

# The Two Truths that Descartes Discovers in His *Meditations on First Philosophy* that Do Not Require the Divine Guarantee

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## Abstract

In my paper, I show that there are two truths in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* that do not require the divine guarantee, despite Descartes' claim in the last sentence of the fourth paragraph in the third meditation that he cannot be certain of anything unless he knows that God exists as Descartes' creator and that God is not a deceiver.

**Keywords:** Thinking thing, Self, God, Knowledge, Meditation

## Introduction

Early in the third meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes asserts that all knowledge depends on knowing that God is his creator, and that God is not a deceiver. In my paper, I show that this claim is misleading, in that there are two truths that Descartes discovers in the *Meditations* that do not require the divine guarantee, the first being that he exists as a thing which thinks, and the second that a veracious God exists as his creator. In my paper, I explore why Descartes holds that the divine guarantee is not required for these claims.

## Methodology

Descartes' method in the *Meditations* is never articulated in this work. In fact, commentators usually regard Descartes' method in the *Meditations* to be the deductive method utilized in Mathematics. In the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, Descartes explains that the method utilized in the *Meditations* is not the method of the mathematician, but rather is a method unique to the *Meditations*. He refers to this method as 'analysis', and the method of the mathematician as 'synthesis'. In my paper, I explain why the special method of analysis is required in the *Meditations*, and how this method is employed to establish the truth that he exists as a thinking think, and that God is Descartes' creator.

Early in the third meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes asks himself what it was that assured him of the truth discovered in the second meditation that he is a thing which thinks. He replies:

Certainly in this first knowledge there is nothing that assures me of its truth, excepting the clear and distinct perception of that which I state...(M.59)

However, after recognizing that mathematical claims are equally clear and distinct, but might be subject to the deceptive powers of a deceiving deity, he hesitates to generalize and conclude that 'whatever he perceives clearly and distinctly must be true'. In fact, he goes further, and urges that all knowledge depends on knowing that God exists as his creator and that God is not a deceiver:

But in order to be able altogether to remove it [i.e. his doubts about the truth of the clear and distinct] I must inquire whether there is a God as soon as the occasion presents itself; and if I find that there is a God, I must also inquire whether He may be a deceiver; for without a knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything. (M.60)

In my paper, I propose to show that Descartes holds that there are two truths which he discovers in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which do not require the divine guarantee - knowledge of the self as a *res cogitans*, and knowledge of God - and that, therefore, the passage quoted above is misleading.

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* seeks the metaphysical first principles of human knowledge, that is, what must be known before anything else can be known. Since first principles are what must be known before anything else can be known, they cannot be conclusions of geometric-type demonstrations. In fact, the principles of knowledge, being first principles, cannot be conclusions of any argument. Therefore, a geometric or deductive-type demonstration is ruled out in the case of metaphysical first principles. Accordingly, Descartes correctly sees that the methodology developed in his *Regulae (Rules for the Direction of the Understanding)*, which is based on the deductive model of reasoning in Mathematics, is such that, even if its reliability were assured, would not serve his purpose in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. According to the third meditation, geometric-type demonstrations will always be susceptible to doubt, until we know that God exists and is not a deceiver. On the other hand, as I propose to show in my paper, the *Meditations* reveals that knowledge of two indubitable metaphysical principles can be had without the need for the divine guarantee. Accordingly, Descartes realizes that he must develop a new method for establishing metaphysical truths, which is not based on the mathematical model developed in the *Regulae*. For Descartes, Metaphysics is possible only if (at least some) metaphysical knowledge can be had without the divine guarantee, whereas geometric-type demonstrations can be considered knowledge only after the divine guarantee is achieved.

At this stage, we are able to see that, given the nature and importance of metaphysical knowledge for Descartes, it could never have been his intention to apply the method developed in the *Regulae* to the *Meditations*. Both metaphysics and geometry utilize first principles. Descartes' treatment of the similarities and differences between

metaphysics and geometry in regard to their respective first principles is to be found in the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*. He points out that the first principles of geometrical proofs "harmonize with the use of our senses, and are readily granted by all. Hence, no difficulty is involved in this case, except in the proper deduction of the consequences." (M.102) In other words, no special method is required in order to intuit the first principles of geometry. Metaphysics, on the other hand, lacks this advantage:

... [Nothing] in metaphysics causes more trouble than the making the perception of its primary notions clear and distinct. For though in their own nature they are as intelligible as, or even more intelligible than those geometricians study, yet being contradicted by the many preconceptions of our senses to which we have since our earliest years been accustomed, they cannot be perfectly apprehended except by those who give strenuous attention and study to them, and withdraw their minds as far as possible from matters corporea<sup>1</sup>. (M.102 – 103)

To apprehend the first principles of metaphysics, a different method of proof is required, which Descartes, in the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, calls 'analysis' (to be discussed below). Descartes speaks of 'demonstrations' in geometry, and in the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, he speaks of 'demonstrations' in metaphysics. We now understand that this term is being used equivocally. When applied to the *Regulae* and the geometric-type method developed in that work, demonstration is what we know as deductive reasoning. In the *Replies to the Second Set of Objections*, this method of proof is called 'synthesis'.

Synthesis . . . does indeed clearly demonstrate its conclusions, and it employs a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems, and problems, so that if one of the conclusions that follows is denied, it may at once be shown to be contained in what has gone before. Thus the reader, however hostile and obstinate, is compelled to render his assent. (M.102)

He insists that this method, "though it very suitably finds a place after analysis ... nevertheless cannot so conveniently be applied to those metaphysical matters we are discussing" (M.102). This is the case because the first principles of metaphysics are "contradicted by the many perceptions of our senses" (M.102) For Metaphysics, we require the method of 'analysis':

Analysis shows the true way by which a thing was methodically discovered and derived ... so that, if the reader care to follow and give sufficient attention to everything, he understands the matter no less perfectly and makes it as much his own as if he had discovered it. But it contains nothing to incite belief in an inattentive and hostile reader; for if the very least thing brought forward escapes his notice, the necessity of the conclusions is lost . . . (M.101)

Descartes points out that "I have used in my Meditations only analysis, which is the best and truest method of teaching" (M.102). Analytic demonstrations are designed to guide the mind, so that all prejudice preventing us from grasping a metaphysical first principle will be removed, and the first principle can be grasped. An analytic demonstration, therefore, is, as it were, a process of 'reasoning up' to first principles, the upward movement taking place as prejudice is removed. Accordingly, when in the case of an analytic demonstration, Descartes speaks about drawing conclusions or concluding a first principle (e.g., at M.51 he writes: "So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it"), he is not speaking of drawing a conclusion in a deductive argument. To draw a conclusion when employing analysis is tantamount to saying that I am now able to grasp the truth of a first principle.

### ***The First Truth that Descartes Discovers in the Meditations which does not Require the Divine Guarantee***

In the second meditation, Descartes offers two 'analytic' demonstrations or proofs of his existence:

But I was persuaded that there was nothing at all in the world, that there was no heaven, no earth, that there were no minds, nor any bodies; was I not then likewise persuaded that I did not exist? Not at all; of a surety I myself did exist since I persuaded myself of something. But there is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, who ever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me. Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it (M.51)

The first analytic demonstration is based on the notion of 'persuasion' and the second on 'deception'. The 'persuasion demonstration' appears to be the following: Descartes affirms something which he cannot doubt - that he was persuaded of something; he then attempts to affirm in thought both that he was persuaded of something and that he does not exist; by finding a repugnancy between these two thoughts (i.e., he cannot affirm in thought both that he was persuaded of something and that he does not exist), he concludes that his initial thought is necessarily connected with the denial of the second. A similar situation obtains in regard to his second analytic demonstration: he attempts to affirm in thought both that he was deceived about something and that he does not exist; by finding a repugnancy between these two thoughts, he concludes that his initial thought is necessarily connected with the denial of the second: if he is deceived then necessarily he exists.

But now Descartes goes further: he wants to know what he is, now that he knows that he is or exists. After ruling out that he is essentially corporeal, he turns to thinking:

What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist. I do not now admit anything which is not necessarily true: to speak accurately I am not more than a thing which thinks, that is to say a mind or a soul, or an understanding, or a reason, which are terms whose significance was formerly unknown to me. I am, however, a real thing and really exist; but what thing? I have answered: a thing which thinks. (M.52 - 53)

Descartes' analytic demonstration that he is a thing which things takes the same form as we saw above when he proved that he exists in the 'persuasion' and the 'deception' analytic proofs. Here, in the third such analytic demonstration, he affirms that he exists and simultaneously denies that he is a thinking thing, with the result that he can no longer think that he exists. From this, he concludes that his existence is inseparable from thinking. In other words, he exists as a thinking thing.

In the third meditation, Descartes recognizes that the same clarity and distinctness that he finds in the second meditation when establishing that he exists as a thinking thing, is also present when he conceives mathematical propositions:

But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic or geometry into consideration, e.g. that two and three together made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to affirm that they were true? Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted, this would not have so for any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest. But every time that this preconceived opinion of the sovereign power of a God presents itself to my thought, I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him, if He wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. (M.59 - 60)

Descartes' knowledge that he exists as a thinking thing is seen clearly and distinctly, and propositions in mathematics are also seen clearly and distinctly. Nevertheless, while the clarity and distinctness associated with his awareness of himself as a thinking thing are sufficient to guarantee that this claim is true, the same clarity and distinctness associated with mathematical claims do not prove that the mathematical claims are true, and this must await the divine guarantee.

We must now explain why the hypothesis of a deceiving deity is regarded as a source of doubt in the case of mathematical statements, and not a source of doubt in the case of the knowledge of his existence as a thinking thing.

By the end of the fourth paragraph of the third meditation, Descartes realizes that his clear and distinct conception of himself as a thinking thing makes it impossible for him to affirm that he thinks while denying that he exists, and that the same impossibility pertains to mathematical statements which are also clear and distinct (e.g. he cannot affirm that he has a set of 5 objects, and deny that this equals a set of 3 objects plus a set of 2 objects). And yet, the former escapes all doubt, and the latter does not. To explain this, we must consider the fundamental difference which obtains between his awareness that he exists as a thinking thing, and mathematical and other clear and distinct conceptions. When he thinks that  $5 = 2 + 3$  or that motion is necessarily connected with duration, he finds that he cannot think otherwise. Similarly, when he thinks that thought and existence are necessarily connected, he finds that he cannot think otherwise. Now, to doubt, through the hypothesis of the deceiving deity, that  $5 = 2 + 3$ , or that motion is necessarily connected with duration, requires considering that the deceiving deity has so constituted his mind, that although he cannot think these connections other than the way he is thinking them, what he is thinking is false. But how could this be? Under what circumstances would it be false that  $5 = 2 + 3$ , or that motion is necessarily connected with duration? It would be false that motion is necessarily connected with duration, provided that something could move, even though time did not pass; similarly, it would be false that  $5 = 2 + 3$ , provided that there could be a set of two and a set of three which do not equal a set of five. In short, Descartes' concern with clear and distinct conceptions is that his way of thinking may not represent the way these items are actually related - however their relation has been brought about - and yet he cannot help believing that they are always related as he finds he must think them. That this is precisely his concern in the third meditation can be learned from the fact that after he has established that what is perceived clearly and distinctly is true, he explicitly maintains that it is this problem which need no longer concern him: "But now...because I can draw the idea of something from my thought, it follows that all which I know clearly and distinctly as pertaining to this object does really belong to it..."

In the case of the thought and existence, he intuits that thought and existence are necessarily connected, and, he insists, that he need not have, or better, that he cannot have, any doubts regarding this connection of the sort which arise in the case of mathematics. For with thought and existence, the connection thought is the connection thought about: it is the actual relation between the items involved which is being intuited, when he thinks the connection between thought and existence: "What of thinking? I find here that thought is an attribute that belongs to me; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But how often? Just when I think; for it might possibly be the case if I ceased entirely to think, that I should likewise cease altogether to exist" (M.52 - 53). Therefore, Descartes' reason for distinguishing thought and existence from other matters (particularly, mathematical claims) which are clear and distinct and are found to be necessarily connected is that,

only in the case of thought and existence is he apprehending the items about which he is thinking, and, therefore, only in this case, are the clarity and distinctness of the necessary connection between thought and existence an indubitable guarantor of the truth of this connection. For doubting here requires believing that the connection between thought and existence is not as he intuits it, even while he is intuiting it. And Descartes insists that such doubt is not possible: when the mind is free of prejudice, what presents itself as clear and distinct is clear and distinct. The additional feature with respect to his thought and his existence is that the necessary connection intuited is the actual connection with which thought is concerned. Hence, not only can he not doubt what he is intuiting, he also cannot doubt *the truth* of what he is intuiting. With mathematical statements on the other hand, to know that the connection intuited is the actual connection, and therefore, to know that the intuited connection is true, requires knowing that the way in which thought apprehends the connection between the items involved is the way the items must always be connected. And to know this, he insists that he must know that God exists as his creator and that God cannot be a deceiver.

### ***The Second Truth that Descartes Discovers in the Meditations which does not Require the Divine Guarantee***

The second truth that Descartes discovers in the *Meditations* which does not require the divine guarantee is the existence of God as Descartes' creator. In this paper, I will not be studying Descartes' entire proof of God's existence. I am able to make my point by focusing on the anti-penultimate and penultimate paragraphs in the third meditation.

In the anti-penultimate paragraph in the third meditation, Descartes explains:

It only remains to me to examine into the manner in which I have acquired this idea from God; for I have not received it through the senses,...nor is it likewise a fiction of my mind, for it is not in my power to take from or to add anything to it; and consequently the only alternative is that it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me. And one certainly ought not to find it strange that God, in creating me, placed this idea within me to be like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work; and it is likewise not essential that the mark shall be something different from the work itself. (M.70)

For Descartes, to have the idea of the self is to have the idea of God *in that thought*. And when he speaks of the idea of God in the last three paragraphs of the third meditation, he makes it plain that the relation is grasped through reflecting or meditating on the idea he has of himself as a thinking thing.

...[I]n some way he has placed his image and similitude upon me, and...I perceive this similitude (in which the idea of God is contained) by means of the same faculty by which I perceive myself - that is to say, when I reflect on myself I not only know that

I am something [imperfect], incomplete and dependent on another, which incessantly aspires after something which is better and greater than myself, but I also know that He on whom I depend possesses in Himself all the great things towards which I aspire and the ideas of which I find within myself, and that not indefinitely or potentially alone, but really, actually, and infinitely; and that thus He is God. (M.71)

Intuition, for Descartes, involves two relata/ ideas which are necessarily connected. As we saw earlier in the first part of this paper, the necessary connection between thought and existence is intuited, once we realize that if we affirm the first relatum and deny the second relatum, then we can no longer think the first relatum. Nevertheless, in the case of the awareness of the self and the awareness of God, Descartes urges that, we are involved with only one idea: "And one certainly ought not to find it strange that God, in creating me, placed this idea [of God] within me to be like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work; and it is likewise not essential that the mark shall be something different from the work itself" (M.71). The awareness of the self and the awareness of God are made possible through one idea, namely, the idea of the self, whereas Descartes' proofs of his existence as a thinking thing involve two ideas (thought and existence). Now, if intuition involves two relata which are necessarily connected, and the awareness of the self and God are obtained through a single idea, namely the self, then it follows that knowledge of God as Descartes' creator cannot be achieved through intuition. However, even if the awareness of God is achieved through meditating on the awareness he has of himself as a thinking thing, this does not, by itself, prove the truth of the relation between the self and God, and of the claim that God exists, for there remains the question - the same as that raised in regard to his awareness of himself as a thinking thing, and with mathematics - whether what is thought accords with what is thought about. And, even if this problem does not arise in the case of one of the relata - the self - it can still be raised regarding the other - God. To show that the awareness of the self and God is reliable, and, therefore, indubitable, it would have to be shown that the awareness of God through the awareness of the self is like the awareness of the self: there must be no distinction between what I am thinking, and what I am thinking about. But how, in the case of God, can this be upheld?

I will now show how Descartes deals with this issue. The relevant passage appears in the *Reply to Objections V*, in which, through an illustrative analogy, he clarifies his position that the idea of God is 'as it were, the mark of the workman imprinted on his work':

When you ask *whence I get my proof that the idea of God is, as it were, the mark of a workman imprinted on his work, and what is the mode in which it is impressed, what is the form that mark*, it is very much as if I, coming across a picture which showed a technique that pointed to Apelles alone as the painter, were to say that the inimitable technique was, so to speak, a mark impressed by Apelles on all his pictures in order



to distinguish them from others, but you replied with the questions: ‘what is the form of that mark?’ and ‘what is its mode of impression?’ Such an enquiry would seem to merit laughter rather than any reply. (HR.11, 221)

The idea of God stands to the idea of the self in a manner analogous to the relation between a painter's technique and works of art which result from this technique. Accordingly, the idea of God is contained in the awareness of oneself as a thinking thing in a manner analogous to the way in which the observation of a painting contains within itself the technique of the artist who created the painting. Just as observing the painting aids in apprehending the technique through which the painting has come to be, so by meditating on the self as a thinking thing, he comes to understand the only way in which he could have come to be. Therefore, when apprehending God within the awareness of the self, there is no basis for a distinction between what he is aware of, and what this awareness is about, in the same way that when apprehending the technique in a painting there is no basis for a distinction between what is apprehended and what the apprehension is about. The technique that an artist employs in creating a painting is not a copy of the artist's technique; rather it *is* the artist's technique in creating the painting. Similarly, the idea of God which Descartes discovers through meditating on the idea he has of himself is, like the mark of the workman imprinted on his work: this idea is not a copy of God's mark or technique; rather it *is* God's mark or technique. Again here, therefore, there is no basis for a distinction between what he apprehends about God in the idea of the self and what this apprehension is about. It is in this way that indubitability pertains to the awareness of God in the awareness of the self. And once the idea of God is recognized as God's ‘mark’ or a ‘stamp’ which is inseparable from the idea of the self, we know that God exists with the same certainty as we know that the self exists, and we require no further ‘proof’ of God's existence.

## Conclusion

What I have attempted to establish in my paper is that Descartes is misleading in his claim in the third meditation that all knowledge depends upon proving that God exists as his creator, and that God is not a deceiver. Certainly, his knowledge of the clear and distinct ideas in mathematics, and of other clear and distinct ideas, does require the divine guarantee. But his knowledge that he is a thing which thinks, and his knowledge that a veracious God is his creator do not require the divine guarantee, given that the ideas involved in these instances do not have a referential element which must be verified: in these two instances, what he is thinking is identical to what he is thinking about. On the other hand, mathematics always contains a referential or correspondence element, because what he is thinking here is not identical to what he is thinking about. Before knowing God as his creator, Descartes has no assurance that mathematical equations correspond to reality. Only by knowing that a veracious God

is his creator can he be confident that the clear and distinct mathematical ideas that he is considering correspond to reality.

## Discussion

I think that the portion of Descartes' philosophy developed in my paper which calls for further discussion is his claim that his idea of God is contained within the idea he has of himself as a thinking thing, and that the relation between the idea of God and the idea that he has of himself as a thinking thing is like the relation between the technique of a painting, and the painting of which it is the technique. Descartes assumes, but so far as I can tell never proves, that he cannot be deceived about the relation between God and the self when he reflects, or meditates, on himself as a thinking thing. What I think that Descartes needs to consider is forgery in art, where art critics are misled about the artist who produced a work of art, because the technique revealed in the painting is a clever forgery. Similarly, how does Descartes know that he was not created by the Evil Genius, who has misled him into believing that he was created by God, while the truth is that he was created by the Evil Genius? Descartes can still be confident that he exists as a thinking thing, but he can have no confidence that he was created by a veracious God. If Descartes cannot respond to this concern, then the Cartesian enterprise in the *Meditations* cannot proceed beyond his knowledge of himself as a thinking thing, established in the second meditation.

## About the Author

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