

Descartes: The Cartesian Circle

First, Briefly Revisiting the Status of 2Qs: The Gulf: “One of the great scandals of contemporary thought, in Berkeley’s eyes, was the gulf it set between the way physical objects appear to us through our sense perception and the way they are in themselves. This gulf was marked by a distinction [between primary and secondary qualities] that is closely associated with the “scientific revolution” of the seventeenth century” (Adams, p. 12.1)

	How we pre-reflectively think about the world wrt 2Qs	Are our judgments/claims about bodies having 2Qs often true?	What the world is like wrt 2Qs
Descartes eliminativism	we think of bodies as resembling the qualities immediately present to our minds	No	“agreed that there is nothing in bodies resembling the qualities immediately present to our minds in the perceptions of 2qs” (Adams p. xv.5) – no “real qualities”
Locke (unhappy) reductivism	agree	Yes	agree
Reid Happy reductivism	Disagree!*	Yes	also agree

*Reid held that we never thought of bodies as resembling our sensory ideas of them. Our thoughts that bodies have various 2Qs was always just a matter of our thinking they have some properties or other in virtue of which they cause us to have certain kinds of sensations. By identifying those properties, science fills in a gap in ordinary thought without conflicting with ordinary thought: No Gulf!

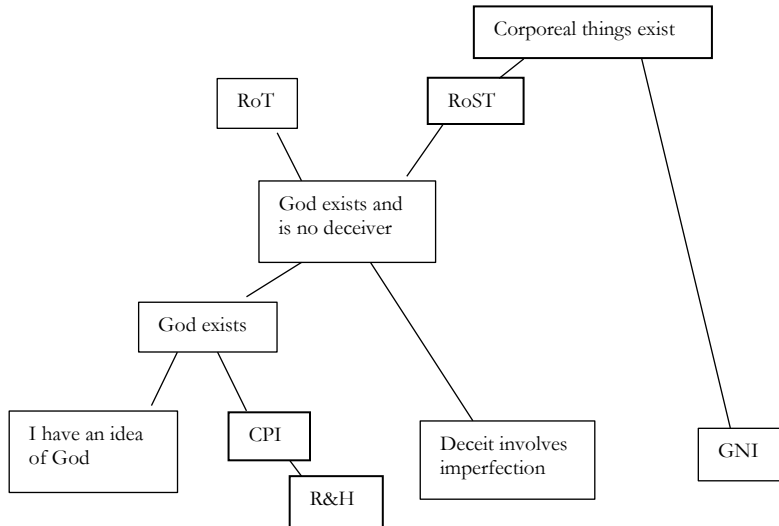
In general, I think the more unhappy views (those that posit a more serious gulf, so toward the top of our table) are more plausible for colors than they are for other secondary qualities, like, e.g., heat

Also, a few words about the “Painter Analogy” wrangling (AT 19.7-20.9) that we skipped over on 1/19:

The scope of the dream argument itself is fairly clear: it’s a skeptical argument aimed at something like our basic perceptual beliefs, e.g., I am seated by a fire. Using the words of the second paragraph of the Meditations (at AT 18.5), what isn’t clear is whether those basic perceptual judgments are the “foundation” of our very general thoughts about whether there is an external physical world and what kinds of properties it might have, such that “undermining” those basic perceptual judgments “will cause” those general thoughts “to fall down.” I think the anti-skeptic within Descartes is thinking that he doesn’t need to rely on the truth of those perceptual judgments in clinging to those general thoughts about there being an external world. Rather, just the fact that he makes those judgments at all (whether they’re true or false on any given occasion) might be best explained by those general thoughts about the external world: “Because I might be dreaming, I’m always liable to be going wrong about the particulars of how the world is configured and my current place within it, but to make sense of my having these

particular thoughts at all, we must suppose that I am at least sometimes experiencing an external world with certain properties (the “true colors”), to explain how I might be able to construct dreams.”

Descartes’s Proof of “the Rule of Truth”: Here is a chart of some of the highlights of the argumentative structure of the Meditations, so you can see how Descartes’s proof of his rule of truth (RoT)—that what he clearly and distinctly perceives is true—fits in to his overall scheme.



What we want to make sense of is how Descartes thinks that reaching his Rule of Truth – that his C&DPs are true – as a conclusion can help to remove the “very tenuous and so to speak metaphysical” doubt that his C&DPs, given that his argument is ultimately based on C&DPs.

Van Cleve’s Solution

-based on a distinction Van Cleve (following work by Anthony Kenny) draws between two readings of “I am certain of the truth of my clear and distinct perceptions”:

- (A) For all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then I am certain that p.
- (B) I am certain that (for all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then p).

The difference is that (A) says that whenever I clearly and distinctly perceive any proposition, I will be certain of it (the proposition in question), whereas (B) says that I am certain of a general principle connecting clear and distinct perception with truth.

(“Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,” pp. 66-67)

-This has potential to address Arnauld’s formulation of the problem (1/19 handout): Note how Arnauld’s statement includes “we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true” and “sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true”: just the kind of statements the distinction can disambiguate.

-More importantly, Van Cleve claims that this distinction

enables us to make sense of...the notorious fourth paragraph in the Third Meditation, where Descartes appears to oscillate inconsistently between saying, on the one hand, God or no God, I am certain of things when I clearly and distinctly perceive them, and, on the other hand, I can doubt even the truth of clear and distinct perceptions if I do not know that there is a veracious God. The appearance of consistency is removed if we see Descartes as being uncertain not of particular propositions that he clearly and distinctly perceives, but only of the general connection between clear and distinct perception and

truth. What he shows us in the paragraph is that at this stage in the Meditations (A) is true of him but (B) is not. (p. 67)

-On Van Cleve's solution, Descartes's particular C&DP's are never in any way doubted (only the general principle connecting C&DP with truth is doubted). Thus, Descartes's C&DI's are available for legitimate use as the starting points for Descartes's building project.

-Recall (from last handout) that on Van Cleve's formulation of the circle, it is the problem that Descartes appeared to commit himself to each of the following propositions:

(1G) 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

(2G) 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 distinctly perceive is true

Van Cleve's solution breaks this circle by having Descartes deny

-Note that we can tweak Van Cleve's formulation of the problem so that it refers to Descartes's particular C&DP's rather than the general principle, yielding:

(1P) I can know (be certain) that my particular clear and distinct perceptions are true, only if I first know (am certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver

(2P) I can know (be certain) that (Q) God exists and is not a deceiver, only if I first know (am certain) that my particular clear and distinct perceptions are true

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-First Potential Problem: Epistemic Circularity. Van Cleve's solution faces two major potential problems, but I think the first isn't a real problem for interpreting Descartes Van Cleve's way. It's that the argument Van Cleve attributes to Descartes is still in a way "circular." It is what (the 20th century epistemologist) William Alston calls an "epistemically circular" argument.

-But: a) That Descartes's key argument (for his Rule of Truth) is epistemically circular is just unavoidable. He clearly uses such an argument. But b1) It isn't clear that "epistemically circular" arguments are fallacious in a way that means they can't articulate good reasons for accepting their conclusions—it isn't clear that such arguments are "viciously" circular, as it's sometimes put; b2) epistemically circular arguments are clearly not so clearly useless as are arguments that are circular in the ways looked at on last meeting's handout. In light of all this, I don't think it's a good objection to Van Cleve that he attributes to Descartes an epistemically circular argument. Really, any credible reading of the Meditations must do so.

-To illustrate epistemic circularity, consider this "track record" argument:

1. On occasion O₁, my ESP led me to believe that P₁, and P₁ was true

2. On occasion O₂, my ESP led me to believe that P₂, and P₂ was true

...

n. On occasion O_n, my ESP led me to believe that P_n, and P_n was true

...

C. My ESP is reliable

-If the "and P was true" part of the key premises comes from my ESP, this is an "epistemically circular" argument: i.e., **an argument whose conclusion is a statement about the reliability of a faculty or way of forming beliefs, and some of whose premises are beliefs one's access to comes through the faculty or way of forming beliefs in question.**

-Are epistemically circular arguments worthless? The philosopher who named them, William P. Alston, in the paper in which he named them, "Epistemic Circularity" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1986), argued that they can be good (they can represent lines of reasoning by which one can improve one's position on the argument's conclusion). Below is my presentation of the state of issue, in light of Alston's case, in a paper in which I ascribe

epistemically circular reasoning to Descartes, and so am concerned to argue that this may not be so bad:

E. *Epistemic Circularity*. Question: But what kind of “proof” could this be? Even if Descartes could successfully argue from clear and distinct perceptions that his faculty of clear and distinct perception is reliable,¹⁵ wouldn’t this argument “beg the question”?

Answer: This is what William Alston has called an epistemically circular argument (see Alston, 1986). But this is just to give a label to a type of argument for the reliability of a way of forming beliefs that takes as its premises the deliverances of that very way of forming beliefs. What is of real interest is that it is not at all clear that such an argument is powerless to improve one’s epistemic position vis-à-vis its conclusion. Alston, in fact, argues that one can use an epistemically circular argument to *justify* one’s belief in its conclusion (pp. 11–14) and that one could use such an argument to successfully *show* or *establish* its conclusion (p. 15).

While Alston’s arguments are plausible, these results (especially the latter concerning showing or establishing) are at the same time questionable, I believe. Still, a brief discussion will suffice to show that it is *very far from clear* that Descartes’s epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes’s epistemic position vis-à-vis its conclusion.

First, recall the results of Part C above. Unlike the type of circularity described by Van Cleve (see the very beginning of Part A, above), I am not ascribing to Descartes a view according to which the following three mutually inconsistent claims hold for any two propositions *p* and *q* and any single epistemic status *J*:

1. My belief that *p* can have status *J* only if my belief that *q* first has status *J*.
2. My belief that *q* can have status *J* only if my belief that *p* first has status *J*.
3. My belief that *p* and/or my belief that *q* is of status *J*.

Claims (1) and (2) above set up a circularity between one’s belief in *p* and one’s belief in *q*. This circularity is *clearly* vicious: It obviously cuts one off from attaining status *J* for either belief. In contrast, on my interpretation, as I pointed out in Part C, where *p* and *q* are Van Cleve’s *P* and *Q*, then if *J* is clearly and distinctly perceiving, Descartes can deny (2), and if *J* is having *scientia*, he can deny both (1) and (2). Thus, the epistemic circularity I ascribe to Descartes is not so clearly vicious. His claims to having attained *scientia* do not generate any easily seen contradiction with any other commitments I ascribe to him.

Next, as Alston has pointed out (Alston, 1985, p. 449), we should remember that the use of a faculty could result in one’s coming to learn that the faculty is *unreliable*. Alternatively, it might issue no result

regarding its own reliability. In light of this, if Descartes were right that his faculty of clear and distinct perception is self-verifying (rather than self-undermining), this would by no means be an obviously worthless result. Such an epistemically circular verification may well be of some significant value.

It is worth noting that, as several people have pointed out to me, when a faculty and its resulting beliefs are otherwise highly suspect, an epistemically circular self-verification of the faculty seems to be of little to no value. (The reader is left to construct her own examples to show this.) It is when a faculty and its resulting beliefs are seen as *already* having something epistemically going for them prior to such self-verification that this process plausibly seems to bestow *further* epistemic virtue on them. As will become most evident in the next section, on my reading of him, Descartes *does* take his clear and distinct perceptions as having a good deal of epistemic merit even before his faculty of clear and distinct perceptions has verified itself.

-You’ll have to decide for yourself what you think here, but in the end I think that it’s plausible enough to suppose epistemic arguments can help that I feel OK about ascribing such an argument to Descartes—well, esp. since it’s hard to see how he could avoid this kind of circularity. (It’s hard enough to keep him away from *clearly* vicious circularity.)

-However, Descartes seems to want something like complete certainty, which would seem to require something like an absolute proof here, and it’s hard to see how an epistemically circular argument could provide all that: While epistemically circular arguments may improve one’s position wrt their conclusions, it’s hard to see them as providing a complete proof. (Though, just what does it take for an argument to constitute a “proof”? I’ll skip all that, and just go with my sense that an E.C. self-validation of a means of forming beliefs can’t constitute a real “proof”.) So, while I’d be comfortable in ascribing an epistemically circular argument to Descartes (as Van Cleve does – and as I end up doing, too), I would at the same time think we wouldn’t be giving Descartes all he wanted here.

-Second Potential Problem: Making Sense of Descartes’s expressions of doubt.

Van Cleve’s other apparent problem is very real. It’s that he can’t make sense of Descartes’s alarmingly sweeping statements of doubtfulness, including in the paragraph Van Cleve points to. When Descartes writes at the close of The Notorious M3-4 that without knowing that there is a non-deceiving God, he does not think that he can “be certain of **anything** else,” I don’t think

we can justify reading that “anything” in a way that it doesn’t include particular C&DPs, some of which he has just mentioned, but applies only to the general principle.

-The better way to make sense of this paragraph and other troublesome passages is by employing a **distinction** between **psychological** and **epistemic (or evaluative)** certainty. The first is a matter of being psychologically incapable of doubting something; the second is a matter of having no good reason for doubting something. These can come apart. In fact, not only can you have evaluative uncertainty where you have psychological certainty, but you can realize that you are evaluatively uncertain even as you remain psychologically certain: You can have even what you yourself recognize to be a good reason for doubting something (and thereby realize that the proposition in question is not an epistemically certain one for you), while finding yourself psychologically unable to doubt the matter for that, or for any other, reason (thereby realizing that this epistemically uncertain matter is nonetheless psychologically certain for you). My suggestion is to read Descartes’s apparent “oscillations” as him asserting, on the one hand, that the matters under discussion (things he c&dp’s, while he’s c&dp-ing them) are psychologically certain for him (he is incapable of doubting them), while admitting that, epistemically, they are not (yet) as certain as he would like (he still has a reason – though it is “a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one” – for doubting them). This seems to handle the texts better than does Van Cleve’s suggestion.

-Here’s the Notorious M3-4, bolding, not Descartes’s expressions of doubt, but of non-doubt (here using a different translation):

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt 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. But whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye. **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.** And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one. But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else. (AT 36)

-Suggestion: To make sense of this paragraph and other troublesome passages, I suggest employing a *distinction between psychological and epistemic (or evaluative) certainty*. The first is a matter of being psychologically incapable of doubting something; the second is a matter of having no good reason for doubting something. These can come apart. In fact, not only can you have evaluative uncertainty where you have psychological certainty, but you can realize that you are evaluatively uncertain even as remain psychologically certain: You can have even what you recognize to be a good reason for doubting something (and thereby realize that the proposition in question is not an epistemically certain one for you), while finding yourself psychologically unable to doubt the matter for that, or for any other, reason (thereby realizing that this epistemically uncertain matter is nonetheless psychologically certain for you). My suggestion is

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But how can we make sense of Descartes's procedure for verifying his Rule of Truth, even if we allow him to use an epistemically circular argument to do so, if we interpret him as holding that his particular C&DP's, on which his argument is based, are in the relevant (epistemic, as opposed to psychological) sense open to doubt?