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The Bearing of the Cartesian Circle on Descartes' *Meditations*

Descartes begins his "Meditation One" by saying that he has long-since realized that the opinions of his youth were largely erroneous. He points out that many of his subsequent opinions have built upon these and that their faulty foundation makes them prone to error. He proceeds to set aside a period of time for nothing but philosophizing and determining which facts are true and what he can logically believe. He begins by assuming that absolutely nothing he knows is true and from there attempts to build a solid foundation on which he can place his trust in what he perceives to be the world. Through his musings he determines one undeniable fact, as distilled in another of his works, *Discourse on Method*: *Cogito ergo sum*; I think, therefore I am. He determines this by applying certain hypotheses to reality that could conceivably affect his perception of the world. The first supposed situation is that Descartes could be dreaming when he thinks that he is awake. While this may account for many possibly illusory situations, the most all encompassing hypothesis is the Evil Genius Hypothesis. In this situation Descartes supposes that there is an evil genius that relentlessly tricks his senses and deceives him, making every fact known by the employ of Descartes' faculties untrustworthy. His logical process goes as such: While all of my thoughts and perceptions may be deceived or erroneous, it cannot be made false that I think these thoughts. The definition of "I" is still highly debatable, but "I" am a thinking being nevertheless (Descartes, 50). Succinctly, as parallel with the Evil Genius Hypothesis, Descartes states in "Meditation Two" that the evil genius "will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something," (Descartes, 50). As momentous as it is to determine this single unrelenting truth, this fact is not enough on which to base the truth of further suppositions to the point of trusting his faculties. Any of these could easily be rendered dubious by Descartes' Evil Genius Hypothesis. Because this hypothesis is so all-encompassing, Descartes, building on a theistic framework, determines that he must prove the

existence of God in order to put trust in his faculties. The logic present is that God would not allow him to be deceived in the manner of the the Evil Genius Hypothesis. I will argue that Descartes' argument to this end is unsound and that his position on the matter of skepticism is invalid due to the logical fallacy of the Cartesian Circle.

In “Meditation Three” Descartes attempts to define what it is that allows him to believe that something is true. He suggests that he may consider anything he “clearly and distinctly” perceives to be true (Descartes, 53). However, this same principle has proved to be untrustworthy when Descartes applied it to many of his preconceived notions. As he suggests, the evil genius may very well be tricking him into thinking these things, even the general principle itself; he has no good reason to trust his faculties in this case. Thus, by Descartes' logic, the only way he can have trust in his faculties is to know that he is not being deceived. Descartes sets out to determine whether a deceiving God exists or, indeed, a God at all, for the only way to trust his faculties is by proving the non-existence of the evil genius by proving the existence of God. We can assume that Descartes is referring to the traditional Christian God, as the evil genius is essentially a ne'er-do-well god in its own right, but the only thing Descartes claims he must know is that this God would not deceive him. Descartes' logical premises to this end are as such: Descartes groups his thoughts into categories in order ascertain their origins. He determines some to be innate (a priori), adventitious (a posteriori, or known by experience), and some “produced by” Descartes himself (Descartes, 54). This third category of thoughts Descartes deems to be fabrications, things derived from within himself. Descartes questions whether the things he senses actually occur externally and how he might trust these apparitions as real and not housed solely within his mind (fabrications). He considers that ideas that represent external objects contain more “objective reality” than figments or imaginings based on the objects. Descartes discusses his idea of degrees of reality synonymously with degrees of perfection. In terms of cause and effect, he claims, nothing can originate from a cause with a lesser degree of perfection or reality than itself. For instance, a table cannot come from a tree with any lesser properties than the table has—the table cannot be of harder consistency or larger mass than the tree from which the craftsman made it. Furthermore, his *idea* of the table has no more reality or perfection

that the actual, material table, and ideas cannot be the cause of objects. Descartes states that he has an idea of an infinite, unbounded, perfect being. By this logic, he further claims that there must such a being with the greatest degree of reality and perfection and that this being—God—is the cause of all things, as all things inherently have less perfection and reality than something with the greatest degree of reality. These premises seem to satisfy the proof for the existence of God and satisfy Descartes' condition that he may trust his faculties. The problem, which has come to be known as the Cartesian Circle, emerges early in his argument. In short, Descartes presupposes that he may trust his faculties in order to proceed with his premises in the proof of God's existence. The conclusion—the objective of Descartes' declared goal from the beginning of "Meditation Two"—is that he may trust his faculties and his understanding of the world. Descartes' premises towards this end, however, rely on that very assumption: Trust in his faculties. In order to take the logical steps necessary to prove God's existence and disprove skepticism, Descartes inferred that his degrees of reality theory was correct. Descartes presupposes that he may trust his own idea of degrees of reality because it is "evident [to him] by the light of nature," (Descartes, 55). The ambiguity of this term alone strikes a discord to the objective mindset with which he set out in "Meditation One." Such an idea, naturally evident as it may seem to Descartes, could conceivably have been suggested by the evil genius through some means. Thus, Descartes' argument is invalid due to circular reasoning as classically described by the Cartesian Circle.

The Cartesian Circle is fatal to Descartes' argument against skepticism as presented in his *Meditations*, but furthermore, Descartes cannot sufficiently modify his premises to adequately obtain validity without abandoning his criterion of certainty. From the beginning, Descartes' objective is to remove all assumption and discover what he may truly believe. This logic carries him through the discovery of the Cogito, but the problem arises when he tries to define further principles of truth. Descartes' own stringent demand for certainty makes his later argument toward God's existence invalid, as he has no sure foundation on which to build his argument. The only way for Descartes to proceed beyond the Cogito is by either making an assumption or inference, effectively abandoning his criterion of certainty. Such a move, however, would render any further argument unable to disprove skepticism as

well as allow for error in further judgments, the very ailment Descartes set out to cure in the beginning.

Works Cited

Descartes, Renee. "Meditations on First Philosophy." *Philosophical Problems: An Annotated Anthology*. Second Edition. Eds. Laurence BonJour and Ann Baker. Pearson Longman, 2008, pp. 46-64.