

## Part IA, Paper 4, Question 5

'How can the argument of Descartes's Meditations best be defended from charges of an epistemic circle? Is this defence successful?'

In this essay I shall argue that Descartes' Meditations can best be defended from charges of an epistemic circle by arguing that it is not the case that we need God to guarantee the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions; rather, our clear and distinct perceptions were always true regardless of God. However, I shall argue that this defence is unsuccessful because it appears in conflict with the rest of the text, in which Descartes guarantees that we are not deceived because God exists and is not a deceiver, further, it describes a larger circle. I shall begin by outlining the 'charges of an epistemic circle', go on to explain the best defence of it, and finally evaluate this defence.

### I. The Epistemic Circle

The charges of an epistemic circle were first raised by Gascendi in Descartes' replies. The charge concerns an alleged circularity in Descartes' reasoning in establishing truth. The circularity is that Descartes relies on God to guarantee the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions, then relies on clear and distinct perceptions to guarantee the truth of God. In more depth, the circularity is as follows. Descartes, after establishing the indubitability of the cogito, takes from this the principle that 'it is manifest by the natural light that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly is true'. By 'clear and distinct' here, Descartes means indubitable, or unable to be doubted; it is true for that reason. But there is a problem. Given the Evil Demon Hypothesis in the First Meditation, it is possible that even things which appear clear and distinct – such as maths - may be dubitable. This is because the 'malicious demon' may have either created him with a defective nature, or may intervene with his clear and distinct perceptions, such that his clear and distinct perceptions – such as '2+3=5' – are not actually true, but an error of faulty reasoning. Thus, the only way to ensure that his clear and distinct perceptions are true is to ensure that it is not the case that there is some malicious demon deceiving him.

Descartes therefore goes on to apparently prove the existence of a God who is supremely perfect; and as any deception is a 'defect', then we can say that it is not the case that there exists a deceptive Evil Demon. This is where the charges of circularity come in. In order to prove the existence of God in the Third Meditation, Descartes uses a casual principle; but the truth of the casual principle relies on such a principle being perceived clearly and distinctly!

Thus we have the charge of circularity. Descartes relies on God for the truth of the clearness and distinctness principle, but on the clearness and distinctness principle for the truth of God.

### II. Defence of the Epistemic Circle

How can we escape this circle? Clearly, the best way is to deny that one does not rely on the other; either God does not rely on the clearness and distinctness principle for His truth, or the clearness and distinctness principle does not rely on God for its truth. It is the latter position Descartes takes in his reply; it is the best defence because it defends itself from charges of an epistemic circle by denying the existence of a circle completely.

How does the defence do this? As Wilson details, the essential argument is that the clear and distinct perceptions do not depend on God for their truth; they were true all along. Rather, as Descartes says, God only guarantees the truth of his memories.

What does this mean? Well, Descartes claims that while he is certain of his clear and distinct beliefs whilst he is perceiving them, he cannot ensure the soundness of a conclusion from such clear and distinct perceptions when he is no longer clearly and distinctly perceiving their premises. For instance, Descartes may think that he knows 'I exist' to be true, but if he is no longer presently clear and distinctly perceiving the premises 'I am thinking', then we cannot guarantee that such a conclusion is true. God therefore guarantees his memory – that is, God ensures that a proposition such as 'I think, I exist' is true even when one is no longer clearly and distinctly perceiving the premises.

Is this defence successful? I argue that it is not. This is because it does not seem to sit comfortably with the rest of the text. That is, Descartes claims here in the defence that God only guarantees the truth of his memory. Yet a close reading of the Third Meditations does not support this. Firstly, the problem that we lose the conclusion when we are not clearly and distinctly perceiving the premises is – in the Third Meditation at least, where the circle first occurs – seemingly raised as a minor issue, not discussed at length and certainly not the biggest obstacle to knowledge. Secondly, the argument for God's existence follows immediately after a discussion of how the Evil Demon could make it such that even clear and distinct perceptions are indubitable. This heavily suggests that the existence of God argument was put forward in order to guarantee the truth of clear and distinct perceptions, thus rendering the theory circular. It seems questionable as to why such an argument would be chronologically placed here, if this were not its purpose. Finally, the general theme of the remaining Meditations, and part of its conclusion, is that we can be certain we are not being deceived as previously thought because God exists and is not a deceiver. So to say now that this was not the point of the Third Meditations, and rather that God is there to ensure that our memories – only a briefly discussed point – are true, does not fit easily with the rest of the Meditations.

Of course, one could respond that none of these points are enough to totally vanquish the defence; they are all related to how the defence appears to fit with the rest of the text, rather than actually criticising the defence itself. But to this I respond that, just as different interpretations of Descartes need reference to the text and whether such an interpretation fits with the theme of the text to support them, so does this.

Regardless, let us grant this objection and instead attack the argument of the defence itself. Descartes argues that God here guarantees his memory. But I ask, doesn't it simply describe a larger circle? For what is the purpose of memory here? Its purpose is to guarantee the truth of clear and distinct perceptions – when we are not presently perceiving them yes, but to guarantee their truth nonetheless. For if it were unimportant to the truth of clear and distinct perceptions that we can't know their conclusion when we have stopped perceiving them, then why would Descartes go through the trouble of arguing for the existence of God to rectify this, as he claims? So God guarantees our memory, and our memory in part guarantees our clear and distinct perceptions, and these guarantee God. So we simply have a larger circle.

In conclusion, we can say that although Descartes' defence is the best as it denies the existence of a circle, it is unsuccessful because it is not only unsupported by the text, but also, even if we grant that it is supported, describes a larger circle.

## **Comments**

This essay sets out its aims clearly at the start, briefly indicating its structure and signposting the rest of its content.

The question is helpfully restated and the reference to a well-known objection to Descartes's argument in the *Meditations* is articulated very clearly in one or two sentences. The significance of this objection and its implications for the rest of Descartes's project is also explained. Section titles further orient the reader to what the author is arguing.

The most substantive part of the essay shows a close engagement with the text. Disparate passages are brought together and more or less correctly paraphrased. The exposition is accurate but critical. Arguments are laid out in full rather than mentioned, and effort is made to reconstruct Descartes's arguments in different language rather than simply to mirror his own terminology. The conclusion makes it clear just how the set question has been answered, and helpfully points towards some wider difficulties, thereby showing an awareness of the essay's limitations. The prose is direct and rarely ambiguous.

Giving the knowledge shown of the set text, the evident understanding of the question asked and its significance, the clarity of structure and the cogency of the argument, this essay merits a mark in the 68–70 range. If the author had given a more precise and complete statement of the supposed problem in God 'guaranteeing our memories' drawn from Catherine Wilson, it could have done even better.