Circling Descartes

1.Introduction.

From its initial, pre-publication circulation amongst a group of his contemporaries right up to the present day, Descartes's *Meditations* has remained a highly controversial philosophical text. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of the text is whether a circular argument lies at its very heart – a circular argument which would, quite literally, destroy the very edifice of knowledge which Descartes had tried so hard to rebuild upon secure and solid foundations. In this paper I want to have another look at the Cartesian Circle and to argue that, for all the undoubted ingenuity of Descartes's various responses to the issue, a damaging circle remains in place and, moreover, I shall argue, it is a circle which outruns Descartes's standard resources for responding to the charge of circularity.

First a little scene-setting. One illuminating way of reading Descartes's *Meditations* is to see the text as incorporating the key elements of Descartes's responses to a range of issues which were in the air at the beginning of the 17th C, including his response to scepticism. The sceptical challenge, as it presented itself to Descartes, may be seen as a two-part challenge thrown down by those like Montaigne with whose work Descartes was familiar. The two parts of that challenge were:(i) to defeat scepticism a philosopher must be able to come up with at least one claim which lies beyond all doubt, a claim which can withstand the vast array of sceptical arguments which Montaigne set out in his *Apology* and elsewhere, a claim which must be sceptic-proof; and (ii) the philosopher must be able to reveal the criterion of truth and certainty which gives such a secure epistemic status to that allegedly sceptic-proof claim. Montaigne thought it unlikely that one could meet the first part of this challenge and was quite sure that, even if the first part could be met, the second part would then come into play and show that all attempts to defeat scepticism are, in the end, either infinitely regressive or circular.[1]

Descartes set out to meet the first part of Montaigne's challenge in *Meditations 1* and *2*. In *Meditation 1* he famously set out a series of sceptical challenges to the many sorts of knowledge claims we make, concluding 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.'[2] In *Meditation 2* he completed his answer to part one of Montaigne's challenge when he claimed that 'after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.'[3] Though the phrase *Cogito ergo sum* does not appear in the text of the *Meditations*, the passage just cited is generally seen as one of many 'Cogito passages' in Descartes's work and it is treated by Descartes in his various replies to objections as on all fours with the famous Latin tag. Thus Descartes saw the Cogito as providing his first sure and certain proposition and as providing him – and indeed any other conscientious meditator – with an answer to the first part of Montaigne's challenge.

In *Meditation 3* Descartes turned his attention to the second part of Montaigne's challenge i.e. he squared up to the task of revealing the Cogito's criterion of truth and certainty in a way which, he hoped, would not push him into any circular argumentation. Descartes tried to achieve this goal by suggesting that the criterion can

literally be 'read off' from the Cogito by anyone who paid close and careful attention to it. Such an attentive inquirer would just 'see' what that criterion is, it would leap out from the Cogito itself. Thus Descartes saw the criterion as already contained within the Cogito and not as the sort of separate and independent claim which underpinned Montaigne's view that all such enterprises are bound to end in circularity. Descartes wrote: '*In* this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting' and he went on to say 'I now seem able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.' [4]

By presenting his criterion in this manner Descartes thought he was pulling off a masterstroke in the battle against scepticism. Not only had he extracted his initial truth, the Cogito, from the very arguments of the sceptics themselves, but he had now revealed his criterion of clarity and distinctness (henceforth C+D) as already contained within that initial truth. His answer to the second part of Montaigne's challenge was now in place: he had a criterion available to him, a criterion which did not seem likely to push him into any circular argumentation.

With the answers to both parts of Montaigne's challenge now in place we would confidently have expected that Descartes would now get down to the exciting business of rebuilding the edifice of knowledge on secure foundations, and that he would henceforth simply deploy his C+D criterion in order to make substantial philosophical progress. The sceptic had been defeated, the first certainty had been found, the criterion of truth and certainty had been revealed – so surely it would be downhill all the way from here. At least that's what one might have expected. But, of course, that is not what happened!

2. Two preliminary worries.

However, trouble was already brewing in the very passage in which the criterion was stated. Note what Descartes said in that passage, paying particular attention to the words I have placed in italics: '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 I now *seem* to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true'.[5]

The occurrence of the word '*seem*' at this point signals a certain hesitancy on Descartes's part in advancing the criterion. The same hesitancy is expressed in another manner in his statement of the C+D criterion in the *Discourse*. There what he said was (again I have added the italics): 'So I decided that I could take it as a general rule that the things we conceive very clearly and very distinctly are all true; *only there is some difficulty in recognising which are the things that we distinctly conceive*.'[6] So though Descartes went on to assert the criterion in both places we can already detect that he had some niggling worries in the back of his mind.

One of those worries emerges more fully if we now turn to the second italicised passage in the statement of the C+D criterion in *Meditation 3*: '*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*'.

What this suggests is that if it could happen that the meditator clearly and distinctly perceived X and X turned out to be false, then obviously C+D perception could not be advanced as a criterion of truth. Further, given Descartes's well known comments about treating the doubtful as if it were false, we may legitimately gloss this by saying that the passage also suggests that if the meditator clearly and distinctly perceived Y and Y turned out to be subject to doubt, then, C+D perception could not be advanced as a criterion of certainty.[7] Now look at what Descartes wrote in the very next sentence of *Meditation 3*: 'Yet I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realised were doubtful. What were these? The earth, sky, stars, and everything else that I apprehended with the senses.'[8] In other words Descartes now seems to be offering for our consideration a list of items which he once took to be C+D, but which he now knows, on foot of the sceptical arguments of *Meditation 1*, were all either false or, at the very least subject to doubt.[9] So is the criterion already dead in the water within two sentences of its announcement?

Fortunately for Descartes the answer is no. He went on in the third paragraph of *Meditation 3* to distinguish between his cognitive access to the *ideas* of the earth, the sky and the stars and his cognitive access to items allegedly corresponding to those ideas and represented by them as existing in reality. Descartes made the point that had he confined himself to claims only about the content of the *ideas* involved, then the C+D status of such claims would have remained intact, it was only the more extensive claims about the alleged real existence of items beyond our ideas which caused trouble. He wrote: "Here was my mistake".[10] So Descartes had an answer to this first worry: we can be sure about the content of our ideas, but, at least at this early stage, we have no entitlement to make claims about the representational dimensions of those ideas. Let's call this 'the representational answer'.

However in paragraph four of *Meditation 3* he went on to express some more worrying thoughts about his new found criterion and it is these thoughts, and his response to them, which lead to the problem of the circle. He wrote: 'But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth?' The answer one would expect is, 'yes', he did see those things clearly and distinctly and surely they must rank amongst the items which are beyond doubt, items which are certainly true.

But at this point Descartes recalled that back in the sceptical onslaught of *Meditation 1* he had made use of the hypothesis of a deceptive God (henceforth DG) or an Evil Demon (henceforth ED) in order to push the sceptical case further than even the sceptics themselves had done.[11] In setting out that ploy, he had first considered the possibility that a DG might do the trick, but, for a variety of reasons, he had second thoughts about such a use of God. However, before setting the DG version of the hypothesis aside, he had suggested that such a DG could raise the possibility of doubt about even the most secure truths we think we have i.e. simple mathematical truths - and he specifically mentioned the claim that 2+3=5.[12] Descartes's thought was that such a DG could have so created him that he (Descartes) would take it that all kinds of things exist or are true even though they do not exist at all or are not true. Later when he replaced talk of a DG with the ED version of the hypothesis, the natural assumption is that the ED would have the power or capacity to so pervert our faculties

that the same range of truths would still be liable to doubt – including the claim that 2+3=5.[13]

Now in *Meditation 3*, when he remembered what he had previously written, Descartes began to worry a little more about the C+D criterion which he had just revealed to us. He wrote: 'Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they…(i.e. simple mathematical truths like 2+3=5)… were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye.'[14]

So here we have a second, and more interesting, example of an item which Descartes had once taken to be C+D (i.e. 2+3=5) but which could be rendered doubtful once we put the DG or ED hypothesis in place. Here 'the representational answer' seems of no use because it is implausible to suggest that the mistake Descartes might have made in the 2+3=5 case was that he went beyond the content of the ideas involved and also took himself to be sure and certain about some items in reality which those ideas were representing to him. When we think about 2+3=5 we do not think of them as representing items out there in reality – that is not the kind of mistake we ever make in such a case. So Descartes cannot get himself off the hook in this case by rehearsing a version of 'the representational answer' tailored to meet the problems now being posed by the case of 2+3=5'. Descartes recognises this and his response leads directly to the issues which give rise to the problem of the circle. He wrote:

'Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; *or even that* that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one.'[15]

Note that if we put this passage together with the earlier passages from paragraph four of *Meditation 3* we can see that Descartes was making intriguing use of a distinction between those occasions upon which he was paying direct attention to the claim that 2+3=5 and those occasions upon which the thought of the DG/ED came into his head and distracted his attention. He was suggesting that in the former case he could see no reason for any sort of doubt about claims like 2+3=5, whereas in the latter case, he conceded that doubts did indeed come into his mind. This is a point I will return to later and it is important to note that Descartes made use of that distinction in paragraph four of *Meditation 3*.

However, Descartes did concede that there is at any rate a 'slight…metaphysical' doubt left in place and he declared what his strategy for removing that slight doubt was going to be: '…in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt…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*.'[16] So to put an end to his remaining worries about the C+D criterion and its viability, Descartes undertook to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver. His thought was that with a non-deceptive God in place the power and epistemic status of the DG/ED hypothesis would be removed – the good God would, quite literally, trump the evil demon. His criterion would then be vindicated and the enterprise of reconstructing the edifice of knowledge would be back on track.[17]

3. The Circle emerges:

Descartes went on in *Meditation 3* to offer a proof of the existence of such a non-deceptive God and then, in *Meditations 4,5* and *6* he made use of this non-deceptive God to explain human error and to vindicate many of those cognitive claims which had been in abeyance since the sceptical onslaught of *Meditation 1*. This non-deceptive God is, thus, of great importance to Descartes's overall project and hence any problems which arise about Descartes's entitlement to such a God place the whole enterprise in jeopardy: hence the importance of the accusation of circularity. So how exactly does that accusation arise?

In the course of his proof of God in *Meditation 3*, Descartes made use of a fascinating premise – a premise which played a vital role in securing the success of the proof – a premise John Cottingham has aptly named 'The Causal Adequacy Principle' (henceforth CAP). That premise runs as follows: 'there must at least be as much (reality) in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause'.[18] This is an interesting and substantive premise, but what is even more interesting is what Descartes had to say about the nature and status of our cognitive access to it. Just before the CAP occurs Descartes said: 'it is manifest by the natural light'[19] In other words, Descartes took it that we know the CAP by 'the natural light'. Now if we ask what exactly that means, the answer which emerges is that the CAP is C+D perceived by the meditator. In other words the expression 'the natural light' is one which Descartes used to catch what he otherwise expressed by using the language of clarity and distinctness: to know X by 'the natural light' is to C+D perceive X.[20]

Now we have all the materials of the circle before us. Descartes has attempted to remove the 'slight metaphysical doubt' hanging over his C+D criterion by proving the existence of a good, non-deceptive God. However, in the course of that proof a vital premises, the CAP, is explicitly said by Descartes to be known by clear and distinct perception i.e. a vital premises in the proof is said to be itself a piece of C+D perception. The immediate thought which presents itself is this: if the proof of God was intended in some way to vindicate the C+D criterion, isn't there something fishy about appealing, in the course of that very proof, to a premise whose epistemic basis turns out to be C+D perception. It all looks rather circular doesn't it? And, indeed, that is how the movement of thought involved struck several of those who read the *Meditations* prior to its first publication. The objection that a circular argument is involved turns up in the set of objections to the *Meditations* collected by Mersenne, and it also, and more famously, turns up in the set of objections which were put together by Antoine Arnauld, one of Descartes's most celebrated contemporaries. It is customary to cite Arnauld's version of the objection as he puts the matter most succinctly – he writes: 'I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly

perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true.'[21]

The circularity charge is now standardly presented in a manner suggested by Willis Doney.[22] Let p stand for the proposition 'God exists and is not a deceiver' and let q stand for the proposition 'whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true'. We can then present the nub Arnauld's objection as follows:

Descartes seems committed to holding both:

>   (1) I can know that p only if I first know that q

>   and

>   (2) I can know that q only if I first know that p.

Presented in this way Descartes's argumentation seems clearly circular, so much so that one might wonder how a celebrated philosopher like Descartes could ever have failed to notice the circular reasoning involved. The answer is, perhaps, that Descartes did not think his argumentation circular at all!

4. Descartes's response to the circle objection:

Confronted with the objection Descartes responded with one of the neatest pieces of philosophical footwork in the history of the discipline. He suggested that to make sense of what he was trying to say, and to see that there is no circle involved, we need to notice that we can take talk of C+D perception in two different ways. (a) Talk of C+D perception can refer to those occasions upon which a person is actually directly attending to the item which is said to be clearly and distinctly perceived. Thus when I am actually paying careful and deliberate attention to the claim that $2+3=5$, then I may be said to be clearly and distinctly perceiving that $2+3=5$. Descartes referred to this sort of C+D in the reply to Arnauld as 'what we *in fact* perceive clearly'[23] Let's call this first sort of clear and distinct perception $C+D^1$.

However, there is a second sense in which we may talk of clearly and distinctly perceiving something. (b) In this second sense when we talk of C+D perception we are talking about having clearly and distinctly perceived something at some time in the past, but we are no longer actually paying direct attention to it. Thus, suppose that yesterday I C+D perceived the claim that $2+3=5$, and was then paying direct attention to it, but now I am using that claim as one ingredient in a wider mathematical setting, and I'm no longer explicitly attending to it, then it is proper to talk of C+D in this second sense. Descartes characterised this as 'what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion.'[24] Let's call it $C+D^2$.

Then comes the masterstroke. Descartes suggests that the guarantee of God provided by the proof is needed only to back up $C+D^2$ – it was never his intention to see $C+D^1$ as requiring divine support. Moreover, in the process of arguing for the existence of God in *Meditation 3* the only sort of C+D involved is $C+D^1$, so there is no circle. His

clearest statement of the central point here is in the reply to Mersenne's version of the objection: '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.*'[25]

If we now set out Doney's formula for capturing the circularity charge, but incorporate into it Descartes's distinction between $C+D^1$ and $C+D^2$, we can see that the original, very obvious circularity is removed at a stroke. When we do this the result is:

Descartes is committed to both:

(1) I can only know that God exists and is not a deceiver, if I first know that whatever I $C+D^1$ is true.

and

(2) I can only know that whatever I $C+D^2$ is true, if I first know that God exists and is not a deceiver.

There is no obvious circularity involved here as in each case the sort of C+D referred to is different. Circularity would only be present if both (1) and (2) contained references to $C+D^1$, or if both contained references to $C+D^2$. That is not what they contain, so things are looking up for Descartes – he seems to have found a way of expressing the nub of the issue without any obvious circularity emerging. So is Descartes off the hook then? Is the project or rebuilding the edifice of knowledge now back on track with a vindicated criterion of C+D perception firmly in place? Has the sting finally been taken out of the DG/ED hypothesis?

Before directly responding to those questions let's first see whether the response Descartes made is a plausible one in the light of what he actually had to say in *Meditation 3* – in other words is it plausible for Descartes to suggest that the distinction between the two sorts of C+D was in place in his treatment of the issues of God and the criterion in *Meditation 3*. In my view, Descartes's move does have firm roots in what he had to say at that point and indeed, elsewhere. To see that this is so let's look again at the key passage in paragraph four of *Meditation 3* which is central to the whole debate:

'…(i) whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind's eye. (ii)Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; *or even that* two and three added together are more or less than five…'[26]

The passage numbered (ii) is clearly suggestive of C+D^1 i.e. of the sort of C+D perception which is involved when a person is paying direct attention to what is being perceived. The passage numbered (i) suggests that it is only when a person's attention is taken away from the direct perception of some item that a doubt about it arises. This suggests that it is cases of C+D^2 which are involved. The passage also suggests that no additional epistemic support is needed for C+D^1 perceptions, whereas C+D^2 perceptions clearly need additional support of some sort and that is what the proof of God supplies. Now if this strategy is what Descartes had in mind, then he can be said to have opted for what some modern commentators have called the 'criterion-not-needed strategy' or the 'antecedent exemption' strategy in responding to the circle. The expression 'criterion-not-needed' indicates that Descartes held the view that the general C+D rule (C+D^2) does not need to be available during the execution of the proof of God's existence. The reference to 'antecedent exemption' indicates the view that there were some pieces of C+D (i.e. the C+D^{1}s) which Descartes always thought of as exempt from the doubting strategy.[27]

Further support for the view that Descartes was working with a C+D^1/C+D^2 distinction and that, in particular he seems to have taken C+D^{1}s as exempt from doubt, can be had by looking at the famous 'atheist' passage in Descartes's reply to Mersenne's version of the circle objection. There Descartes wrote: 'The fact that an atheist can be "clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists.'[28]

Note that Descartes concedes that the atheist can have occurrent, or here and now, knowledge about triangles (since, presumably he is attending to the issues involved) but, because he hasn't got a non-deceptive God in his scheme of things, he cannot have secure knowledge over time on such issues. Thus the atheist can have C+D^1 in such cases, but can never have C+D^2.

Further support for elements of Descartes's view on these matters can be derived from two other sources. (1) One of Descartes's correspondents, Regius, wondered whether Descartes held the view that the truth of the axioms used in the proof of God was self-evident. Descartes replied as follows: 'This, I agree, is true, *during the time they are clearly and distinctly understood*, for our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly understands.'[29] This passage clearly suggests that such axioms are exempt from doubt – as long as we are attending to them: i.e. they are C+D^1.

(2) Later, in his exchanges with Burman on the issue of clarity, distinctness and God Descartes has this to say: 'If we did not know that all truth has its origin in God, then however clear our ideas were, we would not know that they were true, or that we were not mistaken – I mean, of course, when we were *not paying attention to them, and when we remembered that we had clearly and distinctly perceived them*. For, on other occasions, *when we do pay attention to the truths themselves, even though we may not*

know God exists, we cannot be in any doubt about them. Otherwise, we could not prove that God exists.' [30]

Together with the key passage from *Meditation 3*, these passages show that Descartes did indeed work with a $C+D^1/C+D^2$ distinction elsewhere as well as explicitly stating such a distinction in his replies to the objections. Moreover, they also show that he frequently explicitly asserted versions of the 'antecedent exemption view' i.e. the view that the category of $C+D^1$s was always exempt from doubt.

Thus, at the core of Descartes's response to the circle objection there lies the distinction itself and the antecedent exemption view of $C+D^1$s. So does that strategy work as well as Descartes thought it did? [31]

5. Problems with Descartes's strategy and the re-emergence of circularity:

I think at least two sorts of problems arise in connection with Descartes's strategy and, while the first may not be fatal to it, the second, in my opinion is. I will look at each in turn.

(A)A worry about CAP and the exemption strategy:

Though the exemption strategy suggests that Descartes never harboured any real worries about the status of simple claims such as 2+3=5, nevertheless the sceptical argumentation in *Meditation 1,* as well as the vacillitations in *Meditation 3,* suggest that things were never quite as simple and straightforward as that. As I have already noted, he does seem to use the DG/ED hypothesis in *Meditation 1* to raise the possibility of doubts about 2+3=5, and in *Meditation 3* the words I altered in the CSM text to read 'or even that' suggest at least some slight hesitation about declaring that the claim that 2+3=5 has the same epistemic standing as the Cogito. [32] This message is also carried, I think, by the occurrence of the word 'else' at the end of paragraph four of *Meditation 3*. [33] As I read this passage it would not be unreasonable to take it that Descartes is suggesting that, until the proof of God is in place, he cannot know with certainty anything other than the Cogito.

Now the general drift of the exemption strategy conflicts with this reading of Descartes. That strategy suggests that in addition to the Cogito, simple claims such as 2+3=5 must also be seen as exempt from doubt – at least when we are directly attending to them. According to the exemption strategists unless this is recognised there is no hope for Descartes. John Cottingham captures this very nicely: 'If Descartes is indeed introducing doubt about whether I can know the truth of such a simple proposition as "two plus three is five" at the time when I am intuiting it, there can be no hope of setting up the axioms needed to prove God's existence. The circle will indeed be insoluble…' [34]

However, I do not want to push the issue of the exemption strategy regarding the simple claim that 2+3=5, rather what I want to do is to focus on the suggestion, crucial to the proof of God, that exemption also extends to the CAP. As I noted at the time of its introduction, the CAP is an important and substantive principle which plays a pivotal role in the proof of God in *Meditation 3*. Descartes, in announcing the

principle, asserted that it was known by 'the light of nature' and, as we have seen, such talk in Descartes amounts to the claim that we have a C+D perception of the CAP. Now given the role the CAP plays in the proof and given Descartes's claim that the only sort of C+D which turns up in the proof is $C+D^1$, we must take it that he regarded the CAP as having $C+D^1$ status in the proof: that is he must have regarded the CAP as a truth about which a person could not entertain any doubts at least for as long as they were attending to it.

But does that not seem an implausible claim? Whatever chance we might have of getting general agreement that a claim like 2+3=5 is $C+D^1$ (while we are attending to it), I do not think that we could be at all so sure that we could get such agreement on a complex claim like the CAP. Surely there is a world of difference between simple claims like 2+3=5 and complex claims like the CAP, and surely it is implausible to see the antecedent exemption as extending to the CAP without further ado. As we have seen, Descartes thought that our minds were so constructed that when directly confronted by a piece of $C+D^1$ 'they cannot but admit what they distinctly conceive'.[35] But his own friend and associate, Mersenne, was not convinced that the CAP was as clear and evident as Descartes thought: his mind when confronted with it was not 'forced to admit' it.[36] Now it would, of course, be open to Descartes to respond that Mersenne, and indeed others who harboured doubts about the $C+D^1$ status of the CAP were simply not sufficiently careful in their cognitive access to that principle – and, perhaps, there is something to be said for that response. However, the objection might still be pressed that whatever about the obvious $C+D^1$ status of 2+3=5, there is at least room for argument about the status of the CAP – and, of course, it is CAP and not 2+3=5 which Descartes needs to carry off the proof.

So let me sum up my first objection to Descartes's response to the circle. It has two parts: (i) either Descartes has lingering doubts about the C+D status of 2+3=5 and they extend to the CAP or (ii) he sticks to his guns and exempts 2+3=5, but cannot plausibly extend that exemption to the CAP. In either case he would not be entitled to the level of C+D which the CAP must have in the proof, and, thus, in both cases the proof collapses and with it Descartes whole enterprise.

(B) Even if we grant exemption to the CAP a fatal circle remains in place:

My second objection to Descartes's response to the circle objection is designed to work even if we grant that the exemption strategy extends to the CAP *while we are directly attending to it*.

To see why I have this worry let's look again at just what Descartes had in mind when he said that a claim has $C+D^1$ status. In order to avoid the objection that I am imposing a view on Descartes, let's look at exactly what he wrote when he addressed this issue. In his 1640 letter to Regius he had explicitly marked out what I have called $C+D^1$ claims by saying that we could be sure they were true 'during the time they are clearly and distinctly understood', and in his reply to Mersenne's version of the circularity charge he suggested that what I have called $C+D^2$ claims arise when we are 'no longer attending…to' the claims involved - so presumably a claim has $C+D^1$ status when we are attending to it. This is confirmed by what he had to say to Burman where he characterised the claims I have called $C+D^1$ claims by saying that a person can be sure of such claims 'for so long as he does pay attention to them.'[37] Thus the

key difference, in Descartes's view, between $C+D^1$ and $C+D^2$ perceptions is that in the former the knower is explicitly and directly paying attention to the item said to be C+D perceived, whereas in the latter the person is no longer paying explicit and direct attention to the item said to be C+D perceived. To emphasise the point: if a C+D item is not being explicitly attended to then the status it has is $C+D^2$.

Now recall Descartes's strategy: with the $C+D^1/C+D^2$ distinction in place he argues that there is no circle because the proof of God contains only pieces of $C+D^1$ and it is only $C+D^2$s which require divine support. Let's now look once again at his execution of the strategy – this time giving him the benefit of the doubt and allowing that the CAP is indeed $C+D^1$ *while it is being explicitly and directly attended to.*

Now we might suggest a reconstruction of Descartes's proof of God in *Meditation 3* along the follow lines:

(i) Amongst my ideas is an idea of a perfect God.

(ii) The CAP: 'it is evident by the light of nature (i.e. clear and distinct) that, at the very least, there must be as much (reality) in the total efficient cause as there is in the effect of that same cause" [A principle Descartes claims applies as much to the causal account of ideas as it does to items like stones—see *Principles 1,17.*[38] - in talking about the causes of ideas he tends to say that there must be as much 'formal' (i.e. actual) reality in the cause of the idea as there is 'objective' (i.e. reality as represented) in the idea.]

(iii) I am an imperfect being (evidence? I doubt, err etc) and so (by (ii)) cannot be the adequate cause of a perfect idea like that of God. I do not possess sufficient 'formal' or actual reality to cause the 'objective reality' of a perfect God as represented in my idea of God. (Neither can any chain of imperfect causes be the cause of the idea of God)

(iv) But, also by (ii), my idea of God in (i) must have an adequate cause (i.e. there must be a cause of that idea which has the appropriate level of 'formal' or actual reality) - it cannot have come from nothing, nor can it have come from any lesser cause.

(v) Therefore, my idea of God must have as its cause a perfect being (God): so God must exist.

Notice that the CAP turns up in the second step in this argument and is then used throughout the argument in order to facilitate the emergence of the conclusion that God exists at step five. It is widely accepted that Descartes's proof is complex, difficult and controversial, so that the movement of thought from the first step to the conclusion is not quite as simple and straightforward as the schematic presentation suggests.

Let's now grant that when it turns up in step two of the argument the CAP is being directly and explicitly attended to and has the exempt $C+D^1$ status which Descartes requires. If we grant that, we can say, at this stage, that Descartes is only using the sort of C+D in the proof which his strategy requires i.e. $C+D^1$.

However, now think of Descartes at step four of the argument where he is, presumably, no longer paying the explicit and direct attention to CAP which secured the $C+D^1$ status for it back at step two. At step four he is remembering that he C+D perceived the CAP back in step two, and he is now relying on it and using it to make an additional argumentative move – he is no longer explicitly and directly attending to the CAP itself. If that is so, then at step four of the argument the status of the CAP has surely shifted from the $C+D^1$ category to the $C+D^2$ category so it follows that, in the course of the proof itself, Descartes is actually making use at the $C+D^2$ level of a crucial philosophical principle. But has he not all along conceded that the use of $C+D^2$s does require the guarantee of God and, at step four, *God is not yet available to him.* God only becomes available at step five – and, indeed, if my criticism holds, Descartes is not entitled to move to step five at all, so he never actually gets God into the picture. The circle is back in play: God is needed to vindicate reliance on $C+D^2$s yet a $C+D^2$ has now turned up inside the proof at step four. Since the proof depends on that step, it thus depends on something which is not available until after the proof has been completed. The proof thus self-destructs and Descartes's whole epistemic project implodes.

Notice the significance of this result. In response to the original charge of circularity Descartes had produced the $C+D^1/C+D^2$ distinction and had used it to show that there was no circle involved. His strategy turned crucially on the claim that while God was needed to vindicate the $C+D^2$s, only $C+D^1$s turned up in the proof of God. My claim is that because a $C+D^2$ *does* turn up in the proof not only does the proof fail and the circle remerge, but this time the $C+D^1/C+D^2$ distinction upon which his standard responses rely is of no use. That strategy is already in place and has given rise to this new version of the circle.

Some will, no doubt, object that I am being captious in taking this view of the way in which the CAP moves from being a $C+D^1$ at step two to being a $C+D^2$ at step four. Surely, it will be argued, this is an extravagant claim to make about the steps in an argument of this sort. I don't think so and, I think, Descartes is not entitled to that reply either. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* at *Rule 3* where Descartes made his famous distinction between intuition and deduction he had, amongst other things, argued that a crucial difference between the two was that, in a deduction, there is always a number of steps involved and the chances of error are greater because the person has to remember the various steps as the argument proceeds, even though at the time each step is taken it is actually intuited (i.e. $C+D^1$). Commenting on the overall view he has of such deductions Descartes wrote: 'deduction in a sense gets its certainty from memory'.[39] If this picture is right, then it does seem to follow that as one moves through an argument the earlier steps *even if they were perceived in the $C+D^1$ sense when originally taken* are being recalled or remembered at subsequent steps and thus fit the description Descartes uses for pieces of $C+D^2$ perception.

Earlier in *Rule 3* Descartes had given an example of such a deductive argument and it is instructive to look at it. The argument runs as follows: (Step 1) 2+2=4;(Step 2) 3+1=4; (Conclusion) hence 2+2 = 3+1.[40] Applying his view of deduction to this argument it follows that, at the outset, the claim 2+2=4 is intuited and has $C+D^1$ status, however at step two that claim is now being remembered and has only got $C+D^2$ status. Now if that is true in the case of such a simple argument, surely it is *a*

fortiori so when it comes to the moves which take place internal to the much more complex argument Descartes used to prove God's existence in *Meditation 3*. Thus not only am I not just being captious in suggesting as much – I am taking the line Descartes took about a much simpler piece of reasoning. Thus, once again, it follows that the proof of God is in trouble and that the trouble it is in is that it makes us of a kind of C+D which it was intended to vindicate.

6. A final card?

Has Descartes anything to say which might stop my objection in its tracks? Well, he has one final card to play. If we look at Descartes's discussion with Burman, we can see that one of the issues raised there concerns the number of items which a person can hold before his mind at any moment in time. The topic of direct and explicit attention to an item is central to the exchange between Descartes and Burman. What Burman had to say anticipates a central feature of my objection: 'But our mind can think of only one thing at a time, whereas the proof in question is a fairly long one involving several axioms…So one will not be able to keep the attention on all the axioms since one thought will get in the way of another.'[41]

Descartes, always quick on his feet, responded as follows: 'It is not true that the mind can think of only one thing at a time. It is true that it cannot think of a large number of things at the same time – but it can still think of more than one thing.'[42] Descartes went on to give an example of what he had in mind: 'I am now aware and have the thought that I am talking and that I am eating'.[43] He then went on to apply all of this to the issue of the proof of God's existence: '…since our thought is able to grasp more than one item in this way, it is clear that we are able to grasp the proof of God's existence in its entirety.'[44] Presumably what Descartes had in mind was that if we attend to it sufficiently carefully and attentively, and run over it often enough, we should be able to grasp the entire proof of God in a single, direct intuition thus removing any possible thought that any element of C+D^2 perception is involved: in such a scenario the entire proof would be grasped as a single piece of C+D^1.

This is a typically Cartesian move but I have to say that it strikes me as an implausible suggestion. Once again the issue turns on the vast difference between the simple example Descartes has given of two things we can think of at the same time, and the demands which thinking at the same time of all the complex components of the complete proof would involve. Sure, I can easily think that I am eating and that I am talking at the same time, but is it plausible to export that conclusion to the case in which what I'm supposed to be thinking at the same time is the complex proof of God set out in five steps earlier? In my opinion that is not a plausible claim to make.

One last comment on this final move by Descartes. Suppose we allow, for the sake of the argument, that a person could, over time, become so familiar with the proof of God that the whole proof could be grasped in a single complex thought, would that help Descartes in dealing with the circle? I do not think so because in the *Meditations* Descartes saw himself as moving forward philosophically in a particular way. He presented his understanding of this way of proceeding succinctly in his replies to Mersenne: 'The order consists simply in this. The items which are put forward first must be known entirely without the aid of what comes later…I did try to follow this order carefully in my *Meditations*.'[45] Now, if in order to achieve the desired C+D^1

status for the various elements in the proof of God, one had to run over those elements a number of times, familiarise oneself with them, and then grasp the proof as a whole, such a procedure would conflict with Descartes's overall understanding of the strategy at work in the *Meditations*. For the proof in *Meditation* 3 to do the trick for Descartes it has to work the first time – and he has to know that it works. If it doesn't work the first time, then God does not emerge at all at that point and the whole enterprise fails. My objection is that this is just what happens and that it happens because a $C+D^2$ turns up in the first statement of the proof *before* Descartes has any entitlement to it. Without reliance on that crucial piece of $C+D^2$ the proof could not continue, and Descartes has no warrant for such reliance at that point. There is no point in talking of running over it all several times, so I think the final card Descartes plays does not win the trick.

Thus, I am inclined to agree with David Hume: 'The Cartesian doubt…were it ever possible to be attained by any creature …would be entirely incurable…To have recourse to the veracity of the Supreme Being …is surely making a very unexpected circuit.'[46] No doubt Montaigne would suggest that the final word in that passage should be 'circle'.

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[1] For readings of Descartes which have influenced this scene setting see R.H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) and Edwin Curley, *Descartes against the Sceptics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). For Montaigne's claim that attempts to defeat scepticism are doomed to circularity see the key passage from his *Apology for Raimond Sebond* in *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. by R.H. Popkin, (New York: Free Press, 1966) p.80. Montaigne, of course, simply borrowed the argument involved from Sextus Empiricus.

[2] CSM 2, 14-15; AT VII, 21-22. All references to Descartes will be given in the two standard forms: (1) CSM, followed by a volume number and page number, refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91) Thus CSM 2,14-15 refers to a passage on pages 14-15 of the second volume of that work. The *Meditations* appears in vol.2 of CSM. (2) AT followed by a volume number and page number refers to the standard French critical edition of Descartes's works, *Oeuvres de Descartes,* ed by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin/C.N.S.R, 1964 -76). Thus AT VII, 21-22 refers to a passage on pages 21-22 of volume seven of that work. The original Latin text of the *Meditations* is given in vol. VII of AT.

[3] CSM 2, 17; AT VII, 25.

[4] CSM 2, 24; AT VII, 35. The italics are mine.

[5] CSM 2, 24; AT VII, 35.

[6] CSM 1, 127; AT VI, 33.

[7] For Descartes's thoughts on the false and the doubtful see e.g. CSM 2, 12; AT VII, 18.

[8] CSM 2, 24; AT VII, 35.

[9] Recall that at CSM 2, 12/ AT VII 18 suggested that, for all practical purposes, we should treat what is doubtful in the same way in which we treat falsehoods.

[10] CSM 2, 25; AT VII, 35.

[11] For the DG/ED ploys see CSM 2, 14 -15; AT VII, 21-23.

[12] CSM 2, 14; AT VII, 21.

[13] Anthony Kenny and John Cottingham dispute this reading. Kenny claims (rightly) that there is no explicit mention of mathematical claims in the passages in which the ED occurs. However, my claim is that since the ED is used by Descartes as a more palatable version the deceiving God hypothesis, it is natural to take it that the sceptical force of the ED extends to, and includes, those items mentioned in the passages treating the deceiving God version of the hypothesis, including simple mathematical truths. For Kenny's view see his *Descartes,* (New York: Random House, 1968) p.36. For Cottingham's view see his "The Role of the Malignant Demon" *Studia Leibnitiana*, 8, (1976), pp.257-64. But see also Gary Hatfield's recent book *Descartes and the Meditations*, (London: Routledge, 2003) pp.80-84

[14] CSM 2, 25; AT VII, 36.

[15] CSM 2, 25; AT VII, 36. I alter the CSM translation here by replacing the words ' or bring it about that' with the words 'or *even* that'. The Latin text reads: 'vel *forte etiam*' and De Luynes's French text has: 'ou *bien que*'. It's a change I will make use of later.

[16] CSM 2, 25; AT VII, 36. I have italicised the word '*else*' at the end of this quotation because some English translations omit it (e.g. those Haldane & Ross and John Veitch) and a good deal hangs on it. In the original Latin text of the *Meditations* the final phrase reads 'non videor de *ulla alia* plane certus esse unquam posse' the word 'else' being expressed as 'ulla alia'. It should be noted that the 1647 French translation by the Duc de Luynes, a translation Descartes approved, does not have the word 'else'. The final phrase there reads as follows: 'je ne vois pas que je puis jamais être certain d'aucune chose.' I think it is in order to see the original Latin text as having precedence here. What hangs on it? Without the word 'else' the phrase conveys that in the absence of a proof of a non-deceptive God, Descartes could not know anything (at all), whereas with the word 'else' the epistemic priority of the Cogito is retained, and Descartes may be seen as conveying that without a non-deceptive God he cannot know anything other than the Cogito. Undercurrents of all this can be seen in the discussion of the circle. For a dissenting view on the importance of the word 'else' see e.g. Michelle Beyssade's paper in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. by Stephen Voss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). A useful tool for looking at the Latin and French texts of the *Meditations* can be found at: http://philos.wright.edu/DesCartes/Meditations.html. The site permits the reader to move, a paragraph at a time, between the various versions of the text. The English text is also given but, unfortunately, it is Veitch's translation which is used.

[17] That this does reflect Descartes's overall strategy can be seen by looking at a number of passages later in the *Meditations* e.g. in the last paragraph of *Meditation 5*, having reviewed the importance of God to his overall account of knowledge, Descartes says: '… I was incapable of perfect knowledge about anything else until I became aware of him.'(CSM 2, 49; AT VII, 71)

[18] CSM 2, 28; AT VII, 40. Cottingham labels it the CAP in his *Descartes,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) p.49. For some interesting remarks on the CAP see George Dicker *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp.100-102 and 118-119.

[19] CSM 2, 28; AT VII, 40.

[20] On this point see Descartes's remarks earlier in *Meditation 3* when he is discussing the three sorts of ideas he thinks we can have. There he said: ' Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light… cannot in any way be open to doubt.' The example he gives where I have left the gap is: 'from the fact that I am doubting, it follows that I exist'. In other words we know the Cogito by the natural light. Now at the outset in *Meditation 3* he had identified the Cogito as the very paradigm of C+D. The two snippets quoted here from *Meditation 3* are at CSM 2, 27; AT VII 38.

[21] CSM 2, 150; AT VII, 214. The objection as presented by Mersenne is given at CSM 2, 89; AT VII 125.

[22] Doney's suggestion is in Willis Doney, 'The Cartesian Circle', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955) 324-338 (p.325) I have switched, for exegetical reasons only, the propositions the letters p and q stand for, but otherwise I retain the essence of Doney's strategy

[23] CSM 2, 171; AT VII, 246. The italics are mine.

[24] Loc. cit.

[25] CSM 2, 100; AT VII, 140. I have added the italics.

[26] CSM 2, 25:AT VII, 36. I have inserted the (i) and (ii).

[27] The phrase 'criterion-not-needed' derives from the book by Dicker's book *Descartes* p.121.The expression 'antecedent exemption' derives from work on the Cartesian Circle by Lex Newman and Alan Nelson. See e.g. L. Newman and A. Nelson, 'Circumventing Cartesian Circles', *Nous*, 33 (1999) pp. 370-404 (p.371).

[28] CSM 2, 101; AT VII, 141.

[29] CSM 3, 147; AT III, 64. The letter from Descartes is dated May 24th 1640.

[30] CSM 3, 353; AT V, 178.The italics are mine.

[31] In attributing the 'antecedent exemption' view to Descartes I am, of course, taking sides in a dispute about how Descartes should be interpreted. There are those who take it that the certainty of C+D's is only secured by the proof of God. Such views are referred to by the expressions 'vindication-not-needed' (Dicker) or 'consequent exemption' (Newman & Nelson). For me the key problem in such strategies is that they seem to deliver to Descartes only a psychological certainty and, in my opinion Descartes would not have settled for that. The issue is too complex to enter into here. For some discussion of the merits and demerits of the various strategies see the works by Dicker and by Nelson and Newman.

[32] Here we must remember that in the case of the Cogito certainty was secured merely by thinking it or uttering it.

[33] See my earlier note on the word 'else' .

[34] John Cottingham, *Descartes*, p.69.

[35] See the passage from the letter to Regius cited earlier.

[36] For Mersenne's doubts see CSM 2, 88; AT VII, 123.

[37] For the letter to Regius see CSM 3, 147; AT V, 64; for the reply to Mersenne see CSM 2, 100; AT VII, 140; for the response to Burman see CSM 3, 334; AT V, 148.

[38] CSM 1, 198, AT VIII A, 11.

[39] CSM 1, 15; AT X, 370.

[40] CSM 1, 15; AT X, 369.

[41] CSM 3, 334-5; AT V, 148.

[42] CSM 3, 335; AT V,148.

[43] Loc. cit.

[44] Loc. cit.

[45] CSM 2, 110; AY VII, 155.

[46] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* ed. by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) section XII, pt.1 pp.150 and 153.