

Descartes: More Skepticism and the Problem of the Cartesian Circle

Status of Secondary Qualities: Descartes (elim), Locke (red), and Reid: happy red.

Wrangling over the Scope of Dreaming-Driven Skepticism: AT 19.7-20.9

-Particular perceptual judgments (“such particulars as these,” AT 19.8) are thought to be lost
 -But through “painter” analogy reasoning (that I, for one, have a hard time following, but will try to quickly render), a physical world with certain general kinds of properties seems to be spared. After some negotiation, the arithmetical and geometrical properties are selected for this honor. (Brief mention of Descartes’s role in founding analytic geometry.) What Descartes seems to retain (so far) is that there is an external world, that is characterized by such properties, in some arrangement or other. The properties in question sound like “primary qualities.” Colors themselves seem excluded from the ranks of the “true colors” (AT 20.3) of our experiences

Descartes’s Deceiving God / Evil Genius Argument (par. 9 thru the end of M1, AT: 21.0-23.7)

-Doesn’t really depend on God, as Descartes makes clear in par. 10 (AT 21.6-22.1). It can be the doubt that, as Descartes puts it toward the end of Meditation Five, “I am so constituted as to go wrong sometimes about what I think I perceive most evidently” (AT: 70.2; A&G; close to our translation): a doubt about whether his nature is such as to get such matters right.

-I think the argument suggested here is a case of the basic (“classic,” we might say) form of skeptical argument by skeptical hypothesis that I call the “Argument from Ignorance,” and that goes like this:

1. I don’t know that not-H
 2. If I don’t know that not-H, then I don’t know that O
- So, C. I don’t know that O,

Where ‘H’ is a skeptical hypothesis (here, that I’m the victim of a deceiving god), and ‘O’ is something I would ordinarily think I know (here, for instance, that $2+3=5$, or one of the other items from AT 21.3).

-Force? I put the argument in terms of knowledge, but that was mainly because “know” is so short and easy to work with. What force Descartes really intends here is a very tricky matter to which we will return. But it is worth noting that Descartes calls the doubt occasioned by this skeptical hypothesis is “very tenuous and, so to speak, metaphysical” (AT 36.8), which seems quite different from the dizzying attitude he has toward dream-based doubt.

-Scope?, How are we to generalize this skeptical conclusion? Is this an argument for Universal skepticism??!! (This is the matter you were to watch for in your reading.)

a. in favor of US:

1. M1, par’s 9-10 (AT: 21.0-22.1): see esp. the “nothing” at AT 21.8
2. M3, par 4 (AT: 36.0-36.9): the “notorious M3-4”

b. against US:

1. M2, par’s 1-3 (AT: 23.9-25.5)
2. structure of the Meditations: If you’re going to “rebuild” something stable, as Descartes clearly thinks he succeeds in doing, you need some “foundation” on which to build

-But at any rate, it seems that the external physical world has been lost to doubt at this point

(3 Statements of) The Problem of the Cartesian Circle

-Descartes seems to seek to remove the doubt that infects his “clear and distinct” perceptions by proving (on the basis of his c&dp’s, it seems) that there is a good God who would not allow him to be deceived about what he c&dp’s. But isn’t that...circular?

-Arnauld’s formulation (from the Fourth Objections):

I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists.

But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true. (CSM2: 150)

- James Van Cleve (“Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,” *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979): pp. 55-91) handily summarizes the problem as arising because Descartes:

appeared to commit himself to each of the following propositions:

(1) I can know (be certain) that (P) whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true, only if I first know (am certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver

(2) I can know (be certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver, only if I first know (am certain) that (P) whatever I clearly and distinct perceive is true (p. 55)

-In dilemma form: What is the initial status of Descartes’s clear and distinct intuitions: ☺ or ☹ ?

Tying together the problem of the Circle and the problem with interpreting the scope of the skepticism of Meditation One as being universal: There’s a general ***apparent problem of uncertain starting points***. The Circle can be a problem even if the scope of the skepticism isn’t universal, so long as some of Descartes’s needed starting points fall within the scope of his initial skepticism. But if the scope of the initial skepticism is universal, then Descartes’s needed starting points definitely do fall within the scope of that initial skepticism.

How We Will Proceed: Identify Descartes’s starting points (the premises Descartes is willing to help himself to without argument: we can call these “clear and distinct intuitions”: those things Descartes thinks he can c&dp to be true immediately—without basing them on other beliefs), look at his arguments leading to the “Rule of Truth,” then return to the problem of the Circle.

Descartes’s starting points seem to be limited to two classes of truths: self-evident metaphysically necessary truths and truths about his own states of consciousness that are self-evident to him. These are the starting points of “Classical Foundationalism.” (Note that perceptual beliefs about the external world are excluded.)

Next time, we will see how Descartes seeks to show various things from that meager starting point – including how he seeks to show that there is an external world, after all. It turns out, Descartes thinks he needs to prove the existence of a perfectly good God to do show that, too. This prompted one of my favorite quips ever in philosophy, from one of our authors, David Hume: “To have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit.”