

1 A proposal for achieving the strong validation of reason

Descartes' *Meditations* presents a student of the text with a number of difficult problems. The most fundamental of these is the problem of defining the project that Descartes is undertaking. There are a variety of ways of understanding Descartes' goals; our view of those goals will determine our approach to the other issues raised by the text. While this problem has been the subject of much debate, there is consensus about one approach to Descartes' project. It is widely agreed that his project is doomed to circularity, or even absurdity, if we give his own skeptical doubts their strongest force and also see him as attempting to achieve the "strong validation of reason."¹

The strong validation requires Descartes to establish three guarantees. First, he must prove that his clear and distinct perceptions correspond to the reality that God has created. Second, he must prove that his logical inferences are valid. Finally, he must establish that these perceptions and inferences are true not only at the moment that they are being perceived, but also remain true over time. Commentators have rejected the possibility of providing this validation while also giving Descartes' skeptical doubts their strongest force. This project requires Descartes to doubt the reliability of the best use of his reason in each of his clear and distinct perceptions and logical inferences. Once he does so, it is difficult to see how he can, without circular reasoning, achieve the proof of God's existence and non-deception that must provide the three guarantees which he needs.²

Although many of Descartes' statements indicate that he was attempting this project,³ commentators have overwhelmingly insisted that Descartes must

¹ Hatfield (2003), 178–80, introduced this term.

² For example, Nakhnikian (1967), 253–4, calls this reading of Descartes' project his "aberrant view," and insists that it can only entail absurdity: "such doubts are radically self-stultifying. A man cannot philosophize without reasoning, and he cannot reason if he doubts even the simplest analytic propositions . . . Descartes ought to have disowned the aberrant view not only to avoid circularity in his own system but also to avoid utter absurdity." And Cottingham (1986), 42, sees the project of validating reason "from the bottom up" as a "wildly impossible" one.

³ I will indicate these as we proceed. I will also consider the passages that have been appealed to as evidence that Descartes was not attempting a strong validation – particularly the much-quoted passage in the *Second Set of Replies* (AT VII, 144–5; CSM II, 103) which has been dubbed by

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have seen its impossibility. As a result, most analyses of Descartes' response to skepticism have limited either Descartes' doubts or his epistemological goal. Some approaches limit Descartes' doubts by exempting a number of clear and distinct perceptions from the need for validation, making it possible for him to use those perceptions in a non-circular proof of God's existence.⁴ Other analyses claim that Descartes' goal is not to show that his clear and distinct perceptions are true, but to establish stability in his beliefs or the internal consistency of reason.⁵ Although a variety of such less demanding projects have been proposed, no analysis of the *Meditations* has provided thoroughgoing clarification and consistency to Descartes' texts.⁶

I propose that Descartes' goal is to establish the three guarantees I have described while insisting on the strongest force of his own doubts in *Meditations* I and III.⁷ This is the project that I will call his strong validation of reason. It requires, primarily, that we take Descartes' doubts at the start of *Meditation* III to be questioning the truth of all his clear and distinct perceptions and logical inferences, including the *Meditation* II certainties about his own essence and existence. To follow out his project, this is the force we must give to Descartes' claim that, without the knowledge of a non-deceiving God's existence, "it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else."⁸ I will show that if we pursue Descartes' attempt to validate reason while insisting on this full force of his doubts, we can achieve a more thoroughgoing clarification of his texts than has previously been provided.

The central obstacle to the strong validation project is the problem of the Cartesian Circle. My initial proposal is that this apparent obstacle can point us to the way in which the strong validation can be achieved.

Hatfield (2006), 134, the "limited aims passage." I will show that my reading can explain these passages better than other analyses. Throughout, the abbreviation AT refers to Descartes (1964), CSM refers to Descartes (1984–85) and CSMK refers to Descartes (1991).

⁴ For example: Kenny (1968), 193–5; Broughton (2002), especially 175–86; Carriero (2009), especially 337–58.

⁵ For example: Gewirth (1941), Frankfurt (1970), especially 170–80; Bennett (1990). I agree with the claim by Hatfield (2003), 174: "Assuming, as seems reasonable, that Descartes was seeking metaphysical truths, the 'certainty, not truth' approach neither accords with his intent nor reveals what he would need to achieve his goal."

⁶ The *Meditations* is the central text at issue, but we must surely also consider the *Objections and Replies*, the *Conversation with Burman*, the *Principles of Philosophy*, the *Discourse on the Method* and Descartes' letters.

⁷ I will spell out the details of the *Meditation* I doubts in Chapter 3 and of the *Meditation* III doubts in Chapter 5.

⁸ AT VII, 36; CSM II, 25. In the *Second Set of Objections*, Mersenne asks Descartes directly whether he can know he is a thinking thing at the beginning of *Meditation* III, before he has proven God's existence (AT VII, 124–5; CSM II, 89). A full understanding Descartes' answer (AT VII, 140–1; CSM II, 100) requires a consideration of the conclusion of his validation project in *Meditation* V. I will show in Chapter 7 that his response falls into line with my reading of his doubts and his validation project.

1.1 A problem pointing to a solution

The doubts involved in the strong validation project raise the problem of the Cartesian Circle in its most difficult form. To understand the problem and to see how it can lead us to its own solution, we must first recognize the full impact of Descartes' doubts. Their force is best made clear by Descartes' doctrine of God's creation of the eternal truths.

Descartes held the view that, since God is omnipotent, He is not bound by any standards in His creative activity. Moreover, God's perfection entails that His understanding and His creative will are united. Thus, God cannot contemplate possibilities prior to creating them; rather, by thinking them He also creates them as real. As a result, Descartes' Creation Doctrine asserts that God could have created contradictions "true together": "God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and . . . he could have done the opposite."⁹ As commentators have now made clear, this view is central to Descartes' thinking about God.¹⁰ While he does not state this doctrine explicitly in the *Meditations*,¹¹ its skeptical force is reflected in his metaphysical doubt in Meditation III, when he suggests that God could have created us with faculties that lead us to go wrong even in our clearest thinking.¹² Since God's creative activity is not bound by the rational limits that restrict our thinking, the Creation Doctrine raises the possibility of a gap between our clear and distinct perceptions and the reality that God has created.

To carry out the strong validation project, the meditator must eliminate the possibility of this epistemological gap by proving that God did not create his faculties in this deceptive way. The difficulty of accomplishing this goal has led commentators to deny the possibility of the project. One commentator has referred to the gap opened by the Creation Doctrine as a "bifurcation" between God's viewpoint and our own and has said, "not only is it the case that the bifurcation . . . cannot be eliminated; it is quite difficult to see how Descartes could have thought – even for a moment – that it could be eliminated."¹³ The problem of the Cartesian Circle can help us see how that goal can be achieved.

In Meditation III, after raising doubt about the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes tells us that he will establish their truth by proving that God exists and is not a deceiver. Within this attempt, the problem of the

⁹ AT IV, 118; CSMK III, 235.

¹⁰ Most influential in this regard has been Marion (1981).

¹¹ He does state it in the *Sixth Set of Replies* (AT VII, 436; CSM II, 294).

¹² AT VII, 36; CSM II, 25.

¹³ Carriero (1990), 110. As Carriero acknowledges, Margaret Wilson (1978), 127, first described the impact of Descartes' Creation Doctrine in terms of this "bifurcation."

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Cartesian Circle poses three challenges.¹⁴ First, Descartes' proof will involve circular reasoning if it is a deductive demonstration that assumes the truth of the clear and distinct perceptions he uses as premises. Nor can Descartes assume the truth of any clearly and distinctly perceived steps of logical inference in his deductive proof.

Second, Descartes' argument will be circular if he establishes his conclusion by simply achieving a clear and distinct perception of God's existence. Arnauld made this challenge clear in his objections to the *Meditations*:

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. (AT VII, 214; CSM II, 150)

The final challenge of circularity arises from Descartes' claims in a letter to Regius. He explains that his demonstration of God's existence will eliminate the need to attend to the reasons that led to this result and to all of his other conclusions:

a man who has once clearly understood the reasons which convince us that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided he remembers the conclusion 'God is no deceiver' whether or not he continues to attend to the reasons for it, will continue to possess not only the conviction, but real knowledge of this and all other conclusions the reasons for which he remembers he once clearly perceived. (AT III, 65; CSMK III, 147)

Descartes' claims appear to commit him to circular reasoning because he can achieve the results he describes here only if the premises and reasoning used in his proof of God's existence are guaranteed to be true. In that case, he will know that his conclusion is true and he will not need to repeat his demonstration; and only in that case can his demonstration ground the truth of the other conclusions that he can demonstrate.¹⁵ But if Descartes' Meditation III doubts question his premises and reasoning, as the strong validation project requires, his demonstration can convince him that God exists only so long as he attends to it and is compelled to assent to its conclusion. Once his attention ends, he will

¹⁴ In this initial account, I am focusing on the circularity issue that arises in Meditation III. Some commentators suggest that we also find circular reasoning in Meditations IV and V. I will consider those other challenges as I proceed.

¹⁵ Scribano (2004), 11, has posed the circularity problem in this way by asking, "can a deduction, which demonstrates the existence of God, validate the body of deductions that constitute science?" She suggests that Descartes understood the problem of the circularity of his project: "Descartes himself perfectly and consciously took on the risk of such a circularity, in defending the possibility of a knowledge of God, and therefore of the foundations of science, at the very heart of finite science, within the limits and according to the demands which are hers." My analysis explains how Descartes resolves this problem.

have neither the conviction nor the “real knowledge” that Descartes describes to Regius. Thus, Descartes’ claims suggest that his demonstration of God’s existence does involve circular reasoning. They appear to be assuming the truth of the premises and steps of reasoning used in a proof whose conclusion is needed to establish their truth.

These challenges show decisively that the strong validation project must involve circular reasoning if Descartes attempts to prove God’s existence through a deductive demonstration that relies on the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions. I propose, however, that this result does not show that the project is impossible. Rather, it directs us away from understanding Descartes’ proof of God’s existence as a deductive argument. The problem of the Cartesian Circle challenges us to consider whether there is a different way in which the gap opened by the Creation Doctrine can be closed.

There is such a way. The meditator can close the gap by achieving an experience of the “God’s-eye point of view,” which shows him that his clear and distinct perceptions correspond to the reality that God has created. I propose that Descartes provides his strong validation of reason in precisely this way. I will argue that his decisive proof of God’s existence in Meditation III is not achieved through a deductive argument, but by leading the meditator to an experience in which he recognizes that his activity of clearly and distinctly perceiving God is a participation in God’s activity of thinking Himself.¹⁶

This experience will prove God’s existence without circularity since the meditator does not have to assume that the premises he uses to achieve the experience are true. Rather, Descartes can use the assent-compelling nature of those clear and distinct perceptions to move the meditator to the experience. And, as I will show, the experience itself will validate the meditator’s clear and distinct perceptions of God’s existence and non-deception. Thus, the meditator does not assume the truth of any clear and distinct perceptions prior to proving God’s existence. Rather, his experience provides the ground for validating them all.

I will show that this experience is achieved in the final stage of Meditation III, in what has traditionally been called Descartes’ “second proof” of God’s existence. In that proof, Descartes first leads the meditator to the idea of God as an infinite being. He then directs the meditator to form the clear and distinct idea of God, which contains only the perfections of God that he can fully grasp. By attending to both of these ideas simultaneously, the meditator will recognize that he has received his clear and distinct idea from God and will experience his limited perception of God to be a participation in God’s activity

¹⁶ I will clarify Descartes’ view of “participation” and its historical background in Section 1.2 and I will clarify the contrast between “experience” and “reason” in Chapter 2.

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of knowing Himself. These discoveries are what “experience tells us” in the “contemplation of God” which concludes Meditation III:

I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in this (*hac*) contemplation of the divine majesty,¹⁷ so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life. (AT VII; 52; CSM II, 36 (amended)¹⁸)

I will argue that the joy of this contemplation is provided by the meditator's participation in God's activity. Faith assures him that “the next life” will offer him an even greater happiness, provided by the more perfect and complete participation he will attain.

In Chapters 3 through 5, I will explicate in detail the steps through which Descartes leads the meditator to this experience. In Chapters 6 and 7, I will explain how Meditations IV and V draw out from this experience the cognitions needed to complete the validation project. At this point, we must see more fully how my proposals regarding Descartes' proof enable him to resolve the three aspects of the problem of circularity in a way that is supported by the text of Meditation III.

The first aspect of the problem is that Descartes' proof of God's existence will involve circular reasoning if it is a deductive demonstration using clearly and distinctly perceived premises or steps of inference. I have proposed that Descartes' proof is not a deductive demonstration. But the text of Meditation III clearly indicates that Descartes does provide such a demonstration, in what has been called his “first proof” of God's existence. This proof uses clearly and distinctly perceived premises regarding formal realities and the objective realities of ideas to conclude that God must exist as the cause of the meditator's idea of Him. To see how my proposal fits the text, we need a preliminary look at my view of Descartes' method of demonstration.

On my reading, Descartes employs an experiential method of demonstration in Meditations I through V. The text of each meditation directs the meditator to this method, since each is divided into three stages. The first stage indicates the goal that is to be achieved. The second stage provides a logical and conceptual analysis of the issues that the meditator must consider. Then, in what I will call his “transition passage,” Descartes explains that his stage two analysis has not

¹⁷ CSM says, “the contemplation of the divine majesty,” but the Latin *hac* indicates my translation. This point is crucial for understanding Descartes' claims about the possibility of “intuitive knowledge” of God in his letter to Silhon. I offer an analysis of that letter in Chapter 5. This point is also central to my discussion of the contrast between Descartes' views on this issue and those of Aquinas and Suarez, in Section 1.3.

¹⁸ I will indicate throughout where I have amended the CSM and CSMK translations.

achieved the meditator's goal with the force that is required by the validation project.¹⁹

In the final stage of each meditation, Descartes leads the meditator to an experiential discovery that provides his goal. By imagining the idea of the demon in Meditation I, he experiences his ability to withhold his assent to all of his former beliefs. In Meditation II, the investigation of the wax brings him to the experience of his mind's power to clearly and distinctly perceive. In Meditation III, he achieves the perceptions of God that enable him to experience his participation in God's activity. And in Meditations IV and V, he achieves the additional experiences of participation in God's activity that are needed to complete the strong validation. The stage two analyses in each meditation are essential, since they enable the meditator to understand his stage three experiences. But only those experiences can provide his goals with the certainty required by the validation project.

We can now see how Meditation III overcomes the initial challenge of the Cartesian Circle. The first stage of Meditation III announces that the meditator's goal is to prove God's existence and non-deception in order to validate his clear and distinct perceptions. In the second stage, Descartes provides the meditator with a theory of ideas that conceptually explains the issues involved in proving God's existence. He proceeds to offer a deductive argument using clearly and distinctly perceived premises to derive the conclusions that God exists and is not a deceiver.

But, in his transition passage, Descartes indicates that his stage two demonstration does not suffice for the validation project. He does so by claiming that, although his reasoning has convinced him that God exists, when he relaxes his attention to the proof it becomes difficult "to remember why the idea of a being more perfect than myself must necessarily proceed from some being which is in reality more perfect."²⁰ This claim shows that the stage two demonstration has not achieved the goal of the validation project that Descartes described to Regius. That is, it has not eliminated the need to attend to the reasons that established his conclusion that God exists. If it had done so, Descartes would not be troubled by his inability to remember those reasons. And we can understand why the stage two demonstration has not achieved that goal.

¹⁹ In Meditation I, Descartes explains that, despite his stage two arguments, "My habitual opinions keep coming back" (AT VII, 22; CSM II, 15). In Meditation II, Descartes explains that stage two has left him with the belief that "corporeal things . . . are known with much more distinctness than this puzzling 'I' which cannot be pictured in the imagination" (AT VII, 29; CSM II, 20). As I will show in Chapter 4, this claim indicates that the meditator has not achieved a clear and distinct perception of his mind in stage two. I will consider the Meditation III transition passage below. And I will explicate the transition passages of Meditations IV and V in Chapters 6 and 7.

²⁰ AT VII, 47; CSM II, 32–3.

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Since the meditator's clear and distinct perceptions were put in doubt at the start of Meditation III, Descartes' deductive demonstration cannot establish the truth of its conclusion that God exists. The proof can provide the meditator with only psychological certainty about that conclusion. That is, when he completes his deduction and concludes that God exists, he will experience the compulsion to assent that accompanies his clear and distinct perceptions. But when he relaxes his attention, his assent will end. At that point, he can question whether he was deceived in his previous assent. The best he can do to remove this doubt is to go through his proof again and re-establish his assent to God's existence. But he cannot eliminate the need to attend to the proof, since this same doubt can arise in the future.

Thus, Descartes' transition passage forces the meditator to recognize that the stage two demonstration has not established God's existence with the degree of certainty required by the strong validation project. It also forces him to recognize that he will be guilty of circular reasoning if he claims that the proof has achieved that goal. Since any other deductive proof will be subject to the same criticism, the meditator must recognize that a different method of demonstration is needed. The experiential procedure which Descartes employed in Meditations I and II has prepared him to expect that the final stage of Meditation III will provide an experiential discovery of the existence of a non-deceiving God.

We can see, then, that the stage two deductive demonstration is essential to the meditator's progress in two ways. First, the theory of ideas which Descartes provides in that stage enables the meditator to understand the experience of participation to which Descartes will lead him in stage three. Second, the failure of the stage two proof shows the meditator that he must now achieve an experiential discovery of God's existence. Descartes will lead him to that discovery without relying on premises or logical inferences that are known to be true prior to achieving the experience. In this way, Descartes overcomes the first challenge of the Cartesian Circle.

The second challenge, raised by Arnauld, is that the meditator's discovery that God exists cannot simply be provided by a clear and distinct perception of that fact. If it is provided in that way, "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."²¹ My proposals respond to Arnauld's challenge by explaining how the stage three exercise validates, rather than presupposes, the truth of the meditator's clear and distinct perception of God's existence.²²

²¹ AT VII, 214; CSM II, 150.

²² A full explanation of Descartes' response to Arnauld (AT VII, 245–6; CSM II, 171) requires an account of the completed validation project. I will consider that response in Chapter 7.

On my view, the meditator does not establish God's existence by simply perceiving it clearly and distinctly. Rather, as I have suggested above, his discovery of God's existence proceeds in two steps. Descartes first leads him to the idea of God as an infinite being, in what has traditionally been seen as a "regress argument."²³ I will show that this idea provides the meditator with an experience of God's self-creative power moving his will. Although the meditator cannot clearly and distinctly grasp all the perfections contained in this idea of God, the self-creative power it contains shows him that God must exist.²⁴ Thus, the first part of Descartes' response to Arnauld's challenge is that the meditator discovers God's existence by experiencing His power.

Descartes also directs the meditator to recognize two features of God's power that will be crucial in the final steps of the proof. First, Descartes points out that God perceives Himself. In doing so, He possesses ideas of all the perfections that the meditator conceives to be in Him.²⁵ Second, Descartes indicates that God's power is characterized by the unity of His attributes.²⁶ In particular, God's intellect and creative will are united. Thus, when God perceives something He creates the reality corresponding to it.

In the next step of the exercise, Descartes leads the meditator to form the limited clear and distinct perception of God. This idea provides the meditator with an awareness of the perfections of God that he can fully grasp. And it also contains God's essence, that is, His self-creative power. Since this power is more perfect than that of the meditator, he cannot be the cause of the idea, as the stage two demonstration emphasized. To show the meditator experientially that God is the cause of this idea, Descartes directs him to perceive, at the same time, the two ideas of God that he has achieved. When he does so, he will experience the power contained in his idea of God as an infinite being to be the source of the power contained in his clear and distinct perception of God. And since God's intellect and will are united, the meditator will experience God's power providing an idea to his intellect and moving his will to a posture of assent. In this way, he will experience his activity of clearly and distinctly perceiving God to be a participation in God's more perfect activity of generating the idea of Himself.

This experience will validate the meditator's clear and distinct perception of God in the following way. Since God's power is creative and unified, His

²³ AT VII, 49–50; CSM II, 34.

²⁴ In Chapter 5, I will explain how this idea of God as an infinite being shows the meditator that he has broken out of the realm of his ideas, so he is sure that God exists. The explanation of this crucial point requires the account of Descartes' theory of ideas, which I will provide in that chapter.

²⁵ AT VII, 50; CSM II, 34.

²⁶ Descartes says, "the unity, the simplicity or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have" (AT VII, 50; CSM II, 34).

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will must create the reality corresponding to any idea He is perceiving. And since God is providing the meditator with the clear and distinct idea of Him, God must create the reality corresponding to this idea, which both He and the meditator are perceiving. Thus, the meditator's experience shows him that this limited idea of God represents a being that really exists. In this way, his experience validates his clear and distinct perception of God.

This view of the meditator's discoveries clarifies Descartes' explanation, in the final steps leading to the experience of participation, that God is not a deceiver since He "is subject to no defects whatsoever" and "all fraud and deception depend on some defect."²⁷ The non-deception that is crucial for the success of Descartes' proof concerns the meditator's compelled assent in his clear and distinct perception of God. If God's power possessed the defect of disunity, it could compel the meditator's assent in this clear and distinct perception without creating the reality corresponding to what he is perceiving. But God does not possess that defect; He must create what both He and the meditator are perceiving. Thus, the meditator knows that he is not being deceived by being compelled to assent to a false idea of God.

We see, then, that the unity of God's intellect and creative will plays the central role in validating the meditator's clear and distinct perception of God. We have also seen that this same unity is the ground of Descartes' Creation Doctrine and of the skeptical doubt it entails. That is, God's unity entails that God creates whatever He thinks, rather than choosing what to create based on the same rational limits that constrain the meditator's thinking. So we can see, in a preliminary way, that the ground of Descartes' doubt ultimately provides the resolution of that same doubt. In the context of the Meditation III experience of participation, the unity of God's faculties closes the gap opened by the Creation Doctrine with regard to the meditator's clear and distinct perception of God. When experienced further in Meditations IV and V, God's unity will guarantee the truth of all the meditator's clear and distinct perceptions.

Finally, we can see how the meditator's experience overcomes the third aspect of the problem of circularity. This final challenge demands that the proof of God's existence in Meditation III eliminates the need to attend to the reasons used in that proof and in all the other demonstrations of science. By experiencing God's self-creative and unified power, the meditator comes to know that God must exist and cannot be a deceiver, and he validates his clear and distinct perception of God. But the meditator is not only certain about these conclusions while he is having the experience. Rather, by providing knowledge of these conclusions, the experience eliminates the precise reasons for the metaphysical doubt about "matters which seemed most evident" which

²⁷ AT VII, 52; CSM II, 35. Descartes attributes the clarity of this perception to the "natural light." I will clarify the issues surrounding that notion in Chapter 5.