# The Cartesian Circle

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## The Threat of Circularity

At the beginning of Meditation Three, Descartes proposes the Truth Rule: “So I now 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; CSM 2:24). [[1]](#footnote-1) Descartes proceeds to argue for God’s existence, the details of which need not concern us here. Importantly, the arguments seem to proceed on clearly and distinctly perceived premises. The language of clearness and distinctness is evident throughout the Cosmological Argument in Meditation Three, but perhaps most obvious in (AT 7:46, CSM 2:31-2); it is also especially pronounced in the Ontological Argument in Meditation Five, notably in (AT 7:68-9; CSM 2:47). However, Descartes appeals to God to justify the Truth Rule at the end of Meditation Four:

…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; CSM 2:43)

Commentators have been worried by the threat of circularity since the *Meditations* have been read. It seems that Descartes uses clear and distinct perceptions to establish God’s existence, but then uses God to guarantee clear and distinct perceptions. Nevertheless, scholars have been virtually unanimous in thinking the circularity is only apparent. One reason is that Descartes was aware of and rejected the objection of circularity when it was raised to him in the objections and replies to the *Meditations*. Given Descartes’ unquestionable brilliance, we would expect him to avoid such a glaring error regardless, what more given his consideration and rejection of the objection in question. Another reason is that if we admit the circle, Descartes' project in the *Meditations* loses a great deal of its philosophical interest and beauty; the anti-skeptical project would be not just in error but fundamentally misguided in a sense. Even if Descartes’ argument was circular (and we have good reason to believe it is not), we still should try and discern a non-circular argument due to considerations of philosophical worth.

Doing justice to the sheer volume of interpretative strategies for avoiding the circle is simply not possible given considerations of space, and so I am forced to pick my battles. My chapter will focus on ‘protected class’ strategies, but will first briefly overview other major accounts.

## Psychological Certainty

Some commentators, such as Rubin (1977), Larmore (1984), Bennett (1990), and Loeb (1992), claim that Descartes only aims at achieving psychological certainty rather than epistemic justification, and thus his argument involves no circularity.[[2]](#footnote-2) All that the argument for God’s existence is meant to accomplish is the banishment of psychological doubt at will by recalling the demonstration of the Truth Rule as and when required (Loeb 1992: 221); the epistemic problem is simply not Descartes’ concern.

There is undoubtedly textual substantiation for this view. Descartes speaks often of certainty and firmness of conviction, most clearly in the Second Replies, wherein he also intimates that his project is not concerned with “absolute” truth and falsity *per se*:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged “absolute falsity” bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. (AT 7:144-5; CSM 2:103)

However, this interpretation has its difficulties. At other times, Descartes characterizes his project as deeply concerned with truth and falsehood, for instance in the opening sentence of the *Meditations* (AT 7:17; CSM 2:12). One might also ask what certainty is worth without the *right* to be certain. Wouldn’t instilling certainty without justification merely be a form of self-deception? On such an interpretation, would Descartes have been just as well off had he simply brainwashed himself and his readers into being convinced that skeptical scenarios do not hold? Loeb (1992: 223) speculates that Descartes might reply to this objection by pointing out the costs of rejecting the ‘illusion’. Nevertheless, there seems much that is missing in a reading of Descartes as merely pursuing psychological certainty.

## Temporal Interpretations

Temporal interpretations, as I use the label, argue that what God guarantees are not clear and distinct perceptions themselves, but rather has something to do with past clear and distinct perceptions, thus avoiding the circle. For instance, the ‘memory’ interpretation defended by Doney (1955) argues that Descartes invokes the existence of a non-deceiving God merely to guarantee the *memory* of past clear and distinct perceptions. In similar vein, Heller (1996) argues that clear and distinct perceptions are known permanently unless a “neutralizing possibility” (such as a deceiving demon) is brought into play; God is invoked to eliminate this possibility, ensuring permanent knowledge of clear and distinct perceptions. Another temporal interpretation is defended by Etchemendy (1981), who argues that God is invoked to demonstrate that what was previously clearly and distinctly perceived is still true now. Similarly, on Della Rocca’s (2005) account God’s existence is invoked to guarantee that what was clearly and distinctly perceived in the past was true even at the time that it was clearly and distinctly perceived.

Such interpretations are suggested by some passages, for instance in his replies:

…when I said that we can know nothing for certain until we are aware that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions which can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments by means of which we deduced them. (AT 7:140; CSM 2:100)

To begin with, we are sure that God exists because we attend to the arguments which prove this; but subsequently it is enough for us to remember that we perceived something clearly in order for us to be certain that it is true. This would not be sufficient if we did not know that God exists and is not a deceiver. (AT 7:246; CSM 2:171)

However, there are also textual worries. Perhaps the most significant is that Descartes often seems to invoke God’s existence to guarantee all clear and distinct perceptions, and not just, say, their memories. Examine the following passage from the *Discourse*:[[3]](#footnote-3)

But if we did not know that everything real and true within us comes from a perfect and infinite being then, however clear and distinct our ideas were, we would have no reason to be sure that they had the perfection of being true. (AT 6:39; CSM 1:130)

See also the following passage from Meditation Three:

… I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else. (AT 7:36; CSM 2:25)

## Presumption in Favour of the Intellect

Another strategy, advocated by Frankfurt (1965) and Curley (1978: Ch.5), is to read Descartes as maintaining a presumption in favour of the intellect – all that is needed to defeat skepticism is to remove any potential road-blocks, such as the “very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical” reason for doubt that is the deceiving God hypothesis (AT 7:36; CSM 2:25), and the path is clear to trusting our clear and distinct perceptions. According to this view, the burden of proof is on the skeptic rather than the meditator, and Descartes’ arguments merely demonstrate that the skeptic has not given us sufficient reason to abandon our faith in the intellect.

One worry regarding this view is that it seems to drastically downplay Descartes’ ambitions. Removing road-blocks is a much less interesting project than the one Descartes seems to be engaging in. Indeed, in the opening passage of the *Meditations* Descartes speaks of his intentions to “demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations”, as well as the “general demolition of my opinions” (AT 7:17-8; CSM 2:12). This talk of starting afresh seems incongruous with Descartes maintaining a presumption in favour of the intellect from the start.

## “Protected Class” Strategies

“Protected Class” strategies read Descartes as taking a subset of clear and distinct perceptions to be independently justified; using these protected truths, he then justifies the rest of our clear and distinct perceptions. This clearly avoids circularity; justification runs in a linear rather than circular fashion. However, for such an account to be both philosophically and textually plausible, one needs to undertake the difficult task of spelling out the criteria for being in the protected class. What should a criterion of protectedness look like? Ideally, the criterion should satisfy at least the following three conditions.

(1) The criterion of protectedness should make sense of why the protected class should indeed be protected. Protected truths should possess some special epistemic feature that render them antecedently justified. In other words, the criterion should be at least somewhat philosophically tenable; we should not simply read Descartes as arbitrarily stipulating that certain truths are immune to skepticism.

(2) The criterion of protectedness should plausibly apply the in the case of the *cogito*, which should be the paradigm of a protected truth for such accounts. If one thinks that there are some protected truths, the *cogito* is surely one of them.

(3) The criterion of protectedness should make sense of Descartes’ arguments for God’s existence. If God’s existence is a protected truth or derives from them, then Descartes’ arguments for God’s existence should involve this criterion in some way.

In the following sections I will examine three different approaches within this category.

## Natural Light

One approach within the “protected class” category of interpretations is to treat as protected those truths that are illuminated by what Descartes calls “the natural light”.[[4]](#footnote-4) This strategy (notably endorsed by Rose 1965, Morris 1973, Murdoch 1999, and Rickless 2005) certainly has a measure of textual substantiation. For one, Descartes does sometimes say that perceptions revealed by the natural light are exempt from doubt:

Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – for example that from the fact I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on – cannot be in any way open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. (AT 7:38-9; CSM 2:27)

Indeed, the above passage explicitly mentions the *cogito*, and thus the “natural light” criterion satisfies condition (2). Moreover, Descartes takes the causal principle that he uses to establish God’s existence in the Third Meditation to be perceived by the natural light:

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. (AT 7:40; CSM 2:28)

And he also notes that the Cosmological Argument as a whole is verified by the natural light:

If one concentrates carefully, all this is quite evident by the natural light. (AT 7:47; CSM 2:32)

Thus, the “natural light” criterion satisfies condition (3) as well.

However, this account falls short on condition (1): we lack satisfactory philosophical reasons for thinking that being illuminated by the natural light grants epistemological immunity from skepticism. Rose (1965: 89) accepts that on the “natural light” interpretation “[Descartes’] metaphysics is based upon a great many premises whose ‘metaphysical certainty’ is at best highly questionable, and at worst non-existent.” Similarly, Morris (1973: 187) concedes that there appears to be no principled distinction between the revelations of the natural light and “prejudices” that Descartes “once sought to abandon”. Rickless (2005: 320) argues that the truths illuminated by the natural light are protected in virtue of their self-evidence. But of course, this begs the question as to *why* the protected truths are self-evident – what constitutes “self-evidence”, and do all the propositions illuminated by the natural light fit this mould? Indeed, Rickless (2005: 325, ft.21), like Morris, concedes that on his reading, some truths that Descartes identifies as illuminated by the natural light can appear arbitrarily selected for this privilege, notably in the case of his Cosmological Argument. [[5]](#footnote-5)

Indeed, textual constraints render it difficult for the “natural light” account to give a philosophically satisfying criterion for protectedness. For instance, as Rickless (2005: 334, ft.20) points out, our awareness of our freedom is also illuminated by the natural light (c.f. AT 7:191; CSM 2:134 and AT 8A:19; CSM 1:205); it is difficult to envision a principled and epistemically satisfying criterion for protectedness that enables awareness of our freedom to count as a protected truth. Thus, ‘natural light’ accounts have genuine difficulties in satisfying condition (1).

## Conditions of Doubt

Broughton’s (2002) “conditions of doubt” interpretation maintains that Descartes justifies the protected truths by demonstrating that they are conditions of his method of doubt by means of “dependence arguments”; thus, these protected truths cannot be legitimately doubted by the lights of this enterprise, which is to say, attempts to doubt them are self-stultifying within the framework of the enterprise. From these protected truths, Broughton contends that Descartes establishes the existence of a non-deceiving God; this in turn justifies our clear and distinct perceptions, allowing us to escape skepticism while nevertheless averting circularity.

There are a few problems that arise for this interpretation. First, if protected truths are simply those that are established by dependence arguments, then this delivers some unintuitive results. For example, ‘I am currently doubting’ is a proposition such that doubting it presupposes its truth; yet granting it protected status seems unintuitive given that it is in fact often false when entertained. Indeed, Broughton (2002: 181) explicitly recognises the proposition that “I am doubting almost everything” as a protected truth. Thus, this criterion seems extensionally problematic, casting doubt on how well it satisfies condition (1).

A second, more serious problem is that Broughton’s account merely relativizes Descartes’ justification for protected truths to the meditator’s specific method of doubt, as Rickless (2005: 331) contends. This accusation comes forth most clearly in Broughton’s treatment of Descartes’ Cosmological Argument in the Third Meditation. Broughton reads the argument as proceeding as follows:

1. I exist.
2. I have an idea of God.
3. The cause of an idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has of objective reality.
4. Therefore, God exists.

“I exist” is a protected truth because my existence is a condition of my attempting to doubt this proposition. This ensures that Broughton’s account satisfies condition (2) in applying to the *cogito*, as well as helping to make sense of the Cosmological Argument. “I have an idea of God” is presupposed by the method of doubt and is therefore protected, because as Descartes points out, to doubt is to recognise one’s own lack of perfection – specifically, a lack of omniscience – which in turn presupposes an understanding of the nature of perfection itself, i.e. God’s nature as an omnipotent, existing non-deceiver (AT 7:45-46; CSM 2:31).

Broughton takes premise 3 to be a specific causal formulation of the principle of sufficient reason (roughly, that everything has a reason for existence).[[6]](#footnote-6) She argues that the causal principle of sufficient reason is presupposed by Descartes’ method of doubt, because the method of doubt, used as a methodological tool *aimed at achieving truth*, assumes that we believe propositions for *some* reason or other (whether this reason is a deceiving demon, or more straightforwardly because the propositions are true). If we do not assume that there must be a causal reason for our beliefs, the method of doubt gets us no closer to truth: even in ruling out every possible skeptical scenario that casts doubt on a particular proposition, we cannot conclude that we believe the proposition because it is true, as it might simply be an inexplicable brute fact that we do believe it. To put the point another way, Broughton reads Descartes’ method of doubt as presupposing a causal account of error – there must be sufficient causal reason for our beliefs being what they are, otherwise dismissing skeptical scenarios does nothing to help us attain truth. Thus the causal principle of sufficient reason is a condition of doubt aimed at achieving truth, and is therefore a protected truth.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The worry of relativization can now be explicated with reference to Broughton’s treatment of Descartes’ Cosmological Argument. The worry is that on Broughton’s account, the justification for Descartes’ causal principle of sufficient reason is clearly relativized to the meditator’s particular method of doubt. The protected status of this principle rests on the fact that a method of doubt that aims at truth by dismissing various possible causes of error (viz. skeptical scenarios) presupposes some form of the causal principle of sufficient reason. Putting aside the question of whether the exact version of this principle that Descartes’ method of doubt presupposes is strong enough to play the role he intends it to play in the Cosmological Argument, the problem is that this justification does nothing to engage with skeptics who employ *different* methods of doubt, and/or aims with respect to doubting. For example, the meditator is unable to engage with the skeptic who, rather than entertaining skeptical scenarios in order to attain doubt, instead does so through meditation in order to remove from the mind all possible justifications of propositions. The meditator is also unable to engage with a skeptic who aims by doubting not to discover truth but rather to attain a Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment. Such breeds of skeptics would not have to presuppose the causal principle of sufficient reason, and it would then be open to them to deny Descartes his key premise for the Cosmological Argument. Thus, although Broughton’s careful analysis of the Cosmological Argument enables her account to satisfy condition (3), it does so at the cost of sacrificing condition (1), since the worry of relativization undermines our reason for thinking protected truths to be indeed epistemically protected. Indeed, Broughton (2002: 145) concedes that her treatment of Descartes’ Cosmological Argument is philosophically unsatisfactory: ‘”I must confess that although I think Descartes’ way of identifying *inner* conditions of doubt in the Second Meditation is of intrinsic philosophical interest, I cannot say the same for his effort to show that God’s existence is also a condition of doubt.”

The worry of relativization is also highlighted by Broughton’s need for principles of logical inference in justifying the existence of a non-deceiving God in the Cosmological Argument. For even if each premise for this conclusion was justified by a dependence argument, we would have no way of attaining the requisite conclusion without making use of rules of inference. However, Broughton’s justification for the principles of logical inference also seems overly relativized to the meditator’s particular method of doubt. Broughton (2002: 163) justifies logical principles on the basis that any rational enquiry – such as employing the method of doubt in order to attain truth – presupposes them. However, one may doubt without meaning to carry out any rational inquiry: again, one might be a wholly destructive skeptic, or simply aim for a Pyrrhonian suspension of belief.

A third worry is raised by Newman (2004: 105-7).[[8]](#footnote-8) He points out that because Broughton’s protected truths are justified inferentially (by dependence arguments) rather than being self-justified, the problem is merely put off rather than solved. For what justifies the dependence arguments? If it is their clearness and distinctness, the circle looms again. If it is the fact that each step is itself justified by a dependence argument, then a regress threatens, for what in turn justifies these further dependence arguments themselves? It seems that an internalist epistemology must bottom out somewhere with self-justified truths. This worry can also be applied more specifically to logical principles. Newman (2004: 123, ft.7) points out that if we are to justify logical principles by dependence arguments, then we must first employ logical principles in order to run these dependence arguments – but what justifies these logical principles in turn? Again, we are faced with the threat of a regress, which also threatens condition (1): if our reason for thinking protected truths to be protected leads to a regress, then this is strong reason for thinking that our criterion for protectedness to be philosophically problematic.

## Self-Stultification of Doubt

Although Broughton’s strategy initially seemed promising, it ran into some major issues. One, the threat of a regress. This would be resolved by giving some account whereby protected truths are self-justified. Two, the fact that the justification of protected truths are relativized to Descartes’ particular method of doubt. To overcome this, we require a criterion of protectedness that applies generally. One straightforward criterion of protectedness would this: a truth is self-justified iff *any* attempt to doubt the proposition (adequately understood) would be self-stultifying. This seems to address the philosophical objections to Broughton’s account, and seems to satisfy condition (1). And this criterion also seems to plausibly apply in the case of the *cogito*, satisfying condition (2). However, can such a criterion be applied to God’s existence, ensuring a satisfaction of condition (3)?

Here is one pass. Any attempt to doubt God’s existence will cause one to entertain the idea of God in one’s mind for two reasons. First, this is because to doubt X, one needs an idea of X, as Descartes points out in claiming that “we cannot doubt [some things clearly perceived by the intellect] unless we think of them…” (AT 7:145-6; CSM 2:104). Second, for the reason that Descartes himself cites in the Third Meditation, i.e. that the very act of doubting anything presupposes having an idea of God (AT 7.45-6; CSM 2:31). Given that we have an idea of God, adequately understood, we have an idea of His perfection. This perfection entails, among other things, His non-deceiving nature, and as highlighted by the Ontological Argument, His existence. In doubting that a non-deceiving God exists, we affirm that He does. Thus, the proposition that a non-deceiving God exists, like the *cogito*, is a protected truth.

Indeed, there seems to be a modicum of textual support for the above account. Descartes notes that in thinking of God, the meditator has to think of His existence:

I am not free to think of God without *existence* (that is, a *supremely perfect* being without a *supreme perfection*) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings. (AT 7:67; CSM 2:46)

Also, in the Second Replies, Descartes points out that there are some privileged perceptions such that, in doubting them, we have to think of them, and we cannot think of them without believing them to be true:

Now some [things clearly perceived by the intellect] are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true… For we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing they are true, as was supposed. Hence we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them. (AT 7:145-146; CSM 2:104)

Clearly, this strategy leans heavily on the Ontological Argument, which argues that God’s nature necessitates His existence, rather than the somewhat messier Cosmological Argument. Note importantly, however, that the Ontological Argument does not *justify* the belief in the existence of a non-deceiving God, but merely highlights a feature of God that renders this belief self-justified; it makes a point *about* the self-justification of this proposition, rather than grounding such justification.

However, this variant of the protected class strategy only partially satisfies condition (3): it makes sense of Descartes’ Ontological Argument, but not his Cosmological Argument. Moreover, this dependence on Meditation Five seems incongruous with Descartes’ dialectic in the Meditations. The Ontological Argument only appears in the Fifth Meditation, after Descartes takes the job of securing our clear and distinct perceptions to be done and dusted, as detailed in the Third and Fourth Meditations. In the Third Meditation, he takes himself to have established the existence of a non-deceiving God:

Altogether then, it must be concluded that the mere fact that I exist and have within me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists… It is clear enough from this that he cannot be a deceiver, since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect. (AT 7:51-52; CSM 2:35)

And he goes on to use this result to establish the truth of clear and distinct perceptions in the Fourth Meditations:

… if, whenever I have to make a judgement, I restrain my will so that it extends to what the intellect clearly and distinctly reveals, and no further, then it is quite impossible for me to go wrong. This is because every clear and distinct perception is undoubtedly something, and hence cannot come from nothing, but must have God for its author. (AT 7:62; CSM 2:43)

It would be decidedly peculiar for Descartes to make these claims before the moves of the Fifth Meditation, if indeed the Ontological Argument plays such a crucial role. And such an account seems to assign no meaningful role to the Cosmological Argument. As Abbruzzese (2007: 277-8) points out, Descartes refers to the Cosmological Argument as his “principle” (AT 7:14; CSM 2:10) and “chief” (AT 7:101; CSM 2:74) argument for the existence of a non-deceiving God. But it seems difficult to see how the Cosmological Argument could hope to establish that any attempt to doubt God’s existence would be self-stultifying.

Newman and Nelson (1999: 386) endorse such a strategy in maintaining that the existence of a non-deceiving God is self-justified; they argue that attempts to doubt the *cogito* and the existence of a non-deceiving God “are both self-stultifying insofar as attempting to deny them involves manifest repugnance” (Newman and Nelson 1999: 391). As Nelson (Forthcoming) puts it: “Just as the attempt to doubt one’s existence perforce leads to its affirmation, the attempt to metaphysically doubt one’s capacity for clearly and distinctly perceiving truth immediately leads to an intuition of the non-deceiving God.” As Newman and Nelson (1999: 387) recognize, their account leans much more heavily on the Ontological Argument than the Cosmological Argument. Yet they ingeniously attempt to accommodate Descartes’ dialectic by arguing that although God’s existence is initially put forward by the arguments in Meditation Three, it is only by Meditation Five that, through repeated meditation, we genuinely come to establish God’s existence, seeing it as a self-evident truth; indeed, the Ontological Argument is not so much an argument as something like an immediate intuition of God. The Cosmological Argument does not suffice for epistemic justification for God’s existence; epistemic justification comes later, when the grounds for God’s existence are subsequently *enhanced* by repeated meditation that eventually shows (by the end of the Fifth Meditation) that the truth of God’s existence needs no supporting arguments or premises – rather, it is self-evident and self-justified. Having climbed the ladder of the Cosmological Argument to get to the required heights, we can now kick it away.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Nevertheless, one might worry that although on the surface this account seems to allow the Cosmological Argument to play a role in the dialectic of the *Meditations*, it is less clear that this role is not superfluous. To establish the self-justificatory status of the existence of a non-deceiving God, what is required is that (a) doubting the existence of a non-deceiving God entails the possession of an idea of Him, and (b) an idea of a non-deceiving God must necessarily be instantiated. Only (a) seems to have its roots in the Third Meditation, but even this point might be thought to be established on other grounds. For Descartes does not need to maintain that *all* doubt presupposes an idea of God (as was argued for in the Third Meditation), but only that *doubting God* presupposes an idea of God. And this is entailed by Descartes’ claim that “we cannot doubt [some things clearly perceived by the intellect] unless we think of them…” (AT 7:145-146; CSM 2:104). Thus, it seems that the Cosmological Argument does not make a meaningful contribution in this respect.

If the Cosmological Argument is not meant to play an epistemic role on this account, perhaps it plays a merely psychological one, serving only to imprint the notion of God’s existence on the mind of the meditator, for the meditator to later perceive its self-evident status. But this still seems unsatisfactory, for it is unclear what relevant psychological role the Cosmological Argument could play that the Ontological Argument could not, since the latter seems perfectly capable of imprinting the notion of God as existing and non-deceiving. Why not simply present the Ontological Argument directly? Why bother with the Cosmological Argument at all? Thus, it seems unlikely that the Cosmological Argument is doing honest work on such an interpretation.

Newman and Nelson (1999: 399, ft.30) deny this, claiming that the Third Meditation plays a role that the Fifth Meditation cannot. The critical result that Newman and Nelson think to issue from the Third Meditation is that

… from the mere fact that I have cognition of an omni-perfect (and thus self-grounded) being, it follows that this very being is the bottom-most, ontological ground of my own cognitive nature. (Newman and Nelson 1999: 383)

The reason they think this result to be crucial is that it halts “the epistemic regress by grounding the C&D Rule in the ultimate divine guarantor – the ontological ground of all grounds.” The thought seems to be that, to avoid the regressive problem posed by what they call “meta-critical doubt” – that is, doubt raised about the veracity of one’s cognitive faculties – it must be established that God is ‘the bottom-most, ontological ground of my own cognitive nature’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Even if it is granted that there is a regress worry here, I must confess that I fail to see why avoiding regress requires the Third Meditation. To halt an *epistemic* regress, what is crucial is that we found our truths on a bottom-most *epistemic* rather than an *ontological* “ground of all grounds.” Of course, Newman and Nelson might simply be making the point that insofar as God is the bottom-most ontological ground of *my cognitive nature*, He is therefore also my bottom-most epistemic ground. But the result that that God is the bottom-most epistemic ground hardly seems exclusive to the Third Meditation. For the Ontological Argument establishes the existence of a God which is both omnipotent and non-deceiving – thus acting as the required “ultimate divine guarantor” – and this is surely enough to establish that God is the bottom-most epistemic ground. Even if this result is required to halt a regress, the Third Meditation still appears superfluous to the dialectic.

Of course, this objection is perhaps merely a minor quibble, given that the “self-stultification of doubt” strategy seems more successful than its competitors in the “protected class” category. As mentioned earlier, all the “protected class” accounts examined above seem able to accommodate condition (2), since these criteria can plausibly be read as applying to the *cogito*. However, unlike “natural light” and “conditions of doubt” strategies, this account manages to satisfy condition (1) of a criterion of protectedness, which is to say it satisfactorily explains why protected truths should indeed be protected (in this case because doubting such truths is self-stultifying). Admittedly, this account does not seem entirely successful at accounting for condition (3), since it faces some difficulties accommodating Descartes’ emphasis on the Cosmological Argument. But given the varied and often seemingly contradictory texts regarding this fraught matter, it is not surprising that no interpretation unqualifiedly fits all the texts.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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Newman, L. (2004) “Rocking the Foundations of Cartesian Knowledge: Critical Notice of Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*,” *Philosophical Review*, 113.1: 101–125.

Newman, L. and Nelson, A. (1999) “Circumventing Cartesian Circles,” *Noûs* 33.3” 370–404.

Rickless, S. (2005) “The Cartesian Fallacy Fallacy,” *Noûs*, 39: 309–336.

Rose, L. (1965) “The Cartesian Circle,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26.1: 80–89.

Rubin, R. (1977) “Descartes's Validation of Clear and Distinct Apprehension,” *The Philosophical Review* 86.2: 197–208.

## Further Reading

Della Rocca, M. (2011) “Taking the Fourth: Steps toward a New (Old) Reading of Descartes,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 35: 93–110. (An ingenious and interesting article that argues that there is a threat of another, more serious, circle in Meditation Four – the idea is that Descartes argues that clear and distinct perceptions are true because we should we should assent only to clear and distinct ideas, yet we should assent only to clear and distinct ideas precisely because they are true.)

DeRose, K. (1992) “Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and *Scientia*”, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73.3: 220–238. (In a way the reverse of the “protected class” strategy, this account holds that we begin with clear and distinct perceptions with a lower level of certainty than *scientia*, and work our way up to a higher level of justification via the arguments for God’s existence. Protected class strategies work their way *down*, starting with independently justified premises, proceeding to guarantee premises with lower levels of justification.)

Frankfurt, H. (1962) “Memory and the Cartesian Circle”, *The Philosophical Review* 71.4: 504 – 511. (Raises some very influential objections to the memory interpretation.)

Kenny, A. (1970) “The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths”, *The Journal of Philosophy* 67.19: 685–700. (A classic paper on the Cartesian Circle.)

Williams, B. (1978) *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Penguin Books. (An excellent book for students and scholars alike.)

## Related Topics

Doubt (Chapter 8); The Cogito (Chapter 10); God (Chapter 15); Descartes and Epistemology (Chapter 40).

## Contributor Biography

Hsueh Qu is an Assistant Professor at the National University of Singapore. He works largely on early modern epistemology with a focus on Hume, although he maintains an interest in early modern philosophy in general.

1. Reference to Descartes’ work include two sets of volume and page numbers: AT numbers refer to *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1904), edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery; meanwhile, CSM numbers refer to *Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), edited and translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bennett (1990) hedges somewhat, arguing that Descartes’ project was also concerned with truth, with some conflation occurring between truth and certainty. Della Rocca (2005: 6) reads Frankfurt (1970) as endorsing such an interpretation, although he notes that Frankfurt is difficult to classify. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Della Rocca (2005, Section.4) addresses this objection in some detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A contrary view of the natural light is raised by Della Rocca (2005: 20), who maintains that the natural light is simply the faculty of clear and distinct perceptions; therefore, the truths illuminated by the natural light do not constitute a smaller “protected class” of clear and distinct perceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Murdoch (1999: 231) argues that what is perceived by the natural light is true, because there could not be another faculty by which one could discern that such perceptions were false. This seems philosophically unmotivated, and so does not really help us with satisfying condition (1). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course, establishing that everything has a reason for existence does not in itself entail the more specific (and controversial) claim that ‘the cause of an idea must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has of objective reality’, and it is the latter (or something close to it) that Descartes requires for his Cosmological Argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In correspondence, Don Garrett suggests that Broughton’s account only shows that we should accept the causal principle of sufficient reason relativized to those beliefs that we are aiming to doubt, rather than a general causal principle of sufficient reason; after all, only the former has to be presupposed by Descartes’ method of doubt. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Newman also raises a battery of textual objections against Broughton’s view, which I cannot do justice to here. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Thus, one major difference this account has from other “protected class” strategies such as Broughton (2002) is that while the latter antecedently exempt a class of truths from skepticism, the former only subsequently enhances our grounds for believing these truths (Newman and Nelson 1999: 386). Newman and Nelson (1999: 374) take this to be a strength of their position, given that it helps accommodate various texts that suggest that hyperbolic doubt applies to all clear and distinct perceptions prior to establishing God’s existence; these texts are also problematic for temporal accounts, as explained earlier. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Newman and Nelson (1999: 382) note that these steps are necessary but not sufficient to halt the potential regress. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Acknowledgements to be added later. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)