for such animal guidance. What would be insane is the abandonment of the beliefs needed for guidance. The judgments involved in conscious reflection can be suspended, however, with no need to abandon the corresponding animal beliefs. These judgments do require the rational endorsement that is made problematic by the skeptic. So much for objection a.

As for b, it helps again to distinguish the vast storehouse of implicit animal beliefs from the conscious reflective beliefs that

[5]Of course Descartes does allow us a measure of freedom that makes it possible for us to go wrong even if thus endowed. Where we cannot possibly go wrong is in our understanding, in our ability to perceive with sufficient clarity and distinctness what is thus perceivable (so long as we avoid unfortunate inattention, passion, and other such disablers). It is this ability that is *securely* our God-given endowment.

constitutively involve judgment. There are implicit judgments, or *judgmental* beliefs, such as when we say of someone asleep that "in his judgment" we ought to pursue a certain course of action. We are not saying that he is at that moment, while asleep, performing a certain act of judgment. Rather we are saying that he is disposed to so judge occurrently if he considers the question and endeavors to answer it correctly, disposed to affirm accordingly at least to himself, *in the privacy of his own mind*. Suppose our episodic judgments to be largely ones over which we exercise voluntary, free control, *as Descartes emphatically believed*.[6] In that case, the corresponding dispositional judgments will be in effect freely upheld policies to answer corresponding questions affirmatively. And it is not at all implausible that *these* beliefs, these judgmental policies of response upheld by the will, could be modified with a general act of will. The act of will involved would be quite like deciding to abandon our policy to signal our turns as we drive. In one fell swoop, we would affect the policy as it concerns each of the corners where we turn as we drive home every evening. Through a general dispensation we change each of those more specific policies by changing the overall governing policy. Similarly, we could try to change our general disposition to respond affirmatively to a great variety of questions as we took them up. Skeptical reasoning could surely affect our beliefs that way. As a result of the conscious reasoning, we might try to give up our policies to respond affirmatively to such questions as "Is there such a thing as snow?" "Is it white?" "Is there such a thing as the sky?" "Is it blue?" And so on. So, once we focus on the sorts of beliefs that held primary interest for Descartes, as for the Pyrrhonists, we can much more plausibly consider a universal abandonment of our beliefs, that is, of our judgmental beliefs: of our dispositions to respond affirmatively, freely, and voluntarily.

[6]His faculty of judgment was actively volitional by contrast with the faculty of the understanding, whereby he explains how error is possible despite God's perfect epistemic benevolence.

E. Four Key Concepts of Cartesian Epistemology

We have touched already on *certainty*, *doubt*, and *endorsement*, but we have yet to consider Cartesian *error*. What we uncover about this crucial concept will also bear on the other three.

Error. Ordinarily we take error to consist in falsity. An erroneous belief or opinion is just a false one. How far this is from Descartes's own view may be seen in the following two passages:

> But there was something . . . which I used to assert, and which through habitual belief I thought I perceived clearly, although I did not in fact do so. This was that there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects. Here was my mistake; *or at any rate, if my judgment was true, it was not thanks to the strength of my perception*.[7] (Third Meditation, CSM II: 25; emphasis added)

> If . . . I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error. But if in such cases I either affirm or deny, then I am not using my free will correctly. If I go for the alternative which is false, then obviously I shall be in error; if I take the other side, then *it is by pure chance that I arrive at the truth*, and I shall still be at fault since it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will. In this incorrect use of free will may be found the privation which constitutes the essence of error. (Fourth Meditation, CSM II: 41; emphasis added)

Falsity is *sufficient* for error but not *necessary*. One can still be in error with a true belief so long as its truth is not attributable to

[7] In the Latin: "Atque hoc erat, in quo vel fallebar, vel certe, si verum judicabam, id non ex vi meae perceptionis contingebat." In the French: "Et c'était en cela que je me trompais; ou, si peut-être je jugeais selon la vérité, ce n'était aucune connaissance que j'eusse, qui fût cause de la vérité de mon jugement."

one's clear and distinct perception. One's belief is then true by accident:

> It is also certain that when we assent to some piece of reasoning when our perception of it is lacking, then either we go wrong, or, if we do stumble on the truth, *it is merely by accident*, so that we cannot be sure that we are not in error. (CSM I: 207; emphasis added)[8]

In the crucial second paragraph of the Third Meditation we find a further clue. By that point we have finally reached a true certainty, *sum res cogitans*. Having wondered aloud what could possibly yield such certainty, Descartes answers his own question. "*As far as I can see, certainty here derives from clear and distinct enough perception*."[9] Perception of such clarity and distinctness is said to yield certainty, however, only if nothing could ever be so clearly and distinctly perceived and yet be false. It is such clarity and distinctness, then, that will properly account for the correctness of one's perception, with no chance of falsity, so that it will perfectly explain why the corresponding judgment must be true. It must be true because it corresponds to a perception by that subject so clear and distinct that it could not possibly be false.[10]

The *essence* of error is said to reside in a judgment that does *not* manifest the sort of competence required, one whose manifestations would leave little enough to chance. (See the earlier passage from Meditation Four.) So even when we judge with truth, as Descartes emphasizes, we can be in error if our judgment fails to be true "thanks to our perception," with its required level of clarity and distinctness. When our hitting the mark of truth is *not* thus explained by a competence that leaves nothing to chance, our judgment is still in error despite being true.

[8] A defense of Descartes's exact words here would require some verbal acrobatics. For it would seem that a judgment could fail to be infallible without descending to being right *merely* by accident. But we can perhaps take his formulation to be a forgivable exaggeration in line with his focus on certainty.

[9] As he notes in the third paragraph of Meditation Three; see CSM II: 24.

[10] Here it is easy to get confused. What accounts for the truth of the *judgment* is not necessarily what accounts for the truth of its *content*.

A judgment might be not only true but indeed *necessarily* true, while still in error. Suppose one believes that the square of 2 squared is 2 to the fourth power. One hence multiplies four 2s, concluding thereby that the square of 2 squared is 16. Suppose one arrives at how many 2s to multiply, however, by *adding* the exponents. Only because adding these two exponents (2 + 2) yields the same as multiplying them (2 × 2) does one here get the right result. If the exponents had been in any way different, one would have arrived at the wrong result. It is no thanks to competence that one hits the mark of truth. Yet one's judgment could not possibly be false, since the square of 2 squared could not possibly be anything other than 16.

Certainty. To attain absolute certainty, then, is to hit the mark of truth in one's judgment or belief thanks entirely to (the quality of) one's perception, which could not possibly lead one astray. To attain such certainty is thus superlatively to avoid error. One hits the mark of truth, true enough, and moreover does so thanks to (the quality) of one's perception. But one does even more than that, since one's perception is of such high epistemic quality that it leaves no room for error in the way ordinary, sensory perception leaves room for error even when highly reliable.

Doubt. To doubt a certain content is to forbear endorsing belief of it, and in Descartes's quest for certainty one is to forbear unless one can endorse one's belief as certainly apt. No matter the intensity of one's credence, one still entertains some doubt concerning that belief so long as one forbears endorsing it as certainly apt. A reason for doubt is, accordingly, a reason to forbear endorsing.

There is more than one way to adopt such a meta-attitude toward a credence that you hold. You might adopt it under a description, whereby you pick out the credence as one that satisfies a certain condition: "credence whose source is perception," as it might be. Alternatively, your meta-attitude might instead target a belief whose content is fully present and on display as the focus of your attention. If this is how you forbear from endorsing your belief that p as certain, your forbearing will bring with it your suspending judgment on the question whether p: you will judge

on that question neither affirmatively nor negatively; you will neither affirm nor deny.

Endorsement. And so we come to this important concept. In keeping with the foregoing thoughts, to endorse a belief is to regard it as correct, and in Descartes's project that requires one's endorsing it as *certainly* apt, as one that hits the mark of truth thanks entirely to the subject's clear and distinct perception, where this in turn amounts to an infallible competence. If one endorses the belief that p while aware of its content *directly present to our minds*, one will also judge affirmatively on the question whether p. For Descartes this requires certainty, moreover, so that the belief must manifest infallible competence.

F. The Cartesian Project

The Cartesian epistemological project is, at a minimum, one of examining human epistemic competence, our actual modes of acquiring and sustaining beliefs. Descartes considers how defensible are our actual modes, and also which are the best of those available to us.

One way in which a first-order credence—whether continuing or newly acquired—might benefit from such a project is by the subject's picking it out specifically, with its content on full display, and endorsing it while thus picked out. Such endorsement is fully proper only if the subject knows the competence involved to be, first, sufficiently reliable and, second, manifest in his holding of that first-order credence.

A normal human could not upgrade many of his credences up to that level, at least not *through conscious reflection*, at any given time. There is a limit to the scope of our concurrent attention.

If we moderate our ambition, we can widen the reach of certainty, however, by allowing the second-order endorsement to be implicit and to remain implicitly stored in memory. We require the judgment to be made or sustained competently enough through the sufficient competence of the faculty that prompts it. We may even require that the subject have an appropriate second-

order account of how that faculty is so reliable. However, we must *not* require, for this more realistic level of upgrade and for the corresponding endorsement, that the specific belief be picked out separately and consciously. It suffices, first, that the subject have some implicit awareness of it as a belief that manifests the competence in question while, second, his sustaining of that belief is positively influenced by that awareness.

G. Concluding Remarks

In the view here defended, Descartes uses his principle of clarity and distinctness in order to raise his first-order judgments to the *scientia* level. He must assure himself that judgments rationally based on clear and distinct perceptions avoid error. *Error* is what one must avoid, not just falsity. So he seeks not just truth but also *aptness*. And aptness requires a good enough competence, one that is reliable enough. You are to assure yourself that you attain such aptness, which is required for confidence that you avoid error, and attain certainty. But this assurance is forthcoming only with assurance that the operative source of your judgment is indeed a reliable-enough competence. And this includes your present judgments as well as those you made in your past or will make in your future. This raises an issue of circularity, since it is hard to see how you could really assure yourself of how reliable your competence is in the absence of any first-order premises. So we face an issue of vicious circularity and the notorious Cartesian Circle. Moreover, it is a circle that also affects contemporary virtue epistemology when it postulates a level of reflective knowledge above that of animal knowledge. This is what one would expect if one perceived the parallel between the two epistemological distinctions: that between the animal and the reflective on the contemporary scene and that between *cognitio* and *scientia* in Cartesian epistemology. Virtue epistemology, whether Cartesian or contemporary, must address this allegedly vicious circle, which it can arguably do with success.[11]

[11] Epistemically vicious circularity is the theme of my *Reflective Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2009), with its defense of virtuous circularity.

It was already hard for Descartes's contemporaries to make sense of his epistemological project with its distinctive quest for certainty. This comes out most famously and clearly in the *Objections and Replies*. There is no promising way to do so except by (1) ascending to the second order, as we have done; (2) distinguishing credence from judgment; (3) highlighting the fact that some propositions are indubitable because, even when considered consciously and reflectively, they demand our assent; and (4) addressing the problem of the circle through the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*. But proceeding in this fourfold way raises the difficult interpretative and philosophical questions that we have taken up.

In all important structural respects, Cartesian virtue epistemology takes the same view as a virtue epistemology on the contemporary scene, *virtue perspectivism*.[12] The structure of this view does not require the theological content that Descartes gives to his own version. The role of theology can be played instead by science, by common sense, or by the two combined. Although we have seen in this chapter how the two versions of virtue epistemology are closely akin, the full extent of the kinship remains to be detailed. But it should become increasingly clear as the contemporary view is developed to include more explicitly the epistemic agency that played so central a role in Cartesian epistemology. This is a development of the contemporary view that is now underway.[13]

Further Reading

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[12] This is the view I defend in *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) and in a series of later publications.

[13] In my *Judgment and Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

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