

Descartes: The Cartesian Circle (cont'd)

Other solutions: there are other solutions to the Circle that are like Van Cleve's in that they seek to locate classes of beliefs that are completely exempt from doubt and that can thereby legitimately serve as Descartes's argumentative starting points, and these can build on some of things Descartes himself says when addressing the problem. Perhaps most notable is the memory solution (which Descartes seems to motion toward in the letter to Regius below), on which Descartes's C&DPs are (even before proving the Rule of Truth) not in any way doubtful when they are being C&DP'd, but can be doubted in memory, and so the doubt that attaches to them then that is being removed. split verdict solution, on which the relevant truths of consciousness are never doubted, but the self-evident necessary truths, like $2+3=5$, are doubted, and it's this doubt that Descartes seeks to remove.

-The third (dilemma) form of the problem of the Circle and two-level solutions

The Circle: A Suggested Two-Level Solution

-Retains Van Cleve's account of how Descartes uses particular C&DP's to establish, as a C&DP, the general truth that *Whatever I C&DP is true*. (So, while we add the distinction between psychological and evaluative [un]certainty, we also retain the helpful distinction that Van Cleve took from Kenny.)

-But avoids VC's main problem by construing Descartes as aiming for a level of certainty stronger than that provided by mere C&DP. Descartes does think that C&DP-ing that p does put him in a very good epistemic position with respect to p (as well as giving him psychological certainty of it), but, evaluatively/epistemically, he wants still more...

-Descartes wants *scientia*, or perfect knowledge, which is attained only when the general principle connecting C&DP with truth is itself C&DP'd.

-Here is Descartes sounding very two-level-y, in the "Atheist Geometer" passage, from his Replies to the Second Set of Objections (Haldane & Ross translation):

That an atheist can know clearly that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, I do not deny, I merely affirm that, on the other hand, such knowledge on his part cannot constitute true science, because no knowledge that can be rendered doubtful should be called science. Since he is, as supposed, an Atheist, he cannot be sure that he is not deceived in the things that seem most evident to him, as has been sufficiently shown; and though perchance the doubt does not occur to him, nevertheless it may come up, if he examine the matter, or if another suggests it; he can never be safe from it unless he first recognizes the existence of a God.

-And here he is in a letter to Regius (24 May 1640):

In your second objection, you say that the truth of axioms which are clearly and distinctly conceived is self-evident. This too, I agree, is true, during the time they are clearly and distinctly conceived; because our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly and distinctly conceives. But because we often remember conclusions that we have derived from such premises without actually attending to the premises, I say that in such a case, if we lack knowledge of God, we can pretend that they are uncertain even though we remember that they were deduced from clear principles; because perhaps our nature is such that we go wrong even in the most evident matters. Consequently, even at the moment when we deduced them from those principles, we did not have scientific knowledge (*scientia*) of them, but only a conviction (*persuasio*) of

them. I distinguish the two as follows: there is conviction when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but scientific knowledge is conviction based on an argument so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger argument. Nobody can have the latter unless he also has knowledge of God. But a man who has once understood the arguments which prove that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided that he remembers the conclusion 'God is no deceiver', whether or not he continues to attend to the arguments for it, will continue to possess not only the conviction, but real scientific knowledge of this and all other conclusions whose premises he remembers he once clearly perceived.

-Proposal: We make sense of Descartes's procedure if we understand his goal, *scientia*, along these lines:

S has *scientia* of p if and only if (1) S clearly and distinctly perceives that p is true and (2) S clearly and distinctly perceives the truth of the general principle that what S clearly and distinctly perceives is true. (DeRose, "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and *Scientia*," *Pacific Phil. Quart.*, 1992, p. 224)

-Comparison with the "memory solution," on which Descartes thought that C&DPs are only in any way doubtful when one considers them while not currently being in a state of C&DP-ing them. From my perspective, this is to miss how Descartes's key statements of indubitability report psychological certainty. On my reading, one's C&DPs are in an important sense uncertain even when one is having them. In fact, this is the very uncertainty Descartes is seeking to remove. As one can perhaps even recognize at the time, these beliefs are subject to doubt even when one is psychologically incapable of doubting them.

-Main Question: Is having *scientia* of p, so understood, really epistemically better (more certain) than is merely having C&DP of p? To answer, we should think mostly about different kinds of reasons for doubt.

--undercutting (as opposed to opposing) reasons for doubt and D's supposed advantage over the atheist geometer.

-If we suppose that epistemically circular arguments can improve one's position with respect to their conclusions, which Descartes also needs on Van Cleve's solution, and which he seems to just need on any credible interpretation, this seems (well, to me—no surprise, I suppose) a more attractive reading, since it makes sense that improving one's position wrt to the epistemic principle that underwrites a belief helps to shore up that belief. Plus, with this solution, we can make sense of Descartes's expression of doubts about his particular C&DPs.

-As I've admitted, making this all depend on an epistemically circular argument seems at odds with Descartes's apparent search for complete certainty. While we can make sense of what he's doing in the Meditations (protecting his C&DPs from some forms of skepticism by improving his position wrt to the epistemic principle behind them, and thereby shoring up those C&DPs themselves), we seem not to be giving him the kind of complete certainty he sought.

So I close with a passage in which Descartes seems at spots (perhaps a bit uncharacteristically) ready to settle for something less, for getting just "everything we could reasonably want" (though he does kind of ruin it at the end with that bit about "most perfect certainty"). From the Second Set of Replies:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. 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, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. 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? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. (AT 7:144–45)

Normal belief in bodies characterized 8th-9th par. of M3, AT 38.3-39.1

-a belief that there are “things existing outside me” which resemble my [sensory] ideas, and from which those ideas derive 38.3. The thing “is sending its likeness...into me” (38.7). I think this is not just the thought that the outside thing is like what we take it to be like, but that we think of it as being a certain way by means of supposing the thing resembles something we find within us (our idea): Here Descartes is construing our natural thought about bodies as aligning with the Aristotelian/Scholastic theory of perception (see Adams’s description).

-our thinking of the external object seems to go through our thinking of the idea(s) it supposedly produces: we seem to think of it as something which produced these and those ideas, and is in ways like them

-Descartes is out to vindicate belief in the existence of “corporeal objects,” but he is out to jettison that important aspect of ordinary/Aristotelian thought about what these objects are like.

-believed to exist through a “spontaneous impulse” (38.8) / “natural impulse” (39.0): We are “taught by nature” (38.5) that they exist. We do not see by the “light of nature” that they exist (38.8). Descartes writes that these are “very different things” (38.8). We do not C&DP that bodies exist.

-the ideas of bodies come to us in a way that does not depend on our will (38.5). We have “a great inclination to believe that these [sensory] ideas issue from corporeal things” (80.0—here we go to a M6 characterization); however, (Descartes’s belief voluntarism:) Descartes thinks one can refrain from believing in the bodies themselves.

Normal belief in bodies – evaluated 9th-12th par. of M3, 26.8-28.1

-Natural impulses, unlike what we see by the light of nature, are dubious, and have led Descartes astray in the past (27.1)

-That my sensations come to me independently of my will doesn’t prove that they come from “things existing outside of me” (27.2)

-and doesn’t prove that the things that caused them resemble them

-So, we need a proof of “corporeal things”...

(and not just in the way we need a backing argument for our c&dp’s: in the case of corporeal things, we don’t even c&dp that they exist yet)

A Conservative Response:

-“conservative”: will be mysterious for now. But the non-note text that I quote on the other side of this page should give some idea of what epistemic conservatism amounts to. I consider Reid to be something of the intellectual forbearer of modern epistemic conservatism

-I guess I have no quarrel with Descartes’s characterization of our beliefs in bodies being based on “natural instinct”. My complaint is actually his contrast of that with what he thinks are the better bases for other beliefs

My long note, having it out with Descartes, at long last: n. 30, on the bottoms of pp. 237-238 of my book, *The Appearance of Ignorance*. First, the sentence in the text that the note attaches to is:

My conservatism, at least, runs very deep: The basic conservative story of how epistemic justification is generated for our perceptual beliefs is also the basic story of how we come to be justified in believing the likes of $2 + 3 = 5$. In both cases, we are justified in thinking that things are as they seem to us to be (absent good reason to think otherwise).³⁰

The note itself:

30. Here I take myself to be departing from the deeply anti-conservative attitude I find most emblematically expressed in the (disastrous in its implications) ninth paragraph of the Third Meditation, where Descartes distinguishes between “natural impulses” to belief and being able to intellectually “see” the truth of something by “the natural light.” Descartes is examining his long-standing belief in “things existing outside [him]” (Descartes 1996: 26) or “external objects” (Descartes 1971: 79), and has, in the previous paragraph, given this account of how this belief arose: “Nature has apparently taught me to think this” (1996: 26). Here is how Descartes draws the crucial distinction:

When I say “Nature taught me to think this,” all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on—cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. But as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters. (1996: 26–7)

His beliefs in external objects having fallen on the dark side of this crucial distinction, Descartes refuses to accept them, at least in his Meditations, unless and until they can be verified by things that are not just believed by “some blind impulse” (as he puts it in the twelfth paragraph), but that he can see to be true by the “natural light.” Much is going on here, and I won’t go into it all. But I should note that the “natural” belief that Descartes is speaking of here is not just that there are external (in some suitable sense) objects, but also that they in some seemingly murky and problematic way resemble his “ideas” of them: “But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking they resemble those things? Nature has apparently taught me to think this.” Here, Descartes may well be saddling our “natural belief” with some extra baggage it doesn’t actually carry, though issues of interpretation are tricky—not to mention issues about the actual nature of our relevant thoughts! And (especially for those of us with a history of actual error in matters of math and logic) much needs to be hashed out about how Descartes manages to individuate “faculties” so that believing what one sees to be true by the “natural light” presumably ends up with a pristine track record, as compared with the apparently very sorry record of following mere natural impulses to belief. But at the end of the day, the conservative, like me, thinks that Descartes is just fooling himself here: There is no great difference of the type Descartes thinks he has found. Ultimately, we are just going by how things seem to us. When appearances are in conflict, we give some up in favor of others, often with the aid of explanations of how and when we are apt to go wrong, and if all goes well (as it often enough does) we may in that way come to learn that some types of natural impulses tend to misfire. And on the other side, some of these would-be beliefs we find ourselves impelled toward fit together well with another, and survive and are bolstered by our best attempts to tidy up our view of the world, perhaps to the extent that we might start to think of them as having some altogether different and higher status than something that could just result from our best attempt to best manage appearances. But that way by which we come to “see” things to be true is in reality to arrive at a view of the world that is built on a suitably refined way of following our natural impulses toward belief, not to reach outside of what is indicated by our natural impulses and instead rely on a totally different (and pristinely trustworthy) source, as it seems that Descartes’ “natural light” is supposed to be.