

In *Meditations on First Philosophy* French Philosopher René Descartes calls into doubt all of his current metaphysical and epistemological convictions. In order to obtain an impermeable system of beliefs, Descartes weaponizes a reductive method of radical doubt to question all of his inherited fundamental beliefs in search of a certain foundation that will ultimately serve as the basis for reconstruction. Upon discovering this archimedean point in meditation two, Descartes uses it to develop a broader criteria for a certain perception: that which is clear and distinct (C&D). In what follows I will explicate C&D perception and its textual applications, defend it against charges of circularity and inadequacy, but ultimately argue that Descartes ineffectively wields it to prove core components of his metaphysics.

### **Clear and Distinct Perceptions:**

In the aftermath of the first two meditations, Descartes encounters the limit of his reductive method of radical doubt. According to Descartes, it is entirely self-evident that “I think therefore I exist” (Cogito Ergo Sum). In short, the act of doubting is an act of thinking, so to doubt the cogito results in a logical contradiction: “I think that I am not thinking.” That is, Descartes’ ability to doubt his existence necessitates, beyond all doubt, that he exists as a “thinking thing.” Even if he is perpetually deceived by an omnipotent force, Descartes must exist to be deceived. This revelation, according to Descartes, is a C&D perception, his criteria for indubitable truth. While Descartes never directly defines C&D perceptions in the meditations, we can infer from the this first fundamental truth that C&D perceptions refer to those intellectual perceptions whose negation would result in a “manifest contradiction”<sup>1</sup> as does the Cogito.

### **On Circularity: Is C&D an absolute criterion for certainty?**

Before I discuss Descartes’ dubious applications of the C&D rule, I will first examine its merit as an infallible criteria for truth.

Upon first glance, one may contend that the development of Descartes’ C&D criteria is circular in that it appears to be derived from itself. That is, since the C&D criteria is the only measure of certainty, then the Cogito must only be certain by C&D criteria. However, this results in a logical loop as C&D criteria is derived from the certainty of the Cogito. In other words, if we cannot affirm one without the prior affirmation of the other, then neither can be maintained. In my opinion, this is a weak interpretation of Descartes that ignores the purpose of the first two meditations. That is, the Cogito is not true because it passes C&D criteria, but because it survived the arduous skeptical doubts posed earlier by Descartes. Upon further examination of what makes this “first item of knowledge”<sup>2</sup> certain, it is only then that the C&D criteria is developed. In this sense, Descartes’ argument for C&D criteria is not circular, but transcendental. With this in mind, it follows perhaps anticlimactically that C&D criteria is merely a means of identifying perceptions that are just as immune to doubt as the Cogito. As aforementioned, this immunity stems from the fact that the act of doubt in these instances is

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<sup>1</sup> Med 3, pg 37

<sup>2</sup> Med 3, pg 35

impossible by logical contradiction (e.g, doubting that I am thinking or doubting *my idea* that a triangle has three sides). By definition, if something cannot be doubted, then it cannot be false. Accordingly, the C&D criteria is indeed an infallible criteria for truth if understood in this stronger sense.

### **Applying C&D Criteria:**

With his own nature as a starting point, Descartes endeavors to expand his repertoire of C&D knowledge beyond the Cogito. If Descartes exists as a thinking thing, then all modes of thought (“doubting, affirming, denying,” etc.) exist insofar as they are merely ideas in his internal world. Even sensory perceptions exist in the sense that they are objects of the intellect. For example, while I cannot be sure that an object I “see” exists, I cannot doubt that I possess some mental image of it (whatever “it” may be). Put differently, while our judgments<sup>3</sup> about what we “doubt, deny, perceive, etc.” may be unknowable, it must be true that we are “doubting, denying, perceiving, etc.”

In order to break beyond the confines of his certain inner world and reconstruct his metaphysics, Descartes attempts to prove the existence of a non-deceiving God. For, according to Descartes, if an all-perfect God exists, then our internal judgements about the external world must be true on the grounds that it would pose a contradiction for an omnibenevolent being to deceive. In order to accomplish this, Descartes weaponizes the C&D rule within two arguments for God’s existence.

Both arguments begin by positing that we possess a C&D perception of an infinite, all-perfect being. Since this will not be a focal point of my later critiques of Descartes’ pro-theist arguments, I will take our conceptual ability to grasp infinity as a given, passing over some of Descartes’ justification for brevity’s sake.

### *Cosmological Argument*

Taking as given a C&D perception of an infinite, all-perfect being, Descartes’ employs what is known as his Causal Principle (CP) to contend that such an idea could not have originated from himself, but must have been planted in him by God. In short, the CP asserts that the cause of something must have at least as much reality as its effect; this hierarchy of reality is determined by ontological dependence. According to Descartes, the CP is C&D as to doubt it would result in the logical contradiction of “something comes from nothing.” That is, if Y is ontologically dependent on X, and  $X \in \{a,b\}$ , and  $Y \in \{a,b,c\}$ , then c must have come from nothing. In the corporeal world, if it exists, this means that an apple (cause) has more reality than its red property (effect), as this red hue cannot exist without the apple. In the mental world, this

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<sup>3</sup> Judgements here mean our interpretations as to the true content of a mental representation.

amounts to saying that an idea's objective reality<sup>4</sup> must be caused by something with at least as much formal reality.<sup>5</sup> For example, Descartes' *mental representation* of an apple, a finite substance<sup>6</sup>, can feasibly originate within him as Descartes is a finite thinking thing himself. However, Descartes' idea of an infinite being, which contains an infinite objective reality, must originate outside of him. More specifically, this idea must have at some point originated from God, the only being with an infinite formal reality.

### *Ontological Argument*

Since we can distinctly and clearly conceive of an all-perfect, great being (call it "God"), then it necessarily follows that this being must exist as existence is necessary part of this conception. A key element of this argument is that Descartes views existence as a perfection, or at least views existence as being somehow greater than nonexistence. Accordingly, a conception of "the most perfect" or "the greatest" being must entail existence. Just as it is logically impossible to conceive of a triangle with angles that do not sum to 180 degrees, it is impossible to conceive of God as not existing. So, if we have a C&D conception of God, God must exist.

### **Descartes' Misapplication of C&D**

#### *Cosmological Argument*

Quite predictably, the convoluted epistemological picture Descartes sets up in his cosmological argument is far from immune to doubt as C&D criteria would demand. For one thing, Descartes' conjecture that an idea's objective reality is equal to the formal reality its representation would have if it were to exist is unjustified and seemingly contradictory. In fact, since Descartes later posits existence as a perfection in his ontological argument, one would naturally assume that objective reality is unequal to its formal counterpart. Furthermore, it is also not self-evident that ontological dependence necessitates differing levels of reality under Descartes' epistemology. All living beings are in some sense ontologically dependent on food, but Descartes would hold that these are equal in the hierarchy of reality.

Astonishingly enough, even if we accept the full soundness of the cosmological argument and assume God's existence, it does not necessarily follow that there exists some decipherable reality outside of the mind; i.e, we are not being deceived. As Descartes explains, "it must be admitted that what caused me is itself a thinking thing and possesses the idea of all the perfections which I attribute to God."<sup>7</sup> From this it follows that at some point down the causal-effect chain there must be the ultimate cause, God, but it does not necessitate that our most direct cause is God Himself. This poses consequences to Descartes' metaphysics. For, if we imagine that God created reality X, and the beings of X, simulated our reality Y, then our external reality is still in some sense an illusion. In fact, if beings of X are as cruel as humans

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<sup>4</sup> The formal reality of something is the reality it possesses in virtue of it actually existing. Ideas have formal reality insofar as they exist as objects of the mind. Corporeal objects have formal reality if they truly exist.

<sup>5</sup> The objective reality of an idea is the formal reality that this idea's representation would have if it were to exist.

<sup>6</sup> Substances are that which have properties (modes)

<sup>7</sup> Med 3, pg 50

are to inferior beings, they may intentionally distort our judgments of the external world as much as possible. Any appeal to God's omnibenevolence for the prevention of such a scenario would restrict the free-will of beings of X which contradicts Descartes' conception of God. Thus, even if we wholly accept Descartes' cosmological argument, it still cannot prove that we have any C&D perceptions beyond the mind: the epistemological purpose of his pro-theist arguments.

### *Ontological Argument*

To reiterate, Descartes' second justification for the existence of God contends that since he has a C&D perception of God, and this perception includes existence, God must exist. Unfortunately for Descartes, this argument contains one major sophism: namely, that existence alters our intellectual perception (conception) of something. While all the other perfections Descartes attributes to God (e.g, omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) do impact our ideas of things, existence does not as it is not a property. For example, my conception of a white tiger is no different than the conception I would have if I learned that white tigers recently went extinct. However, this conception is indeed different from my conception of a Siberian tiger, because, unlike existence, color is a property that fundamentally alters one's understanding of something. Accordingly, a conception of "the most perfect being" void of existence does not pose a logical contradiction in the same way adding two right angles to a triangle does, and therefore a conception of God as existing is not C&D.

In conclusion, while Descartes makes adequate use of legitimate C&D rule to demonstrate the certainty of our thoughts, his attempts to expand truth beyond the bounds of the inner world are eclipsed by the metaphysical difficulties of proving God's existence.