

## Descartes: The Circle

**The Problem of the Cartesian Circle:** 3 formulations on p. 3 of the 9/3 handout

**Van Cleve's Solution**, described at pp. 221-223 of KDR

-based on a distinction Van Cleve (following work by Anthony Kenny) draws between two readings of "I am certain of the truth of 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)

-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.

-Potential Problem: Epistemic circularity – discussed in sect. E, pp. 230-231 of KDR. An argument is epistemically circular if its conclusion is a statement about the reliability of a faculty or way of forming beliefs, and some of whose premises are beliefs one has only through the faculty or way of forming beliefs in question. Are epistemically circular arguments worthless?

-Main Problem: But does this do justice to the apparent expressions of doubt about C&DI's we looked at on 9/3 (see esp. the bottom of p. 2 of the 9/3 handout), including in that "notorious" fourth paragraph of Meditation Three? These passages sure look like they're calling particular C&DP's, and not just some general principle, into doubt.

-Let's look at that paragraph (in a different tr.; see p. 25 of our book); with some key bits highlighted:

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.

-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 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.

### **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 (for other 2-level solutions, see the quick description of the solutions of Feldman and of Gewirth toward the bottom of p. 231 of KDR), 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)

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

-still a problem (as with Van Cleve): Epistemic Circularity: sect. E (pp. 230-1) of my paper

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; *emph. added*)