

# Truth and Stability in Descartes's Meditations

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[From *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume 16 (1990), pp. 75–108. A somewhat improved version of the content of this article can be found in chapters 19–20 (vol. 1) of *Learning from Six Philosophers* (OUP 2003).

## 1. Introduction

The announced project of the *Meditations*, it is usually supposed, is to get rid of all error by rejecting everything that *might* be false, thus retaining only what is certainly true; the next step being to acquire further certainly true beliefs by valid inference from that foundation. This standard view cannot be wholly wrong, but listen to Descartes:

When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock or clay or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil. In the same way, I began by taking everything that was doubtful and throwing it out, like sand; and then, when I noticed that it is impossible to doubt that a doubting or thinking substance exists, I took this as the bedrock on which I could lay the foundations of my philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

The 'bedrock' metaphor is slightly off-centre if the topic is

truth, but it is perfect if the topic is stability, the achievement of beliefs that one won't later be forced to give up. Similarly, Descartes's finding it 'impossible to doubt' that P relates him to P psychologically; in logical space it is a neighbour of 'My belief that P is stable', not of 'P is true'.

The opening sentence of the *Meditations* starts by complaining about falsehood, but then moves straight on to stability:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. (AT 7.17)

The two could be elements in a single, cleanly conceived project, namely to establish a system of beliefs that will be true and therefore stable—perhaps with truth as the

<sup>1</sup> Seventh Replies at AT 7.536. I am using the translation in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham *et al* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), but my references will all be to pages in vol. 7 of the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes (AT 7.)

main goal as stability as an incidental benefit, perhaps with stability as the main goal and truth as a means to it. Either way, if Descartes is engaged in this double project, his immediate focus must be on truth.

Against this pleasingly harmonious picture, I shall argue that much of the *Meditations* does not fit into a truth project and suggests that Descartes has some concern with stability considered as standing on its own feet and not as an upshot of truth. Descartes does not interrelate his truth and stability projects in any controlled way, and seems not to be fully aware that he has both. But the stability project is there all right, running alongside the truth project and sometimes pushing it aside. At other times it ought to push it aside: Whenever the truth project comes to grief in a really spectacular manner, the trouble is lessened if we reinterpret the text so that it concerns stability instead. The latter is the lesser strand, but the better strand, in the *Meditations* treatment of scepticism.

This paper will defend these claims.

## 2. Factual and normative indubitability

The first Meditation is labelled ‘What Can Be Called Into Doubt’—compare what can be remembered, what can be lifted, and so on. That I cannot doubt that P is a fact about my abilities, like my inability to hold my breath for two minutes. Descartes does sometimes use this factual concept of indubitability, as I shall call it, e.g. in some of his uses of ‘certain’:

Some. . . perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true. That I exist so

long as I am thinking, or that what is done cannot be undone, and the like—of these we manifestly possess this kind of certainty.<sup>1</sup>

The first sentence involves factual indubitability, so perhaps the second does too. If so, then Descartes here treats certainty as a psychological phenomenon, as in locutions of the form ‘I am certain that P’. This is one of many passages where factual indubitability is at work, with or without the word ‘certain’.

There is a different sense of ‘indubitable’, ‘doubtful. and their kin, and of ‘certain’. To say that a proposition is doubtful may mean not that one does or can doubt it but rather that it is open to doubt—the reasons for it are weak or there are unrefuted reasons against it. To say that P is doubtful in this sense is to say, normatively, that it is not wrong to have some doubt about P. The corresponding use of ‘certain’ has the form ‘It is certain that P’ or ‘P is certain’. Descartes sometimes employs this normative concept, as in the clause ‘I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable’ (AT 7.18).

The factual question ‘Can he question whether P?’ is independent of the normative question ‘Ought he to—or is it reasonable for him to—question whether P?’ The two are not causally or logically connected.

They may be normatively connected, so to speak: If someone realizes that P is normatively certain or indubitable, ‘it is only reasonable that he should be unable to withhold his belief, because he has the best possible basis for assenting’.<sup>2</sup> Granted: but that connection won’t give Descartes what he needs if he is to get the two concepts properly disentangled from one another.

<sup>1</sup> Second Replies at AT 7.145f. Cottingham’s translation goes beyond the Latin in making Descartes say that we are certain of ‘these truths’ and express them with the phrase ‘the fact that’.

<sup>2</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1970), 164.

That he does tangle them is beyond dispute. In his *Conversation with Burman*, for example, he says that we can ‘prove that God exists’ only because we can, in advance of knowing that God exists, get ourselves into a condition where ‘we cannot be in any doubt about’ the premises of the proof.<sup>1</sup> This bases a normative claim on a factual one, unless Descartes means ‘cannot be in any doubt. in normative the sense of ‘ought not to be in any doubt’. If he does, he is quiet about it. Another such jumble occurs when Burman reports him thus:

He does use such axioms in the proof, but he knows that he is not deceived with regard to them, since he is actually paying attention to them. And for as long as he does pay attention to them, he is certain that he is not being deceived, and he is compelled to give his assent to them (CB 6)

Here we have ‘knows. sitting alongside ‘is certain. and ‘is compelled’; the first of these claims truth, while the other two report conviction.

Here is another passage where Descartes is not sensitive to the difference between the normative and factual concepts:

So long as [the mind] merely contemplates these ideas and does not affirm or deny the existence outside itself of anything resembling them, it cannot be mistaken. Next, it finds certain common notions from which it constructs various proofs; and, for as long as it attends to them, it is completely convinced of their truth. (*Principles* 1:13)

He does not mention the great gap between the normative ‘it cannot be mistaken’ and the psychological ‘it is completely convinced’, presumably because he has not noticed it. Sometimes, indeed, one cannot be sure which of the two concepts

is at work:

I thought it necessary to. . . reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable. (*Discourse on the Method* 4. AT 6.31).

The phrase ‘I could imagine the least doubt’ might go either way: it could mean ‘I could bring myself to have less than perfect confidence’ (factual) or ‘I could see a reason for doubting’ (normative). There is no decisive way of choosing.

The tangle also infects the secondary literature, but there is no space for details here.

### 3. The two concepts and the two projects

Let us consider how the two concepts of indubitability relate to the truth project.

For as long as P is factually indubitable by Descartes he will judge it to be true, because being unable to doubt P is being compelled to find it true. But he could not coherently announce his project like this:

I aim to have only true beliefs, achieving this by refusing to believe anything that I can refuse to believe, i.e. believing only what I cannot doubt.

When Descartes is embarking on his project and contemplating the prospect of finding that some of his beliefs are not doubtable by him, he should think that such an inability may be a sign of his limitations rather than of the truth of those beliefs. In short, someone in the throes of factual indubitability will talk truth and think truth, but everyone knows that factual indubitability does not guarantee truth.

John Etchemendy credits Descartes with bridging the gap thus:

<sup>1</sup> CB 81. That is, Descartes, *Conversation with Burman*, ed. John Cottingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976) piece no. 81 (pp. 49–50).

When we have ‘a conviction so strong that nothing can remove it’, we can be assured that the world conforms to our conception, at least to the extent that our conception is complete. If it did not so conform, then our conviction could easily be removed—simply through a brute encounter with the world.<sup>1</sup>

This empiricist suggestion is drastically unCartesian. Descartes if faced with it would say that if he could tell when he was having a brute encounter with the world most of his sceptical problem would evaporate. Etchemendy connects factual indubitability with truth in other ways too, writing that ‘Descartes feels his method produces a direct knowledge of truth’ (p. 28) and ‘assumes no false belief can survive his method of doubt’ (p. 29); but he does not explore, explain or defend that feeling or assumption.

Normative indubitability or certainty may be a sign of truth. It doesn’t look idiotic to say this:

I aim to have only true beliefs, achieving this by believing only what is supported by reasons and not opposed by reasons.

Still, we can challenge the assumption that whatever is not open to doubt is therefore true. Descartes says (AT 7.18) that ‘reason now persuades me’ that this is so, but he does not say what reasons reason gives. I do not deny, however, that in the pursuit of truth normative indubitability is a less broken reed than is the factual sort.

Now let us turn to stability—considered as a goal to be reached directly rather than through truth.

If P is supported by good reasons and not opposed by any, that guarantees its stability in my belief system just so long as I remain rational. Descartes would not balk at that proviso: his own durable rationality is for him an axiom,

and indeed a pragmatically defensible one—if you want a guarantee against becoming irrational you can whistle for it.

If P is factually indubitable by me, does that ensure that it has come to stay? Apparently not, for I might be unable to doubt it at one time and then, through some change in me, come to question or even reject it later. Descartes knows of one way for that to happen: At  $T_1$  I concentrate on P and cannot doubt it; at  $T_2$  I no longer focus directly on P, and then I can doubt it. He assumes, however, that if at  $T_3$  I do again focus hard upon P I shall again find it indubitable as I did at  $T_1$ . This assumption of constancy of intellectual character is like the assumption of continuing rationality.

The normative indubitability concept, therefore, looks the more promising of the two. It promises to link with the truth project as the factual one does not; and the two need about the same amount of help to link up with the stability project.

We might be encouraged by this to think that the normative concept is what Descartes is seriously employing, and that the odd intrusions of the other are negligible slips. But this would be wrong. Even the milder judgment that the factual concept is the junior partner, being less intensively present in the text than the normative one, is mistaken. A good many passages that seem to involve justification and reasons turn out on closer scrutiny to invite a reading in terms of factual indubitability. I shall present some examples.

#### 4. The prevalence of the factual

In the second paragraph of the work we find this

Reason now persuades me that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable. . . So, for the purpose of rejecting all

<sup>1</sup> John Etchemendy, ‘The Cartesian Circle: *Circulus ex tempore*’, *Studia Cartesiana* 2 (1981) 5–42, at 17.

my opinions, it will be enough if I find in each of them at least some reason for doubt. (AT 7.18)

The first sentence credits ‘reason’ with persuading Descartes (he doesn’t say how) of a certain normative judgment. But in what follows the work is done not by that normative judgment but by the fact that Descartes has been persuaded of it and will behave accordingly. This episode, in short, employs the normative concept only under the ‘I believe that...’ operator. Incidentally, Haldane and Ross have Descartes saying that reasons for doubt will ‘justify’ P, but the Latin speaks merely of what is ‘enough. for him to reject P’, leaving it open for this to be causal rather than logical or normative sufficiency.

That illustrates a general point: Descartes can mention reasons without being concerned with them in a normative way; he may instead be treating them merely as items one’s awareness of which will cause changes in one’s beliefs. He certainly does often treat reasons as causes or compellers of states of mind, as here: ‘No counter-argument can be adduced to make me doubt it’ (AT 7.70). In this, ‘make. renders *impellat*, which belongs to the language of causing or forcing. Of course a consideration won’t make me doubt unless I think that it has force or value as a reason: the causality of reasons works through my *reason*, as Descartes himself says. But it is a causality—it produces certain states of mind—so it is directly relevant to factual indubitability.

A normative attitude to reasons might seem to be suggested when Descartes remarks that

There is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. (AT 7.21)

But when Bourdin in the Seventh Objections says that ‘powerful and well thought-out reasons’ ought to meet standards that Descartes’s don’t, Descartes replies:

There may be reasons that are strong enough to compel [*cogendum*] us to doubt, even though these reasons are themselves doubtful, and hence are not to be retained later on. . . The reasons are strong so long as we have no others which produce certainty by removing the doubt. (AT 7.473f.

This roundly says that what counts is not the (normative) worth of the reason but merely its (factual) power to cause doubt. In the same vein, Descartes says at 7.36 that the hypothesis of a deceiving God is a ‘very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical’ reason for doubt, yet treats it seriously because it stands in the way of complete confidence. In these two places, as elsewhere, he is concerned with reasons, arguments, considerations, etc. in their role as causes, not as justifiers, of doubt or confidence.<sup>1</sup>

The causes of doubt or of confidence that Descartes entertains are all logical, rational, normative. The spread of doubt through his belief system is engendered by his recognition of reasons why this or that belief might be false. If I am right that he is seriously interested in causes of doubt *per se*, why he does he not consider ones other than the awareness of reasons?

Well, perhaps he thought that the latter is the most potent and corrosive cause of doubt. ‘Vanquish the sceptical reasons’, he may have thought, ‘and any other causes of doubt will be child’s play’. Or perhaps he thought that there is no way of defending oneself against other causes of doubt: ‘I defend where defence is possible’. I don’t much like either answer, and can suggest no other. Still, I do contend

<sup>1</sup> For good evidence that Descartes did not confine himself to doubts based on good reasons, see Jeffery Tlumak, ‘Certainty and Cartesian Method’, in Michael Hooker (ed.), *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 40–73, at 47f.

that Descartes was interested in causes of doubt generally. Suppose we confronted him with this nasty possibility:

There might be a cause that made you doubt the foundations of the intellectual edifice you hope to build and was not vanquished by your awareness of reasons for confidence and none against it. This would cause you to lack confidence while knowing that you were intellectually entitled to it.

Descartes, as I see him, would regard this as an alarming prospect, and would want to defend himself against it. If you agree, then you also agree that his concerns go beyond normative indubitability.

When we move from causes of doubt to causes of confidence, the picture changes. If I am sure of P because I accept Q which I think is a reason for it, I must be equally sure of Q (there is no analogue of this with reasons for doubt). It follows that either some of my confident beliefs do not rest upon reasons, or else I have no confident beliefs or an infinite regress of them. Whatever Descartes would say about this, in practice he embraces the first alternative: he eventually has a system of confident beliefs some of which are based, through reasoning, on others that are not based on reasons at all. The basic confident beliefs are ones that Descartes has because he *cannot* relinquish them or even call them into question. I shall now defend this claim.

### 5. Factual indubitability at work

There is a well-known question about how if at all Descartes is entitled to use logic in the second Meditation. I have enough to do without that, so I shall give him his modicum of logic in order to get on with considering how he uses it.

The premise on which the rest of the edifice is to be built is 'I think', for which Descartes does not argue at all. At the crucial argumentative turn he silently protects it by removing it from the picture and building it into the frame—I mean the frame of his defence of 'I exist' against the Deceiver hypothesis:

If I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case also I undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something (AT 7.25.)

This trades on the fact that the undermining hypothesis is that a *deceiver* is at work, that is, someone who brings it about that Descartes has false beliefs. The hypothesis is designed to leave standing, unchallenged, the premise that Descartes does have beliefs: the possibility that he confronts is not *Perhaps I do not exist* but rather *Perhaps I am wrong in thinking that I exist*, which takes 'I think' out of the arena in which the battle against scepticism is being waged.<sup>1</sup>

Descartes does not defend his use of *Cogito* as a premise, but could he do so? Curley thinks so: 'The premise of the *Cogito* argument can be represented as being supplied by the opposition, as being a necessary ingredient in any sceptical hypothesis which would provide a reasonable ground of doubt.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if Descartes is confronted by someone who says 'Has it occurred to you that you may be wrong in thinking that you have arms and legs?' this form of question puts *Cogito* into Descartes's hands. But it does not entitle him to use it. He is not playing a game or

<sup>1</sup> The difference between 'Perhaps not-P' and 'Perhaps I am wrong in thinking that P' is widely neglected in the secondary literature. A notable exception is Gareth B. Matthews, 'Descartes's *Cogito* and Katz's *Cogitations*', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 68 (1987) 197–204.

<sup>2</sup> Edwin M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Sceptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 93. See also 95.

fighting a battle, aiming to win under the prevailing rules and with the available weapons. Rather, he is one man sitting alone and trying to refound his belief system. The fact that some challenger hands him a premise is irrelevant to this endeavour, which is intellectual and solitary, not political and communal. Descartes thinks so too, judging from Burman's report on the introduction of the malignant demon: 'The author is here making us as doubtful as he can and casting into us as many doubts as possible. This is why he raises not only the customary difficulties of the sceptics but every difficulty that can possibly be raised.' (CB 2)

I offer a different account of the place of *Cogito* in Descartes's belief system. He helps himself to it because he cannot do otherwise. He accepts it as a premise not because he can justify it but because he cannot call it into question. His (factual) inability to doubt it is bedrock. This is the most striking but not the only example of the active role that factual indubitability plays in Descartes's handling of scepticism in the *Meditations*.

That role is also pivotal in Descartes's defence against the famous accusation that he argues in a circle, as I shall explain in sections 7, 9 and 10.

## 6. The truth rule

Early in the third Meditation Descartes says: 'I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that *whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true*' (AT 7.35). I shall later discuss the role of this truth rule in the over-all scheme of the *Meditations*—why Descartes accepts it, and other related matters. In this section I want only to exhibit a problem about what it means. The problem is to interpret the truth

rule so that it is neither obviously false nor trivially true.

Here is Descartes's only explanation of what 'clear' and 'distinct' mean:

I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear.<sup>1</sup>

A distinct idea, it seems, is one whose inner detail is all luminously present to the idea's owner; it enables the thinker to see all through and all around the mental content. So it bears every possible internal mark of freedom from confusion, conceptual opacity, muddle, or the like. (We can drop 'clear' because by definition whatever is distinct is clear.)

That makes the 'truth rule' false, because one can easily have a controlled, unmuddled, transparent apprehension of a false proposition. If the truth rule is to have the faintest chance of being true, it seems, it cannot be interpreted strictly in accordance with Descartes's explanation of 'distinct'; and this is so obviously right that one must suppose that that explanation doesn't express what Descartes means by 'distinct', or doesn't express all of what he means.

That is Williams's view too. He turns his back on the official explanation and supposes that what Descartes must mean by perceiving a propositional idea distinctly is *seeing it to be true*.<sup>2</sup> That, however, takes Descartes from falsehood into the trivial thesis that whatever you see to be true is true. Margaret Wilson, seeing the trap, defines distinctness as

<sup>1</sup> *Principles* 1:45. I reluctantly follow the custom of using 'clear' and 'distinct' to translate Descartes's words, though they are certainly incorrect. 'Vivid' and 'clear'—in that order—would be nearer the mark.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry* (London: Pelican Books, 1978), 183.

more than clarity of understanding yet less than seeing P to be true.<sup>1</sup> She suggests that to perceive P distinctly is to see the contradictoriness of not-P. That still does not solve the problem. It makes the ‘truth rule’ only a shade less trivial than Williams does, and it doesn’t fit Descartes’s paradigm example of something that is distinctly perceived, namely *I am a thinking thing*.

In section 9 below I shall present an interpretation of the truth rule that makes it neither trivial nor obviously false, that has textual support, and that makes respectable philosophical sense. In the meantime I don’t need an exact interpretation of the rule, but I did have to declare that there is a problem about what it means.

### 7. Why is there no circle? Two wrong answers

Although the truth rule is introduced early in the third Meditation, it is not seriously defended until the final paragraph of the fourth. That defence relies on a theology—God exists and is not a deceiver—which is supposed to have been proved earlier; Descartes seems to imply that our only assurance that whatever is perceived distinctly is true comes from our assurance that God is not a deceiver. A famous question arises:

**Rule Use:** In his ‘proof’ that God exists and is not a deceiver, does Descartes rely on the truth rule?

If the answer is Yes, then

**Circle Threat:** What is going on when he seems to say that the reliability of the rule depends on the existence and veracity of God?

The challenge is to find an answer to Circle Threat that will clear Descartes of the charge that he argues in a circle, reaching his theology with help from the truth rule and accepting that on the strength of the theology.

For much of this century English writers on Descartes usually answered Yes to Rule Use and gave ‘the memory answer’ to Circle Threat.<sup>2</sup> According to the memory answer, there is no circularity because God is invoked not to defend the truth rule but only to help us to apply it in some cases. The reliability of ‘If I ever distinctly perceive that P, then P’ is assured without theological support, but God comes to my aid at a time when I am not distinctly perceiving that P but I seem to recall having done so earlier: I want to know whether I can trust my memory about this, and Descartes says that I can if (but only if) I am assured that I am made by a non-deceiving God.

Nobody accepts this account now,<sup>3</sup> and it is puzzling that anyone ever did, as it has no textual support. In *Principles* 1:46 Descartes says that we are sometimes misled by our memories when we think we recall having perceived something distinctly. But this is about failures of memory

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Wilson, *Descartes* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 141f.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, A. K. Stout, ‘The Basis of Knowledge in Descartes’, *Mind* 38 (1929) 330–342, 458–472; reprinted with omissions in Willis Doney (ed.), *Descartes: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) 167–191; Willis Doney, ‘The Cartesian Circle’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16 (1955) 324–248; Bernard Williams, 191n, accuses himself of having ‘firmly expressed’ the memory answer on 351 of his ‘Descartes, René’ in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), but the accusation is false. Perhaps Williams had the memory answer in mind when writing that article, but he didn’t get it onto the page.

<sup>3</sup> The most influential presentation of the case against it seems to have been Harry Frankfurt, ‘Memory and the Cartesian Circle’, *Philosophical Review* 71 (1962) 504–511. It is also rejected in Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, 102–104; John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 77f; Williams, 191–198; Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), 187f; and in many other places.



that do occur, not about ones that don't because God is veracious; and the context is quite different from the scepticism discussion. In the crucial episode in the latter, namely the final paragraph of the fourth Meditation, Descartes says nothing about memory. (The word 'remember' occurs in the preceding paragraph, but not relevantly to our present issue.)

In something I shall call the Long Passage, Descartes juxtaposes memory with God and the truth rule, but not in a way that fits the memory answer:

Admittedly my nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot fix my mental vision continually on the same thing, so as to keep perceiving it clearly; and often the memory of a previously made judgment may come back, when I am no longer attending to the arguments which led me to make it. And so other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion, if I did not possess knowledge of God; and I should thus never have true and certain knowledge about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. For example, when I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am without knowledge of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be. This will seem even more likely

when I remember that there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false. (AT 7.69f)

There are clear signs here that memory is being trusted, and there's not a hint that it should not be. The attitude is: the previous judgment *was* made, the supporting arguments *were* employed, the mental apprehension *was* clear (distinct?), and so on.

In fact, Descartes was not much interested in memory and did not see it as the locus of a sceptical threat. Early in the second Meditation he writes 'I will believe that my memory tells me lies. . . ' but he does not follow through. His attitude to scepticism about memory is shown in his remark to Burman: 'I have nothing to say on the subject of memory. Everyone should test himself to see whether he is good at remembering. If he has any doubts, then he should make use of written notes and so forth to help him.' (CB 4)

Incidentally, since our memories do often deceive us the friends of the 'memory answer' need to draw and defend a line between memories that are validated by theology and ones that aren't. They have never done this.

Also, the memory answer flies in the face of the text. The crux of the fourth Meditation's final paragraph is this:

Every clear and distinct perception is undoubtedly something <real and positive>, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must necessarily have God for its author. Its author, I say, is God, who is supremely perfect, and who cannot be a deceiver on pain of contradiction; hence the perception is undoubtedly true. (AT 7.62)

It is painfully evident that this invokes God as guaranteeing the truth rule, not as guaranteeing that one has correctly remembered an instance of its antecedent.

Kemp Smith forty years ago, and John Etchemendy recently, have dealt with Circle Threat by giving not the ‘memory answer’ but the ‘continuing truth answer’.<sup>1</sup> These writers answer Yes to Rule Use—the truth rule is used in establishing God’s existence and veracity— but contend that God’s veracity is not needed for us to be assured that what is distinctly perceived is true at that time; what theology assures us, they say, is that the proposition which *was* true when we distinctly perceived it *is still* true.

That attributes to Descartes the view that any proposition whatsoever—including elementary logical truths—could change from being true to being false, except for propositions about the existence and nature of God. Descartes did hold this extraordinary position, however, so there is no complaint against the continuing truth answer on this score.

There is, however, no good support for it. When talking about dubitability, Descartes often distinguishes ‘was’ from ‘is’ and ‘then’ from ‘later’; but on each occasion he seems to be distinguishing a temporary inability to question P’s truth from a later ability to question it, not truth at one time from falsehood later. The Long Passage kills the continuing-truth account when it starts like this: ‘My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that...’ etc. (AT 7.69; see also *Principles* I:13) This repeated emphasis on ‘my nature’ and on changes in my intellectual state is irrelevant to the possibility that a once true proposition should have become false. A little later, furthermore, Descartes says that ‘there have been frequent cases where I have regarded things as true and certain, but

have later been led by other arguments to judge them to be false’, this being the undermining thought which a belief in a beneficent God would vanquish. It is the thought that on the past occasion I *was wrong*, that is, that the proposition *was false*.<sup>2</sup>

Anyone who answers Yes to Rule Use and contends somehow that Descartes’s procedure is not viciously circular has a further problem, namely to explain where Descartes gets the truth rule from if not from his theology. The only possible answer is that he relies on his derivation of it near the start of the third Meditation, but that is too shabby to be taken seriously. I defend that opinion in the next section, which can safely be omitted.

## 8. The derivation of the ‘truth rule’

Here is the apparent derivation of the truth rule:

I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So now I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true. (AT 7.35)

This argument does not have or deserve a good reputation for success. Its form seems to be this:

<sup>1</sup> Norman Kemp Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 273ff; John Etchemendy, ‘The Cartesian Circle’.

<sup>2</sup> In the Second Replies at AT 7.141 Descartes writes that the atheist ‘cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident’. Because of the present tense ‘seem’, that conflicts with the memory account, the continuing-truth account, and the now standard account which I am going to present. It must be a slip.

- (i) *I am a thinking thing* had a certain virtue V lacked by many other propositions that were considered.
- (ii) It must have been given V by some other feature that it had.
- (iii) The only feature of it that was lacked by all the others, apart from V itself, is CD.

Therefore

- (iv) it must be *I am a thinking thing's* having CD that gives it V.

Therefore

- (v) CD must be in general sufficient for V: any proposition that has CD has V.<sup>1</sup>

I shall organize my treatment of this around the question: What is V?

(a) One answer involves factual indubitability: what is special about *I am a thinking thing* is that Descartes cannot doubt it. On that understanding of what V is, he is entitled to premise (i); but (ii) and (iii) are left unsupported, and the conclusion is not about truth, and says only that any proposition that has CD is indubitable by Descartes.

He seems sometimes to have believed this. In the *Meditations* he writes: 'My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true' (AT 7.69), and conversely 'It is only what I clearly and distinctly perceive that completely convinces me' (AT 7.68). There is more to that effect elsewhere: 'Our mind is of such a nature that it cannot refuse to assent to what it apprehends clearly' (Letter to Regius, AT 3.64). '[Some] truths are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them

depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time' (Second Replies, AT 7.146).

This is untenable if 'distinct' is used in Descartes's official sense for it. 'Whatever I perceive distinctly is indubitable by me' is as obviously false as 'Whatever I perceive distinctly is true'. Furthermore, even if Descartes could make it true by strengthening what 'distinct' means, an indubitability rule would be useless to him. When I cannot doubt that P is true, my nose is already rubbed in that fact; I don't need to *infer* it from my distinctly perceiving P, whatever that means. Descartes never performs such an inference, and he would cut a strange figure if he did.

(b) Second answer: V is normative indubitability. What I have to say about the effect of this on the argument's soundness will be said in connection with answer (d) below. As for the conclusion—For all P, if I distinctly perceive P then I am entitled to accept P—this might be useful, but it conspicuously is not what Descartes says his conclusion is.

(c) Well, then, V must be truth—and that does give the desired conclusion. It creates a problem about premise (i), which I'll handle under (d), and it makes rubbish of premise (ii) by making it say that 'I am a thinking thing' must be *made true* by some other feature that it had.

(d) All that remains is for V to be understood as normative indubitability taken as entailing truth, so that when Descartes writes 'I am certain that P' he means 'I am rightly confident that P'. Then premises (ii) and (iii) would concern a feature of P that justified Descartes in his confidence that P, rather than (irrelevantly) a feature of P that made it factually indubitable or (absurdly) a feature of P that made it true. And Descartes could plausibly continue to say (v) that what justifies confidence in one case must do so always; and so,

<sup>1</sup> Descartes writes '... what is *required* for my being certain about anything', but that must be a slip. The conclusion is about what suffices, not what is needed.

taking normative indubitability to entail truth, CD is always a sure sign of truth.

Interpretation **(d)** looks best, but really it is no good either. It requires a premise (i)—asserting not merely justification but also truth—to which Descartes has not entitled himself in the previous pages, where his absolute confidence that he is a thinking thing actually comes from his inability to doubt it. If Descartes disagrees about that, he will have to say that he is entitled to accept ‘I am a thinking thing’ by his argumentative defence against the Deceiver hypothesis. But this flatly contradicts premise (iii), so that the argument collapses yet again.

In face of this series of disasters for the derivation of the truth rule on AT 7.35, we have to walk out on it. There are two bits of evidence that Descartes himself did not take this derivation very seriously.

One concerns the theological defence of the truth rule in the fourth Meditation at AT 7.62, a defence that owes nothing to the argument of AT 7.35. Descartes does not make the latter collaborate with a ‘veracious God’ theology to yield a doctrine that neither could yield on its own. AT 7.62 seems to imply, correctly, that the third Meditation derivation of the truth rule achieves nothing and that it could be deleted without loss to the content of the *Meditations* as a whole. If the ‘truth rule’ derivation has a purpose, it is rhetorical rather than argumentative.

This is confirmed by the fact that Descartes does not use the rule between 35 and 62. He sometimes says that he sees ‘clearly’ that P, or announces Q as ‘clear and distinct’, but these are mere *assertions* and not *inferences* to something’s truth from its being distinctly perceived.

## 9. The standard answer

Here again is Rule Use: ‘In his “proof” that God exists and is not a deceiver, does Descartes rely on the truth rule?’ I have criticized various implications of the answer Yes, including answers that have then been given to Circle Threat. This all adds up to a case for saying No to Rule Use, as most of us do these days. That lets us give a good answer to Circle Threat: ‘What is going on when Descartes seems to say that the reliability of the truth rule depends on the existence and veracity of God?. We answer that Descartes is saying exactly what he seems to be saying. The need to reinterpret the text came from having answered Rule Use wrongly.

By answering No to Rule Use, however, we raise new questions for ourselves. If in arguing for his theology Descartes does not rely on rule use, then he must be relying on something else. We want to know what that is, and what if anything stops it from putting the truth rule out of business. So:

**Basis:** What basis for confidence does Descartes have before completing his defence of the truth rule? and

**Add:** What does the ‘truth rule’ add to that basis?

Basis could be called Circle Threat Two: It asks for Descartes’s basis for confidence in, among other things, his defence of the truth rule; if we have to reply that he bases it on the truth rule then he is caught if a circle after all.

The form of Descartes’s answer to Add can be gleaned from the Long Passage on AT 7.69f, where he commits himself to something with this form:

While I have relation R to P, I have no problem about P even if I do not know the truth rule; but after I have stopped having R to P, I do have a problem, which I can solve if I know the truth rule and know that I did earlier have R to P.

My present rather abstract purposes will be satisfied if we let 'x has a problem about P' carry only as much meaning as it conventionally possesses. Nor does it matter exactly what 'x has R to P' means, though it must be taken to entail that x has a sharp mental focus upon P.

That answer to Add partly answers Basis. Before having justified the truth rule (e.g. in the course of justifying it) Descartes can get an unproblematic hold on a proposition by having R to it. So he can possess himself of a theology, an argument from that to the truth rule, and thus the truth rule itself, by acquiring relation R to all these materials. Then he has the truth rule to remove his problems about other propositions to which he does not currently have R.

For this to happen, the case for God's existence and veracity and the further case for the truth rule must be gone through in a single intellectual sweep, all held before the mind at once so that the R-relation can do its work unaided by the truth rule. In terminology that Descartes sometimes uses, the proof of God has to be contained within a single 'intuition' rather than being gone through in a protracted 'demonstration' which would require him to accept things on the grounds that he was R to them a few minutes before.

The memory answer also requires that a proof of God's existence be gone through in a single psychological moment, so that it can be known without reliance on memory for its earlier stages. Williams seeks to undermine the memory answer partly by attacking this implication of it. He writes: 'It would be necessary that when recollecting some previous demonstration, I should carry in my mind an actual intuition of the proof that God exists and is no deceiver, and there is no reason to suppose that Descartes regarded this as necessary, or, perhaps, even possible.' (Williams, 197.)

No reason? Well, in the *Rules for the Direction of the Understanding* Descartes was greatly interested in getting arguments into a form in which one could take them in by a single movement of the mind. See Rule 7 at AT 10.387, which says that 'every single thing relating to our undertaking must be surveyed in a continuous and wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought'. Commenting on this, Descartes says that one must 'learn to pass from the first to the last [proposition] so swiftly that memory is left with practically no role to play, and one seems to intuit the whole thing at once. (AT 10.388). His reason for this is not like his reason in the *Meditations*—the two works belong to different worlds. Still, they are by the same man, and I think they both show that Descartes had a *thing* about the superiority of 'intuition' to 'demonstration'.

His argument for God's existence and perfection in the third Meditation may seem too complex to be compressed into a single intuition; but its essential core is not so lengthy, and anyway, Descartes had at his disposal also the ontological argument, which led him to write that it is 'self evident. . . that supreme being exists' (AT 7.69).

Even if one could get the proof of God's existence and veracity into a single intuition, and become assured of the truth rule on that basis, this assurance would last only as long as one had relation R to the proof of God.<sup>1</sup> That puts our philosophy and physics on an intermittently shaky basis, unless we have a one-step 'intuitive' grasp of God's existence which we can bring to mind at will, or perhaps one that somehow permeates all our thinking. Descartes would probably choose the latter alternative: a secure, stable body of knowledge requires that a veracious God be there in one's mind all the time.

<sup>1</sup> I was made aware of this point by Rudy Garns, 'Descartes and Indubitability', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1988) 83–100.

My sketch of Descartes's position in this section would be endorsed by most writers on him in the past few decades.<sup>1</sup> The widely accepted idea is this: While I relate in a certain special way to P it has a special status or privilege; after that relation stops obtaining I need the truth rule if P is to regain that privilege or status. And I need God's veracity to assure me of the truth rule.

This interpretation is the only possible reading of the Long Passage (AT 7.69f) and of the CB 6 passage quoted late in section 2 above. The same message comes through loud and clear in this part of Descartes's response to Mersenne:

There are other [propositions] that are perceived very clearly by our intellect so long as we attend to the arguments on which our knowledge of them depends; and we are therefore incapable of doubting them during this time. But we may forget the arguments in question and later remember simply the conclusions which were deduced from them. The question will now arise as to whether we possess the same firm and immutable conviction concerning these conclusions when we simply recollect that they were previous deduced from quite evident principles. (Second Replies, AT 7.146)

It is also very clear in what Descartes writes in reply to Arnauld on AT 7.245f.

However, although the abstract account I have given is pretty much common property among Descartes scholars today, they seem not to have recognized a striking implication

of it, namely: Because the special privilege that P can have independently of God and the truth rule depends purely on my psychological relation to P, that privilege cannot have anything to do with truth or even with justification. I shall explain what privilege it is by saying more about what R is.

### 10. Descartes's bedrock

A mind M is R-related to a proposition P at any time when: M distinctly perceives or apprehends P and M is utterly unable to doubt P or to call it in question. That, I believe, is the relation that Descartes means to invoke when he writes: 'My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true' (AT 7.60); 'Some... perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true' (Second Replies at AT 7.145f); 'I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything?' (AT 7.35). Over and over again, Descartes reports his own inability to doubt propositions that he has distinctly in mind.

Sometimes, as in two of those quotations, he implies that he cannot doubt the proposition *because* he apprehends it distinctly.<sup>2</sup> This requires him to mean something extra by 'distinct', and I am not sure what it is. But that doesn't matter. All that matters is that he is working with the conjunctive notion of

<sup>1</sup> For example, Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, ch. 5; Kenny, *Descartes*, 192f; Jeffery Tlumak, 'Certainty and Cartesian Method', 58ff; Alan Gewirth, 'The Cartesian Circle', *The Philosophical Review* 50 (1941) 368–395, at 371–373; James Van Cleve, 'Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle', *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1979) 55–91, at 66–71; Frankfurt, 'Descartes's Validation of Reason', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965) 149–156; John Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 66–70.

<sup>2</sup> That is how Spinoza reads him, in expressing the truth rule thus: 'The things to which we must necessarily assent when we perceive them distinctly must be true.' (*Descartes's Principles* 1p14s; Gebhardt I/172; in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 256.)

finding P to be factually indubitable for oneself *while* having P distinctly in mind, with 'distinctly' understood in something like the sense given in Descartes's official explanation. His view that one conjunct is extractable from the other indicates that he has fattened up the meaning of 'distinct' somehow so that 'x distinctly perceives P' entails my conjunction: x distinctly perceives P (in the official sense) *and* x finds P to be indubitable. Anyway, even if Descartes says that my conjunction contains a redundancy, he won't deny that it marks out an important relation a mind can have to a proposition.

As convenient short-hand, I shall say that *M has P distinctly in mind and is entirely unable to doubt or question it* in the form '*M Distinguishes P*'. To Distinguish P is to find it to be indubitable while having it in mind in a luminous way that gives no finger-hold for the thought that one's confidence might come from confusion.

Distinguishing (in my sense) is Descartes's bedrock, his ultimate basis. It is the special relation that he has early on both to *Cogito* and to the inference to *Sum*. Before the truth rule is available he can Distinguish a proposition P, and while he does that he has no problem with P. That unproblematicness is the privilege that P can have before the truth rule has been established.

Objection: 'That is a factual and psychological way of not having a problem, not a normative or logical one. The statement 'He has no problem about P at this time because he Distinguishes it' does not imply that he is entitled to be sure of P, still less that P is true. He cannot raise a problem about P, but there may be one for all that.'<sup>1</sup>

True, but I stand by my account of what Descartes's bedrock is. I thereby imply that Descartes tended to be confused about this matter, and often conflated the factual 'I am certain that P' with the normative 'It is certain that P'. I gave evidence for this in section 2 above.

Confusion is not the whole story, though. Descartes's initial emphasis on factual indubitability can be defended in a way, and reason and charity require us to credit him with being somewhat sensitive to the availability of this defence. Occasionally, as I shall show, he seems to have been explicitly aware of it.

The defence turns on this fact: Someone who Distinguishes P cannot do anything with P but accept it. That is, he must behave exactly as he would if he had (and knew that he had) the most secure objective guarantee of the truth of P: the psychological notion of *Distinguishing P* is practically equivalent to the epistemological notion of *knowing that one has a guarantee that P is true*. This point, or one like it, has been persuasively expressed by Panayot Butchvarov:

What could be so much *like* the possession of truth without *being* the possession of truth? I suggest that it can only be the unthinkability, inconceivability, unintelligibility of one's not possessing truth; the unthinkability of one's being mistaken in believing such a truth. I suggest that in the case of primary knowledge the phrase 'having the truth' is a natural but misleading description of the unthinkability of mistake. For even if there were a genuine notion of literal possession of truth, it would function, in life and in thought, in the way in which the notion of unthinkability of mistake does. For if I cannot think

<sup>1</sup> 'The crucial issue is whether we can *know* certain propositions prior to proving God; the observation that there are certain moments when we cannot for the moment doubt is epistemically irrelevant.' Wilson, 133.

<sup>1</sup> Panayot Butchvarov, *The Concept of Knowledge* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 84.

how my belief may be false, then the question whether it is false can play no role for me.<sup>1</sup>

I think that the insight this expresses is one that Descartes also had at some level of his mind, and that it justifies him in treating as bedrock the propositions which he Distinguishes but cannot defend.

Here, then, are the answers to three of my questions. **Rule Use:** No, Descartes does not rely on the truth rule in establishing his theology. **Circle Threat:** When Descartes seems to use his theology as a basis for the truth rule, that is exactly what he is doing. **Basis:** Descartes's basis for confidence in certain propositions before the rule has been defended is that they are psychological bedrock: finding them to be indubitable while perceived distinctly, he *has to* treat them as established while he relates to them in that way. All that remains is **Add**, to which I now turn.

Deploying every doubt-inducer he could, as carefully and intelligently as he could, Descartes ran up against propositions that he Distinguished. While that lasted for a given P, it put an end to his sceptical troubles over P: there is nothing more anyone can do about sceptical worries. But when he looks back to earlier episodes of that kind, then he can raise the sceptical questions again: 'I was unable to doubt that P while thinking hard and sharply about it, but perhaps that was just my pathology and not a reflection of a secure status in P itself. What he thinks he gets from the veracity of God is an assurance that that is not so. To the unavoidable fact that *while he is* Distinguishing P he must treat it as finally established Descartes can now add the general rule that *if he ever did Distinguish P* then P is true.'<sup>2</sup>

## 11. Why the move to truth doesn't work

Thus Descartes's story, as I understand it. I am indebted to Gareth Matthews for helping me to see that the story has something wrong with it. In a nutshell: Taking it that there is a chasm between Distinguishing on one hand and guaranteed truth on the other, if Descartes starts on the Distinguishing side of that chasm he will find no way of getting across to truth. I shall explain.

When he thinks about a proposition that he did once Distinguish, his theology will come to the rescue by giving him the thought: 'God would not allow me to Distinguish a proposition unless it was true.' So he will be carried from a premise about a past indubitability to a conclusion about truth. But that will not really take him across the chasm, because his hold on the conclusion about truth must be like his hold on the optimistic theology on which he bases it. The place of his theology in his doxastic scheme is that of a proposition that he can derive by moves that he Distinguishes from premises that he Distinguishes. While this is going on he declares the theology and the truth rule to be true, because believing is believing-true. We observers, however, are in a position to think:

That is just conviction and not necessarily truth. If there were an objective guarantee of the soundness of the defence of the truth rule, then the rule itself would be guaranteed and so would all the beliefs arrived at by applying it. But the concept of an objective guarantee, though it may figure in Descartes's hopes and aspirations, has no working role in his philosophy. All he has by way of support for the theology and the truth rule is indubitability accompanied by distinctness. So

<sup>2</sup> Strictly, the truth rule could assure me now of truths which I do not now Distinguish but which I know I did *or will* Distinguish, or which I know *someone else did, does or will* Distinguish. It releases me from confinement to I-now.



he cannot cross the chasm.

We observers of Descartes's intellectual performance can think this, and so can he at any time when he is not performing, i.e. when he is not actually Distinguishing his theology and the argument for it. So he ought to see that he cannot cross the chasm.

I shall say that again, a little differently. Suppose that at time  $T_1$  I Distinguish a proposition  $P$  (e.g. that every cause must resemble all its effects). Because I Distinguish  $P$ , I confidently call it true. At  $T_2$  I recall that episode, but am no longer Distinguishing  $P$ ; I look back at  $T_1$  and say 'Of course I *talked* about  $P$  as true, but only because I couldn't doubt it. I wonder whether it really is true'. At time  $T_3$  I Distinguish the complex proposition

Theology: There exists a God who is not a deceiver,  
which leads me also to distinguish

Truth Rule: Every proposition that anyone ever Distinguishes is true.

That in turn, combined with my uncritically accepted memory of what happened at  $T_1$ , leads me to conclude that  $P$  is true after all—it's not just that I Distinguished it, but it really is true, because if it weren't God would be a deceiver. That is the story as far as Descartes takes it. But now move on to time  $T_4$ , when I can look back on the events of  $T_3$  and say: 'Of course I *talked* about Theology and Truth Rule and  $P$  as true, but only because I couldn't doubt them. I wonder whether any of them really is true. I could summon Theology back to the forefront of my mind and, at  $T_5$ , get back into the frame of mind I was in at  $T_3$ , and then again I shall say that Theology and the others all are indeed true. But that is sayable by me only at a time when I am in a special psychological relation to the propositions in question: from any other standpoint, whether of someone else or of myself at other times, what is being said has no bearing on truth at all.

What should we conclude from this? I have two answers to that, which I think share the truth between them.

One is that Descartes was trying to establish a system of beliefs that would be free from all error, and that he mistakenly thought he had succeeded. The mistake probably arose from the cumulative effects of two failures of grasp. One I have already mentioned: he did not properly see that before the truth rule was introduced he had only Distinguishing; which is to say that he tended to conflate the psychological fact of confidence with some kind of entitlement to confidence. The other is the failure to grasp the point I have been making in this section, namely that if he started with only Distinguishing that is all he could end up with.

Some of the time and with respect to a part of Descartes's mind that answer is true. He does have truth as his goal, and his pursuit of it does fall short in the way I have just described. He is guilty of failure and of not realizing that he has failed.

## 12. The stability project

But that is still not the whole story. Despite announcing a truth project and sometimes pursuing justification and truth, Descartes often seems instead to pursue stability, a system of beliefs that will be free from upheavals. I gave evidence for that at the start of this paper.

To the extent that his goal is just stability, Descartes can tell a coherent story about what his belief in God's veracity does for him. It goes like this.

While I Distinguish  $P$  my intellectual behavior must be that of someone who has a perfect objective guarantee (whatever that might be) of the truth of  $P$ . But when my mental spotlight moves off  $P$  my situation changes. Granted that an hour ago I *did* Distinguish  $P$ , what use is that fact to me *now* when I can look back

on my earlier assurance and wonder whether it was pathological?

That is where my theology comes to my aid. I run my mind over the argument for it and Distinguish it; so right now it has a perfectly secure status in my mind, as has the truth rule that I infer from it; the truth rule in its turn, when combined with my uncritical assurance that I did Distinguish P, makes P secure as well, even now when I am not focusing on it. What my theology gives me, then, is a great increase in the range of propositions about which I have security at any given moment—a security that at first could come only from intense mental focus but now is available for any proposition which ever has been Distinguished. This advantage, however, is available to me only while I am actually Distinguishing my theology.

This is not Descartes's principal, official account of what he is doing. But it has many echoes in his text, all the same. According to the Long Passage (AT 7.69f), for example, my Distinguishing P gives me the advantage that 'I cannot but believe it to be true'; the loss I suffer by no longer Distinguishing it is that 'other arguments can now occur to me which might easily undermine my opinion'. Again, whereas earlier 'it appears most evident to me [that P]. and 'I cannot but believe this to be true', when I stop Distinguishing P 'I can easily fall into doubt about its truth'. The drawback from which my theology can rescue me is a state of doubt, lack of confidence. Throughout the passage the concept of truth is used only once outside the psychological context 'believe. . . to be true'. That is in a description of the drawback, and even that is contrasted with something belonging in stability territory: 'I should never have true and certain

knowledge about anything but only shifting and changeable opinions.'

Descartes goes on from there to a spate of talk about truth. If he were engaged only in the stability project, he would still declare P to be true *while* he was Distinguishing it; but it would be disingenuous of him not sometimes to look back on his past performances and declare that they were not guaranteed captures of the truth but just Distinguishings. That he never does so is part of the case for saying that he mainly saw himself as pursuing truth.

Nevertheless, the stability project does make itself felt sometimes in what Descartes wrote. Consider for example this account of the atheist's plight:

The kind of knowledge possessed by the atheist. . . is not immutable and certain. . . The less power the atheist attributes to the author of his being, the more reason he will have to suspect that his nature may be so imperfect as to allow him to be deceived even in matters that seem utterly evident to him. And he will never be able to be free of this doubt until he admits that he has been created by a true God who cannot be a deceiver. (Sixth Replies at AT 7.428.)

This uses the concept of truth as an ingredient in two concepts—knowledge and deception. The knowledge in question cannot involve truth that only our theology puts in our hands, because it is attributed to the atheist! The concept of deception occurs only embedded in psychological contexts: 'suspect that [he is] deceived', 'admits that. . . God cannot be a deceiver'.<sup>1</sup> According to Descartes, therefore, the atheist is condemned not to false or unjustified beliefs but to mutability and intellectual paranoia; so that is what the right theology can save one from.

<sup>1</sup> I use 'admits. to render 'agnoscat'. Cottingham uses 'recognizes', which is truth-entailing. Either translation is possible, but mine fits better the logic of the passage. If 'recognizes' is right, its truth-entailing element is idle.

The stability project is even more strongly felt in the second Replies:

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 cause 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? What do we care about this alleged absolute falsity, 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.<sup>1</sup> It is. . . no objection for someone to make out that these might appear false to God or to an angel. For the evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story<sup>2</sup>

This is the writing of someone who is capable, at least sometimes, of setting the pursuit of truth aside and settling for something subjective, psychological, causal—something like stability.

### 13. Voluntarism about necessary truth

Objection: ‘It is not to be believed that the pursuit of intellectual peace and stability *per se* should be a significant

part, even a small one, of Descartes’s concerns. Suppose he learned that he could get his belief system calmed down by taking a pill, do you really think that Descartes would ever, at any level of his mind, settle for that? Isn’t it clear that such a “solution” would either bore or disgust him?’

Yes, if it were put to Descartes in that direct fashion he would probably recoil, protesting that nothing would satisfy him but the truth. But that response would show that he was not in touch with his own thinking, and the passages last quoted are evidence for that. Further evidence is provided by a strand in his philosophy, showing up in many writings though not in the *Meditations*, that commits him to being tolerant of the prospect of doxastic peace achieved through a pill, so long as he was assured—perhaps by God—of the pill’s reliability. I allude to his metaphysic of necessary truths.

Perhaps alone among all philosophers, Descartes held that necessary propositions owe their truth to the will of God, meaning that even if P is necessarily true, God could have made it false. This is terrible metaphysics. If God could have made P false then it could have been false, so that it is not necessarily true after all. There are modal logics in which that argument does not go through; but they belong to our century, and couldn’t have been known to Descartes. He seems to accept my argument and to say, in effect, that supposedly necessary propositions are not really so:

The eternal truths. . . are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of Him. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the

<sup>1</sup> AT 7.144f. (i) My factual ‘cause for doubting’ replaces Cottingham’s normative ‘reason for doubting’. The Latin is *habere causam dubitandi*. Either rendering is possible, but mine fits the context better: firmness of conviction militates against causes not against reasons for doubt. (ii) My factual ‘What do we care. . .?’ is faithful to the Latin *Quid curamus. . .?* in a way that Cottingham’s normative ‘Why should we. . .?’ is not.

<sup>2</sup> AT 7.146. Where I have ‘these’, Cottingham has ‘such truths’; but that goes beyond the Latin.

knowledge which God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. So we must not say that if God did not exist nonetheless these truths would be true; for the existence of God is the first and most eternal of all possible truths and the one from which alone all others derive.<sup>1</sup>

Another expression of this view can be found in the sixth Replies at AT 7.435f where Descartes, in response to a clear and open challenge, reaffirms that God is the efficient cause of the truth of necessary truths. How he could have made it the case that twice four is not eight is, Descartes admits, ‘unintelligible to us’; but he thinks it would nevertheless have been ‘easy’ for God to do so.

Typically, Descartes says things that amount to replacing the notion of objective necessity by something subjective—a proposition’s being indispensable or something that we cannot think away. Here for example:

I do not think we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since everything involved in truth and goodness depends on His omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or that one and two should not be three. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or an aggregate of one and two which is not three, and that such things involve a contradiction in my conception.<sup>2</sup>

This amounts to saying that all there is to its being ‘necessary that P’ is God’s having brought it about that we cannot conceive that not-P. Whether by giving us a mind with

that limitation, or a mind that lacks the limitation followed by a pill that creates it—why should *that* be regarded as crucial?

#### 14. Interrelating the two projects

I suspect that the stability project was always present in Descartes’s mind at some level. I also think that it represents the better side of his treatment of scepticism: the hardest cruces in the text become more manageable, we have seen, when they are interpreted in terms of stability rather than of truth. There is a systematic reason for this, namely that the truth project, conceived as Descartes conceived it and conducted by the standards he sets up in the first Meditation, cannot possibly be carried through.

How did the two projects interrelate in Descartes’s mind? My best guess is that

- (a) he had before him the goal, involving both subjective and objective elements, of arriving at beliefs about which he could not be wrong (perhaps mediated by the concept of perfectly justified beliefs);
- (b) by his standards the goal was unattainable, and this fact impinged upon his mind though he did not become consciously aware of it;
- (c) he protected himself from that awareness partly by settling for inadequate arguments;
- (d) but he stayed optimistic about his pursuit of justification and truth because he was subliminally engaged in the more promising stability project, which has enough structural similarities to the other to act as a substitute for it.

If (d) is wrong, then I cannot explain the facts I have presented concerning the strength and relative purity of the

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Mersenne, 6 May, 1630, in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 13f.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Arnauld, 29 July, 1648, in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, 236f.

subjectivist strand running through Descartes's treatment of scepticism and the badness of some of his main attempts to execute the truth project. Those facts are too clear and clamorous to be written off as an accident with no deep significance for the understanding of what Descartes wrote.

Many commentators have tried to fend off theses (c) and (d). They have sought to attribute to Descartes some one line of thought in which factual indubitability is intelligibly related to justification and/or to truth. They have usually admitted that the line of thought, whatever it is, is flawed; but the aim has been to find it—to point to some *prima*

facie plausible set of considerations and to say '*That* is how Descartes thought he could interrelate the subjectivist and objectivist strands in his thinking'. Attempts to present Descartes in this light have all failed. They had to. The interrelating structure is just not there; nor is any plausible simulacrum of it.<sup>1</sup>

[Added in this reprint:] Further evidence of the subjective strand in Descartes's thinking is discussed in my 'Descartes's Theory of Modality', *Philosophical Review* 103 (1994), pp. 639–667, an improved version of which is presented in chapter 24 (vol. 2) of my *Learning from Six Philosophers*.

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<sup>1</sup> I have had helpful comments from David Copp, John Cottingham, Jack Davidson, Gareth Matthews, and a referee for the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Don Garrett's suggestions relating to an early draft were especially useful. William Alston's careful comments on a late draft transformed my thinking and enabled me to improve the paper greatly.