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Introduction

The intellectual effort to understand the nature of knowledge and certainty has long been a central theme in philosophical inquiry. The branch of philosophy that is concerned with knowledge is known as epistemology or theory of knowledge.[1] Even though the term itself was coined by the Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier in the mid-19th century, in order to distinguish epistemology from ontology, the philosophical inquiry into knowledge predates Ferrier's coinage by millennia.[2] Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine, along with later scholastic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockham, Johannes Duns Scotus, laid the groundwork for the "epistemological turn," a foundational shift in philosophy that remains relevant even in contemporary thought. [3]

The "epistemological turn" in modernity refers to the shift in philosophical focus from metaphysical questions about the nature of reality to epistemological questions about the nature, sources, and limits of human knowledge.[4] This turn is marked by a fundamental reorientation of philosophical inquiry that places the theory of knowledge at the centre of philosophical concerns. This shift is most prominently associated with the work of René Descartes in the 17th century and is a defining feature of modern philosophy. Descartes' approach, exemplified in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, involves doubting all knowledge claims until something indubitable can be found. This method of systematic doubt leads him to the *cogito*, "I think, therefore I am," as the foundational certainty upon

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[1] Matthias Steup and Ram Neta, "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, accessed July 13, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/epistemology/.

[2] Jan Wolenski, "History of Epistemology," in *Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Ilkka Niiniluoto, Matti Sintonen, and Jan Wolenski (Springer Science & Business Media, 2004), 3. There is also proof that the word was first used in New York's *Eclectic Magazine* in 1847. For more see: Oxford University Press, "Epistemology," in *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), accessed July 13, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/epistemology_n.

[3] Steven Nadler, "The Doctrine of Ideas," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 92.

[4] Linda Zagzebski, *On Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–2.

which to build knowledge.[5] Descartes' emphasis on the certainty of knowledge, the subject who attains knowledge, and the methods for attaining it marks a significant shift from medieval scholasticism's focus on metaphysical and theological questions.

Descartes' emphasis on the certainty of knowledge gave birth to rationalism and foundationalism, two distinct yet related concepts in philosophy. Rationalism is the epistemological perspective that holds that reason is the primary source and arbiter of knowledge, or any perspective that invokes reason to support a claim or provide evidence.[6] Foundationalism posits that knowledge and justified beliefs are structured like a building, with certain foundational beliefs providing support for all other tenets.[7] These foundational beliefs are typically self-evident, infallible, or otherwise indisputable, and serve as the bedrock upon which the edifice of knowledge is constructed.

Often regarded as the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes pioneered a method of deliberate and systematic doubt that aimed at securing ultimate certainty.[8] Descartes' foundationalism, as shown by the famous *cogito ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am"), laid the groundwork for future theories of knowledge. Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* remains a critical source in understanding his approach to epistemology, in which the criteria of clear and distinct concepts play a critical part in determining knowledge. Descartes' rigorous process of doubt and pursuit of certainty through rational reflection were important advances in the epistemological field at the time.

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[5] For a more thorough mapping of Descartes' *cogito* discovery, see: Stephen I. Wagner, *Squaring the Circle in Descartes' Meditations: The Strong Validation of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 107–19.

[6] A. R. Lacey, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), 286.

[7] Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 139.

[8] Justin Leiber, ed., *A Philosophical Glossary* (Houston, TX: University of Houston, 2001), 88, https://uh.edu/engines/philosophical-glossary.pdf.

In contrast, Nicolas Malebranche—a contemporary of Descartes, and his philosophical successor—integrated Cartesian rationalism with Augustinian theological insights.[9] Malebranche's epistemology is deeply rooted in the concept of divine illumination, positing that true knowledge is accessible only through a vision of God. His major work, *The Search After Truth*, articulates a framework where human cognition is dependent on divine concurrence and all ideas are seen in God.[10] Malebranche's occasionalism further distinguishes his thought, asserting that God is the only true cause, with created entities merely providing occasions for divine action.[11] This theological dimension introduces a significant divergence from Descartes' more secular approach to epistemology.

Thus, the early modern period, marked by a flourishing of rationalist thought, brought forward seminal contributions to epistemology by figures such as René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche. Having shown the importance of modern epistemology and its influence on contemporary philosophy, this dissertation proposes to explore and compare the epistemological frameworks of these two prominent rationalists, focusing on Descartes' pursuit of rational certainty and Malebranche's doctrine of divine illumination. By examining the divergences and convergences between these theories, this study seeks to elucidate the foundational principles that underpin early modern rationalism and assess their implications for contemporary philosophical discourse.

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[9] Tad M. Schmaltz, "Augustinian Cartesianisms," in *Early Modern Cartesianisms: Dutch and French Constructions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016; online ed., Oxford Academic, November 17, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190495220.003.0004, accessed July 14, 2024.

[10] Lawrence Nolan, "Malebranche on Sensory Cognition and 'Seeing As,'" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50, no. 1 (2012): 21–52.

[11] Steven Nadler, "Occasionalism and General Will in Malebranche," in *Occasionalism: Causation Among the Cartesians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; online ed., Oxford Academic, January 1, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198250081.003.0004, accessed July 14, 2024.

This research will address several core questions in order to systematically compare these two epistemological frameworks: What are the foundational principles of Descartes' and Malebranche's theories? How do Descartes' methodological skepticism and foundationalism contrast with Malebranche's vision of God and divine illumination? In what ways does Malebranche's occasionalism respond to the limitations of Descartes' system? Finally, what implications for contemporary philosophical debates can be drawn from their epistemological positions, particularly in the realms of epistemology, the philosophy of mind, and the intersection of theology and philosophy?

To answer these questions, this study will employ a detailed comparative analysis, grounded in both primary texts and secondary literature. Key works such as Descartes' *Meditations* and Malebranche's *The Search After Truth* will be critically examined to extract, define, and compare their epistemological concepts and views. This textual analysis will be supplemented by historical contextualization and background, exploring the philosophical backgrounds that shaped the theories of each philosopher. The study will systematically highlight points of convergence and divergence, offering a refined understanding of their respective approaches to knowledge and certainty.

This comparative study holds significance beyond mere historical curiosity, as it seeks to shed light on contemporary philosophical discourse. Descartes' foundationalism, with its stress on unquestionable realities and methodical skepticism, presents insightful perspectives for ongoing discussions in epistemology, namely about the dichotomy between foundationalism and coherentism. Meanwhile, Malebranche's fusion of theology and philosophy, specifically his conception of divine illumination, offers a distinct outlook on the influence of external sources in the acquisition of knowledge. Occasionalism provokes contemplation of contemporary notions of causation and mentality by postulating that divine intervention is the ultimate source of all occurrences.

Furthermore, this study will explore how Descartes' and Malebranche's views on mind–body interaction and cognition can inform contemporary discussions on consciousness and dualism. Descartes' dualism, a view which sharply distinguishes between mind and body, continues to influence contemporary philosophy of mind, while Malebranche's occasionalism offers an alternative account that challenges purely mechanistic explanations and understanding. The theological implications of Malebranche's thought also bear significance for current dialogues on faith and reason, particularly in the philosophy of religion.

In conclusion, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyse the epistemological differences between Descartes and Malebranche, in order to showcase their insights as they are relevant to the growth of early modern rationalism. In doing so, this study aims to reveal the timeless relevance of their theories, as well as the similarities and differences in their approaches to knowledge and certainty. At the same time, this historical analysis not only contributes to a deeper understanding of these significant philosophers but also provides insight into (or even solutions for) resolving contemporary epistemological and metaphysical problems. In analysing the epistemologies of Descartes and Malebranche, this research aims to make a significant contribution to the ongoing philosophical debate in an attempt to fill the gap between the historical analysis of philosophical concepts and respectively the application of those concepts to contemporary philosophical discussions.

Chapter 1: Descartes' Epistemology

1a. Conception of Knowledge: Internalism, Methodism, Logic and Innate Ideas

The first half of this dissertation is structured to systematically explore Descartes' epistemological framework, focusing on how he constructs a foundation for certainty in the face of skepticism. Each

section builds on the previous ones by progressively addressing the core elements of Descartes' method and their interrelations, which ultimately form the basis of his strategy for securing indubitable knowledge. Starting with section 1a, which delves into internalism and logical deduction as the groundwork for Descartes' rationalist methodology, the discussion establishes the importance of reason's autonomy in attaining truth and sets up the framework for the subsequent analysis. Section 1b then introduces radical doubt, illustrating its use as a systematic method to strip away uncertain beliefs, and revealing the extent of Descartes' skepticism. This radical doubt is revisited and further refined in section 1c, which details how Descartes identifies primary certainties that withstand skepticism. Section 1d transitions to foundationalism, where the analysis focuses on how Descartes identifies self-evident principles, such as the cogito, that can withstand radical doubt, providing a secure basis for knowledge.

Next, section 1e shifts to the role of a benevolent God, demonstrating how divine assurance underpins the trustworthiness of clear and distinct ideas. This section builds directly on sections 1c and 1d's treatment of clear and distinct ideas and self-evident principles, revealing that, for Descartes, even foundational beliefs require divine validation to escape what has been critiqued as the Cartesian Circle—a structure that Descartes, however, presents as the very shape of perfect knowledge, where each element mutually reinforces the certainty of the other and unifies reason and divine assurance. Thus, each section progressively moves from Descartes' internal certainties to the external validation of knowledge through the existence of a non-deceptive God. Finally, sections 1f and 1g bring these elements together, showing how Descartes integrates logical deduction, clear and distinct ideas, and divine assurance to address the twin challenges of self-knowledge and the existence of the external world—both of which remain central and unresolved issues in contemporary philosophy. These sections illustrate how Descartes' system aims to move from the isolated certainty of the self to a

coherent account of reality that connects the mind to the external world, ultimately providing a comprehensive structure that secures not just internal consistency but also external truth.

By methodically analysing these five key elements—i) Methodological Doubt, ii) Foundationalism, iii) Clear and Distinct Ideas, iv) The Role of God, and v) Logical Deduction—the first half of the dissertation lays a comprehensive foundation for understanding Descartes' approach to epistemic certainty. This structure not only clarifies Descartes' philosophical positions but also sets the stage for the comparative analysis with Malebranche in the latter half of the dissertation.

As mentioned above, in this section, I examine Descartes' comprehensive approach to epistemology by exploring his foundational concepts of knowledge, including the roles of internalism, methodism, and innate ideas. Descartes' epistemology is not merely about the certainty of knowledge but involves an intricate interplay between logic, the justification of belief, the psychology of belief, and the volition or will. By dissecting these elements—along with the analytic-synthetic distinction and the concept of innateness—I aim to demonstrate how Descartes constructs a coherent system where each component reinforces his pursuit of indubitable knowledge, anchored in clear and distinct ideas. This exploration reveals the underlying reasoning that ties these diverse topics together, ultimately highlighting the systematic nature of Descartes' philosophy.

Descartes' epistemology is a cornerstone of what is today called modern philosophy, as it deeply influenced the discourse on the nature and limits of human knowledge. It is Descartes' quest for

certainty that drives his epistemology, driven by the conviction that genuine knowledge must be indubitable (or undeniable).[12]

Rather than be content with mere belief or probable opinion, Descartes' conception of knowledge depended upon the pursuit of absolute certainty. This pursuit is more than evident in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where Descartes employs methodical skepticism to strip away all beliefs that could possibly be doubted.[13] The goal of this radical doubt is to discover a foundation of knowledge that is immune to skepticism or doubt in general.[14] To use Descartes' own definition of perfect knowledge:

> I distinguish the two as follows: there is conviction [*persuasio*] when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but knowledge [*scientia*] is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason.[15]

Before delving deeper into Descartes' epistemology *per se*, it is important to have a look at Descartes' logic, because logic provides the formal structure and rules for constructing valid and sound arguments, which is essential for ensuring the consistency and soundness of reasoning. Epistemology uses these logical principles to evaluate the justification of beliefs and to understand the nature of knowledge.[16]

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[12] Finnur Dellsén, "Certainty and Explanation in Descartes' Philosophy of Science," *Philosophy of Science* 81, no. 5 (2014): 1008–19.

[13] Georges Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 91.

[14] It is noteworthy that Descartes was significantly influenced by Isaac Beeckman, whose program for mathematising science predated that of Marin Mersenne. Nevertheless, it is possible that Mersenne's influence helped shape the overall structure of Descartes' epistemology. For more, see: Michael Ayers, "Theories of Knowledge and Belief," in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth Century Philosophy (Volume 2)*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1011.

[15] René Descartes, letter to Regius, May 24, 1640, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, *Correspondence*, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 147.

[16] Rex Welshon, "Logic and Epistemology," in *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, Continental European Philosophy, (Chesham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2004), 115–34.

So, in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes emphasises two fundamental sources of knowledge: intuition and deduction.[17] Intuition involves the clear and attentive grasp of self-evident truths by removing their own dubitability.[18] While, deduction refers to the logical progression from these truths to derive further knowledge.[19] Among the methods that modern logicians would classify as deductive, Descartes makes another distinction between the method of analysis that uses immediate inferences and the method of synthesis that uses syllogisms.[20] Descartes' logical system in general is modelled on mathematics, where one begins with axioms and derives theorems through clear and logical steps.[21] By starting with indubitable foundations—such as the aforementioned *cogito*, from his famous book *Principles of Philosophy*—Descartes believes one can build a comprehensive and certain system of knowledge.[22]

Descartes presents methodical doubt as a strategic instrument for divesting oneself of all questionable convictions, leaving behind only those that are irrefutably certain. This procedure reveals the indisputable bedrock of knowledge, upon which one can erect a sturdy edifice of reason and understanding. Descartes' method entails disassembling complex problems into simpler and more

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[17] Alan Nelson, "Logic and Knowledge," in *The Routledge Companion to Seventeenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Dan Kaufman (London: Routledge, 2018), 226.

[18] Frederick F. Schmitt, "Why Was Descartes a Foundationalist?" in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 492.

[19] Schmitt, "Why Was Descartes a Foundationalist?" 492.

[20] Thomas C. Vinci, *Cartesian Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 41.

[21] For more, see: R. H. Moorman, "The Influence of Mathematics on the Philosophy of Descartes," *National Mathematics Magazine* 17, no. 7 (1943): 296–307.

[22] It is important to note that Descartes' (half- preserved) *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* were written before the *Principles of Philosophy* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. The *Rules* do not explicitly include the famous "cogito ergo sum". However, the *Rules* do contain foundational elements of Descartes' method of inquiry that prefigure the cogito. Specifically, the *Rules* emphasise the importance of clear and distinct ideas, intuition, and deduction as means of achieving certain knowledge, which are all central to Descartes' later development of the cogito. Thus, this paragraph serves as a reconstruction of the cartesian view about logic and knowledge *per se*. See: René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 193.

manageable components, analysing these elements for clarity and certainty, and then ultimately synthesising them into a coherent whole.[23] This analytic-synthetic method guarantees the preservation of clarity and certainty in knowledge's foundational truths.

Additionally, Descartes stresses the importance of a proper order in reasoning, progressing from the simplest and most rudimentary elements to more complex and intricate ones.[24] This systematic advancement effectively prevents misunderstandings and fallacies, guaranteeing a thorough and organised comprehension. The criteria of clarity and distinctness are crucial in Descartes' logical system, guaranteeing the certainty and indisputability of knowledge derived from these criteria.[25] Through this rigorous methodological framework, Descartes aims to establish a reliable foundation for knowledge, shaping not only philosophical but also scientific processes of investigation.

Perfect knowledge, for Descartes, is characterised by clear and distinct ideas—those ideas that are so self-evident that, when the mind perceives them, their truth cannot be doubted.[26] This criterion for certainty is first applied in the famous *cogito* argument (even if it is only implied in the *Meditations*, but later explicitly stated in his *Discourse on the Method*): *Cogito, ergo sum* ("I think, therefore I am").[27] As Descartes correctly points out, thinking is the indisputable and indubitable foundation upon which all other knowledge rests. Essentially, the *cogito* serves as the model for all subsequent claims of knowledge because of its clarity and distinctness.

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[23] Lex Newman, "Descartes on the Method of Analysis," in *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, ed. Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 66–75.

[24] Newman, "Descartes on the Method of Analysis," 77–78.

[25] For more, see: Lex Newman, "The Fourth Meditation," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, no. 3 (September 1999): 559–91.

[26] Michael Della Rocca, "Taking the Fourth: Steps toward a New (Old) Reading of Descartes," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 35 (2011): 97.

[27] John G. Cottingham, *Descartes* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1986), 35.

Alan Nelson sheds even more light on Descartes' epistemology, interpreting the themes of clear and distinct perceptions in relation to the will. According to Nelson, Descartes' belief is that when individuals experience an objective idea, it is followed by affirmation by the will.[28] This relationship is basic to Descartes' envisioned epistemology, especially in view of the compulsory agreement of the will with clear and distinct ideas. Nelson emphasises that this coincidence of perception and volition is the reflection of the nature of the will, which is drawn toward truths that are clearly perceived to be irresistible.[29] This connection is of great importance for the interpretation of the problem of error and judgment in Descartes' epistemology. Consequently, through the identification of clear and distinct perceptions with the unmediated affirmation of the will, Descartes shows a solid means of differentiating genuine knowledge from mere opinion.

It is significant to note that Descartes' approach to justification is internalist; that is, justification is a matter of factors that are within the believer's epistemic awareness. While externalist theories may permit the conditions outside the believer's consciousness to explain why a belief is justified, Descartes tries to claim that if a person is to have a justified belief, he or she must be aware of and acknowledge the justificatory basis for the belief.[30]

This internalist stance is well illustrated by Descartes' focus on ideas that are clear and distinct.[31] For a belief to be considered justified, the mind must be able to perceive the belief as clear and distinct. In the Cartesian sense, an idea is clear if it is vividly present before the mind and if the mind pays

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[28] Alan Nelson, "Descartes's Ontology of Thought," *Topoi* 16 (1997): 163–4.
[29] Nelson, "Descartes's Ontology of Thought," 166.
[30] For more, on internalism, see: Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 332–52.
[31] For an externalist interpretation of Descartes, see: Michael Della Rocca, "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 70 (January 2005): 1–33.

attention to it in a way that leaves no room for confusion or obscurity, and an idea is distinct if it is possible to separate it from other ideas. These criteria are employed to assess the truth of propositions, providing a yardstick against which all beliefs can be measured. This, of course, reminds us of Socrates' epistemological views.[32] This introspective accessibility gives the individual the ability to check on the truthfulness of a belief through logic. Hence, the Cartesian approach is one which turns inward and pursues certainty through the subject's awareness of their mental acts.

In regards to his epistemological method, Descartes utilises what has been referred to as the Methodist method. This form of reasoning is different from what is known as particularism. For the methodists, a general criterion of knowledge is used to screen and determine specific pieces of knowledge.[33] In Descartes' case, as we have seen, the general criterion of truth is the criterion of clarity and distinction. By this criterion, Descartes ranks different beliefs in order to decide whether a particular belief is knowledge.

Epistemological particularists start from concrete cases of knowing and then try to infer the general form from these cases.[34] Descartes rejects this approach since he insists on a method that will help him arrive at an absolute certainty. Thus, by beginning with ideas that give rise to clear and distinct perceptions, Descartes seeks to build a solid foundation for knowledge and guard against the inherent twisting of particulars and the tendency of particularistic notions to be subject to doubt and error.

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[32] "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 20, 2024, https://iep.utm.edu/int-ext/.

[33] Lex Newman, "Descartes' Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, accessed July 25, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/descartes-epistemology/.

[34] Michael Bergmann, "Intuitionist Particularism: An Introduction," in *Radical Skepticism and Epistemic Intuition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021; online ed., Oxford Academic, August 19, 2021), 111–30.

A significant aspect of Descartes' epistemology is his doctrine of innate ideas. Descartes posits that certain fundamental concepts are innate to the human mind, rather than derived from sensory experience *per se*. This idea has its roots in (Neo)-Platonic philosophy, which also emphasises the existence of innate knowledge.[35]Descartes' argument for innate ideas is multifaceted. He asserts that certain concepts, such as the idea of God, mathematical truths, and the basic principles of logic, are too perfect and immutable to have been acquired through the inconsistent and (often proven) deceptive senses. Instead, such ideas must be inscribed on the mind by God during the creation of such an individual or thing.[36] This theory mandates an *a priori* source of information that does not depend on one's senses, thus tempering the varied and dubious details reported through them.

Additionally, in his *Meditations*, Descartes discusses the concept of God as an innate idea.[37] Descartes essentially argues that the very idea of an infinitely perfect being cannot have originated from finite human minds or unstable sensory experiences, which only provide imperfect and finite representations. Hence, the idea of God must be innate, placed in our minds by God Himself. Similarly, mathematical truths are seen as clear and distinct ideas, requiring rational insights rather than sensible representations.[38]

The use of innate ideas is something that differentiates Descartes from other philosophers who come after him and whose works are largely informed by/ dependent on empiricism. This perfectly foreshadows Descartes' tendency to rationalism which presupposes that the primary forms for obtaining knowledge are reason and intellectual intuition. This aspect has (again) Platonic roots, and

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[35] Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51, 298–99.
[36] Nelson, "Descartes's Ontology of Thought," 165.
[37] Nelson, "Descartes's Ontology of Thought," 165–6.
[38] Michael Friedman, "Descartes on the Real Existence of Matter," *Topoi* 16 (1997): 155.

it is the main key to understanding Descartes' epistemology because it puts the disposition of the mind before the passive reception of information and sensory data.[39]

Generally, Descartes' theory of ideas is considered thorny and complex. Vere Chappell highlights this complexity of Descartes' theory of ideas, which holds a central position in the epistemology of the *Meditations*. Chappell notes that Descartes uses the term "idea" in both the material and objective senses. In some of Descartes' early works, "idea" refers to "corporeal images"— viz. material entities existing in the brain rather than in the mind. [40] However, Descartes abandons this use in his later and mature philosophy, instead focusing on ideas as mental occurrences that accommodate sense perception, imagination, and intellectual thought.

Additionally, Chappell points out that Descartes occasionally uses "idea" to refer to the source or faculty of innate ideas within the mind; this usage is not essential to his doctrine of innate ideas, but it is worth mentioning.[41] This nuanced understanding of the term "idea" enriches the analysis of Descartes' epistemology, illustrating the depth and flexibility of his theoretical framework.

Steven Nadler further elucidates the role of ideas in Descartes' epistemology. Nadler explains that Descartes' doctrine of ideas is central to his project of developing a means of erecting a bridge from self-evident truths within the mind to things in the external world. What Descartes does is use clear and distinct perceptions of ideas to prove the existence of God, who vouches for the truthfulness of the perceptions.[42] This divine guarantee is extremely important to Descartes' assertion that, if used

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[39] Menn, *Descartes and Augustine*, 245–46.
[40] Vere Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 179.
[41] Chappell, "The Theory of Ideas," 179.
[42] Nadler, "The Doctrine of Ideas," 86–103.

correctly, the rational abilities of the human mind can provide us with knowledge of the world around us.

Consequently, Descartes' epistemology—comprised of perfect knowledge, internalist justification, the methodist approach, and innate ideas—provides a solid background that aptly explains the quest for certainty in knowledge. His insistence on distinct and clear ideas and the accessibility of self-reflective justification also demonstrates a completely different approach that can be implied as being rationalistic, in contrast with empirical paradigms. The examination of innate ideas, insofar as it is derived from the platonic tradition, reinforces Descartes' impact on the formation of the new epistemology. By establishing a foundation of indubitable beliefs, Descartes endeavours to build a sound and solid edifice of knowledge, a quest that remains relevant in philosophical discussions to this day.

1b. Radical Doubt and the *Cogito*

Building on the foundational concepts explored in section 1a., particularly Descartes' pursuit of indubitable knowledge and the role of innate ideas, this section delves into his method of radical doubt and the establishment of the *cogito* as the bedrock of his epistemology. By systematically doubting all beliefs, Descartes aims to uncover a foundational truth that withstands even the most rigorous skepticism. Generally speaking, Descartes' epistemological revolution is built on the foundation of radical doubt and the establishment of the *cogito* as an indubitable truth. This chapter explores Descartes' method of doubt in detail and examines the role of the *cogito* as a foundational truth in his philosophy.[43]

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[43] There is a debate regarding the *cogito*'s translation. According to Daisie Radner: "The two terms *cogitatio* or *pensée* and *conscientia* or conscience figure prominently in Descartes' account of mental substance. Most translators, including Haldane, Ross and Kenny, render the first as "thought" and the second as "consciousness" or "awareness." Anscombe and Geach, attempting to avoid the intellectualistic connotations

In this section, I will explore various interpretations of Descartes' method of radical doubt and the cogito, each offering unique insights into his epistemological framework. In presenting these alternative readings, the aim is to highlight the different dimensions of Cartesian argumentation, demonstrating the richness and complexity of Descartes' approach to foundational knowledge. These perspectives not only showcase the interpretive diversity surrounding Descartes' philosophy, but also emphasise how his arguments continue to inspire debate and analysis.

As we have seen, Descartes' method of doubt, or what is commonly referred to as "Cartesian doubt," is one of the cornerstones of his philosophy. This radical form of skepticism involves doubting the veracity of all beliefs in order to identify those that are absolutely certain.[44] In his work *Meditations on First Philosophy* (mostly in the second *Meditation*), Descartes uses this method to eliminate all false beliefs and construct a new system of belief based on certainty.

Within the *Mediations*, Cartesian Doubt unfolds in three steps.[45] I will begin by analysing the steps as they appear in the Meditations, so that the reader may be able to map and place doubt within the context of Cartesian philosophy and the work of the *Meditations* itself. This mapping will also be useful to the reader throughout the course of this essay. Including various interpretations is not merely a

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[44] of the word "thought," translate *cogitatio* as "experience" or "consciousness," thereby downplaying any distinction between it and *conscientia*, which they render as "awareness."' Since the nature of the relation between *cogitatio* and *conscientia* is at issue here, I shall follow the majority of translators so as not to prejudice the case at the outset." See: Daisie Radner, "Thought and Consciousness in Descartes," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 439–40.

[44] Elliot Samuel Paul, "Descartes's Anti-Transparency and the Need for Radical Doubt," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 5, no. 41 (2018): 1085.

[45] It is important to note that this section does not exhaust the material on doubt. The whole concept of Cartesian doubt could stand as an essay alone. There are so many important aspects of this topic, such as the subject (here, mediator) of doubt, the reasons for doubting, doubting and its relation to ancient skepticism, and the conditions and usage of doubt, among others. For more, see: Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

matter of scholarly thoroughness. Rather, these perspectives are necessary to illuminate how Descartes' radical doubt operates on multiple levels: as a mechanism for eliminating uncertain beliefs, as a means to establish the self as the first certainty, and as a strategy to construct a broader epistemological framework. Each interpretation emphasises a different aspect of Descartes' use of doubt, revealing subtle differences in his method that are critical for understanding his approach to securing indubitable knowledge. By examining these interpretations together, this study aims to show that the strength of Descartes' foundationalism lies not just in the cogito itself, but in the rigorous, multi-faceted use of doubt that precedes and underpins it. Without these varied lenses, the significance of doubt as both a destructive and constructive force in Descartes' philosophy would be obscured, making these interpretations indispensable for the overall aim of this dissertation.

Amelie Oksenberg Rorty identifies six stages in Descartes' meditative process that reflect a standard form of spiritual exercises, adapted to philosophical inquiry. The first is what Rorty calls "Catharsis, Detachment, or Analysis" located primarily in the First *Meditation* and the beginning of the Second *Meditation*.[46] Essentially, this initial stage involves moving from sensation to imagination and memory, then to science and mathematics, and finally to theology. It mirrors the methodical doubt that purges unreliable beliefs, because both processes involve a systematic questioning and eventual rejection of beliefs that are not absolutely certain. So, according to Rorty, Cartesian doubt can be found even in the very first stage of Descartes' meditative process. The second step, which is located in the First Meditation and the early part of the Second Meditation, is "Skepsis, Despair, or Nihilism." At this stage, the meditator experiences profound doubt and uncertainty, reflecting the impact of the dream argument and the deceiving demon hypothesis, both of which will be discussed later.[47] The third stage is the "Reflection (*Peripeteia*)." This stage involves a revolutionary change in perspective, akin to the

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[46] Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 10–11.
[47] Rorty, "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations," 10.

realization of the *cogito*, where the meditator, in the Second Meditation, recognises an indubitable truth amidst radical doubt.[48] As we can see, each of the first three stages includes doubt, which is the subject of this section, while stage three also includes the so-called *cogito*.

Stage four is known as "Recognition (*Anagnorisis*)." Here, the meditator discovers the corrective power of the will and the methodological principle of noncontradiction, validating reductio arguments and reinforcing the certainty of the *cogito*.[49] This stage can be found mostly in the Third Meditation and partly in the Fourth and Fifth Meditation, respectively. Then, in stage five, or the "Ascension from the Psychological to the Ontological Order," one can find in the Third and Fifth Meditation the famous proof of the existence of God, and a transition from introspective certainty to broader metaphysical truths. Last, but not least, is the "Reconstruction of the World and the Self."[50] Essentially, in this sixth and final stage located in the Sixth Meditation, the meditator reconstructs their understanding of the external world and the self, based on the secure foundation established through the previous stages.

It is important to note, however, that there are also other categorisations of Descartes' *Meditations* and of the meditator's phases. For example, Christia Mercer highlights how Descartes transforms the traditional elements of spiritual meditation into a philosophical methodology. According to Mercer, this process involves several key steps: a) Desire to Change: Like spiritual meditations that assume a reader's desire for enlightenment, Descartes begins by convincing his readers of the need to demolish their former beliefs and start anew (First Meditation); b) Doubt and Demons: Drawing on the tradition of spiritual meditations that warn of demons and false beliefs, Descartes introduces the concept of a deceiving demon to force readers into a state of radical doubt (First Meditation); c) The Meditating Subject and the Authorial Voice: Descartes' meditator begins in confusion and gradually moves

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48 Rorty, "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations," 10.
49 Rorty, "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations," 11.
50 Rorty, "The Structure of Descartes' Meditations," 11.

towards clarity, which mirrors the process described by Augustine in his *Confessions*, where the seeker turns inward to find divine illumination (Second Meditation); d) The Arduous Journey: Descartes' "Meditations" reflect the slow and challenging process of intellectual reorientation (across the First Meditation to the Fourth Meditation); and e) Illumination: The goal of Descartes' meditations is the (pure) intellectual—not emotional—illumination that comes from clear and distinct perceptions (primarily in the Fifth Meditation).[51]

Those steps refer to the whole corpus of the *Meditations*, but for Georges Dicker, Descartes delineates eleven steps of doubt, specifically, in the First Meditation. These are: i) initial purpose, ii) withholding belief, iii) deceptiveness of the senses, iv) skeptical reflection, v) doubting mathematical certainties, vi) perfect conditions of doubt, vii) dream argument, viii) existence of a deceiving God, ix) conclusion of universal doubt, x) resolution to withhold assent, and xi) evil demon hypothesis.[52] However, I believe that many of these steps refer to conditions, reasons, and conclusions that do not deal with doubt *per se* but rather illustrate the progression of Descartes' meditative method, moving from an initial goal of certainty to the radical skepticism that characterizes his philosophical inquiry.

In contrast to Dicker's detailed analysis, I will focus more closely on three broader steps of doubt found in the text (specifically the First Meditation), which can be categorised according to one's preferred interpretation. Many scholars consider these three steps—or methods or arguments of doubt—as vulnerable to self-refutation due to the inherent issues in skeptical arguments. Therefore, I will categorise them according to Georges Dicker's framework, as I completely align with his conclusions.

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[51] Christia Mercer, "The Methodology of the Meditations: Tradition and Innovation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. David Cunning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 34–39.

[52] Georges Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10–27.

Thus, Step 1 is to doubt sensory perceptions. Descartes argues that sensory experiences are often deceptive. For instance, a stick partially submerged in water appears bent, though it is straight. Optical illusions and dreams further illustrate that the senses can mislead us. Since the senses sometimes deceive, Descartes concludes that they are not wholly trustworthy sources of knowledge. However, Dicker does not identify this argument as self-refuting because the acknowledgement of occasional sensory deception does not imply that all sensory experiences are deceptive.[53]

Expanding on the fallibility of sensory perceptions, Descartes introduces the dream argument in Step 2. He observes that there are no definitive signs to distinguish waking life from dreams. Since experiences in dreams can be as vivid and convincing as those in waking life, this raises the possibility that all perceived experiences could be dreams. Thus, the dream argument casts further doubt on the certainty of all sensory-based beliefs. Dicker explains that the Dream Argument is considered self-refuting because Descartes would need to rely on his senses to establish the premise that vivid dreams and waking perceptions are indistinguishable. This undermines the argument since, if the senses are unreliable as he states, Descartes cannot use them to justify his premise.[54]

Finally, Step 3 is the (in)famous deceiving demon hypothesis. To further intensify his doubt, Descartes posits the hypothetical existence of a powerful deceiving demon. This demon, Descartes suggests, could manipulate his perceptions and thoughts, making falsehoods appear true.[55] By considering this extreme possibility, Descartes aims to doubt even the most seemingly self-evident truths, such as

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[53] Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, 29–30.
[54] Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, 32.
[55] For Descartes, thought is: "a word that covers everything that exists in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus, all the operations of the will, intellect, imagination, and of the senses are thoughts." For more, see: René Descartes, *Reply II, Def. I*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 52.

mathematical and logical propositions. The deceiving demon hypothesis demonstrates that if an all-powerful being could deceive him about the nature of reality, then nothing Descartes believes can be assumed to be true without rigorous examination. Dicker argues that this argument is not self-refuting. It imagines a powerful deceiver manipulating perceptions, leading to doubt about everything but without any logical contradiction as found in the Dream Argument. The Deceiver Argument ultimately leads Descartes to the realization of the *cogito*, reinforcing the certainty of self-existence rather than contradicting the argument itself.[56]

Following these steps, Descartes systematically erases the possibility of the validity of sensory data, experience, and reason, and ends up in a state of doubt. This methodological skepticism is not an end in itself but rather a tool to eliminate all doubts and ultimately achieve certainty of some facts. In the midst of this radical doubt, Descartes arrives at a realization that becomes the bedrock of his philosophy: "*Cogito, ergo sum*". This statement can be considered the only and ultimate truth that remains invulnerable to all the questions and doubts.

The cogito is not established through deductive reasoning but rather as a clear and immediate realization. Descartes argues that in the act of doubting everything, he discovers that the very act of doubt confirms his existence as a thinking being. This insight is not derived from empirical observation or sensory experience but emerges as a direct, self-evident truth: if he is doubting, he must be thinking, and if he is thinking, he must exist. Descartes describes this recognition as an intuition—a clear and distinct perception that does not rely on deductive reasoning but is instead evident in the very nature of thinking itself.[57]

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[56] Dicker, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, 37–8.
[57] René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 100.

The *cogito* is indubitable because it is a direct insight into the nature of existence of a particular thing. Although the content of thoughts can be questioned, the existence of the self that is having these thoughts cannot be disputed. Not even the hypothesis of the deceiving demon can affect this because the demon's deception presupposes that there is someone to be deceived. Thus, the *cogito* emerges as the ultimate and most reliable foundation for knowledge.[58]

The *cogito* is the first principle of Descartes' philosophy and, for him, it is the starting point from which all other knowledge is derived.[59] It allows Descartes to begin the process of rebuilding his belief system on a foundation that he is sure is unshakeable. Now, whether the *cogito* is an (immediate) inference, an intuition, or an argument is a long discussion, with each view having its merits and limitations.[60] However, I will approach Descartes' *cogito* as an intuition, as this is often considered the most faithful to Descartes' intentions. Descartes himself emphasises the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*, indicating its nature as a self-evident truth. However, recognising it as an intuition also involves elements of inference and argumentation that help appreciate its multifaceted nature.

From the *cogito*, Descartes moves to prove the existence of a benevolent God who vouches for the clarity and distinctiveness of ideas. This chain of reasoning results in the acceptance of the existence of the world outside and the legitimacy of scientific investigation.

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[58] Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes's Discussion of His Existence in the Second Meditation," *Philosophical Review* 75 (1966): 350.

[59] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 24.

[60] For more on the paper that started this debate, see: Jaakko Hintikka, "*Cogito* Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?" *Philosophical Review* 71 (1962): 3–32. For a more contemporary and enhanced view, see: André Gombay, "*Cogito* Ergo Sum: Inference or Argument?" in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1972), 71–88.

However, this unwavering feature of the *cogito* creates the famous *cogito* paradox, which arises because Descartes asserts that *cogito* is indubitable even within the framework of radical doubt. This raises the issue of whether the *cogito* itself can be subject to the same doubt it is meant to transcend.[61] Besides Guéroult's attempt at addressing this paradox, Kenny offers a convincing solution to this problem by distinguishing between first-order and second-order doubts. Kenny argues that while the *cogito* cannot be doubted directly (first-order doubt) because its self-evidence compels assent, it can be doubted indirectly (second-order doubt) by raising the question on the general principle that "what we conceive clearly and distinctly is true."[62] This approach aims at preserving the Cartesian *cogito* while recognising the extent of hyperbolic doubt.

The *cogito* has, therefore, a far-reaching consequence for the theory of knowledge. It changes the emphasis from the acquisition of knowledge from outside to the interior cognitive processes of thinking and analysis. The Cartesian view of the self as the foundation of knowledge can be seen as a precursor to existentialism and phenomenology. The *cogito* also emphasises the role of reason and reflection in the process of gaining knowledge.

Thus, Descartes' method of doubt and the *cogito* form the cornerstone of his epistemological project. By systematically doubting all beliefs, Descartes identifies the *cogito* as an indubitable truth that withstands even the most radical skepticism. This foundational insight not only secures a basis for knowledge but also reorients the (even contemporary) philosophical inquiry towards the internal operations of the mind.

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[61] Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 2005), 76.
[62] Charles Larmore, "Descartes' Psychologistic Theory of Assent," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984): 65–66.

1c. Methodological Skepticism and Clear and Distinct Ideas

Building on the foundational concepts explored in sections 1a and 1b, particularly Descartes' pursuit of indubitable knowledge and the role of innate ideas alongside (hyperbolic) doubt, this chapter delves into his use of methodological skepticism—a concept related to doubt—to achieve certainty, and examines the criteria for clear and distinct ideas. These ideas are central to Descartes' epistemology, serving as the cornerstone for distinguishing true knowledge from mere belief.

Descartes' methodological skepticism is a disciplined approach that employs doubt as a tool to reach certainty. As we have seen, by questioning the validity of all beliefs, Descartes seeks to discard those that can be doubted and retain only those that are absolutely certain. This process, which can be seen in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, does not employ the type of doubt that leads to skepticism (nor Aristotelian scholasticism) but a doubt that helps eliminate the false in order to arrive at the truth.[63]

Essentially, Descartes' doubt is a method used temporarily to test the certainty of beliefs, while skepticism is a more general philosophical stance that questions the possibility of knowledge. Moreover, Descartes' doubt is constructive, aimed at finding certainty, whereas skepticism can be more destructive, often leading to the conclusion that certainty is unattainable. Lastly, Descartes resolves his doubt with the discovery of the *cogito*, whereas skepticism often remains unresolved in the broader philosophical tradition. Thus, Descartes' skepticism begins with the acknowledgement that our senses can deceive us.[64] To ensure that his beliefs are well-founded, Descartes systematically

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[63] Charles Larmore, "Descartes and Skepticism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 19.

[64] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 12; René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 127; René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 194.

questions all sources of knowledge, including sensory perceptions, dreams, and even mathematical truths.[65] These skeptical scenarios are useful in pointing out the possibility of error in every form of cognition; hence, the need to question what can actually be regarded as certain.

Cartesian skepticism includes many skeptical sub-categories such as property skepticism (the view that the objects around us do not have the properties they seem to have), content skepticism (which questions whether the contents of our thoughts or beliefs can be accurately known or trusted) and external world skepticism (the view that one cannot be certain that the external world exists).[66] The latter version of skepticism includes the existence of a world that is out there independently of our minds.

Descartes' methodological skepticism has roots in ancient skepticism, particularly in Pyrrhonism and Academic skepticism. Pyrrhonian skeptics practised *epoché*, the suspension of judgment, and argued with equal plausibility (*isosthenia*) to achieve a state of tranquillity (*ataraxia*) by avoiding dogmatic beliefs. However, while Pyrrhonian skeptics kept this suspension of judgment indefinitely, Descartes employed skepticism as a means of arriving at the truth. For Descartes, the goal is not to continue living in doubt, but rather to employ doubt as a tool to arrive at certainty. Essentially, Descartes' skepticism entails the rejection of all opinions that are not beyond doubt.[67]

Academic skeptics, like the followers of Arcesilaus and Carneades, also practised a form of skepticism aimed at attaining the Socratic goal of achieving intellectual humility through the recognition of the

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[65] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 12–15.
[66] Deborah Brown, "Descartes and Content Skepticism," in *Descartes' Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 32–33.
[67] Michael Williams, "Descartes and the Metaphysics of Doubt," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 119–20.

fact that there is much that one does not know. A main difference between the two ancient schools of skepticism lies within the skeptical attitude of Academics towards cognitive impression which is based on similarity.[68] In contrast, the Pyrrhonian attitude is typically based on difference. However, while Descartes' skepticism has this critical attitude in common with the ancient skeptics, it differs in that it aims at refuting skepticism by finding indubitable truths. Thus, while inspired by ancient skeptical traditions, Descartes' approach is distinct in its constructive aim to establish certainty. Although ancient skeptics, particularly in the Pyrrhonian and Academic traditions, employed epistemological arguments to challenge knowledge claims, Descartes uses doubt not to suspend judgment, but to build a foundation for certainty.

As we have seen, an idea is clear when it is directly accessible to the mind, and distinct when it can be easily separated from other ideas. These criteria are used to evaluate the truth of propositions, functioning as benchmarks for the validity of beliefs.

Clear ideas differ from obscure ideas in that they are immediately and unmistakably understood. They are essentially self-evident and require no further justification.[69] Distinct ideas are those that are so sharply and well-defined that they have no element of obscurity within them.[70] To use Descartes' own words:

> I term that clear which is present and apparent to an attentive mind, in the same way as we assert that we see objects clearly when, being present to the regarding eye they operate upon it with sufficient

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[68] Lex Newman, "Descartes on Unknown Faculties and Our Knowledge of the External World," *Philosophical Review* 103 (July 1994): 518.

[69] Martha Bolton, "Confused and Obscure Ideas of Sense," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 389.

[70] Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, 207–8.

strength. But the distinct is that which is so precise and different from other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear.[71]

According to E. J. Ashworth, a distinct idea is one that is complete and that can be judged adequately, though only the second applies to ideas of sensations.[72] In combination, clarity and distinctness ensure that an idea is free from confusion and ambiguity, making it a sound basis for knowledge. Insofar as we pay attention to a specific clear and distinct idea, we cannot but assent to it.[73]

For example, the idea of a triangle, defined as a three-sided polygon, is clear and distinct. The concept is precise, clear and unambiguous; if one understands and knows what a triangle is, there is no room for doubt about its properties. Likewise, mathematical statements like 2+2=4 are clear and distinct because they are a consequence of the nature of numbers and can be easily understood by the intellect.

E. M. Curley explains that Descartes distinguished between two modes of demonstration—analysis and synthesis—one of which allows for clear and distinct ideas to grow.[74] Analysis shows the true way by which a thing is discovered methodically and *a priori*, revealing the logical process of discovery step by step. In contrast, synthesis presents conclusions derived from a series of definitions, postulates, axioms, or theorems, structured more geometrically and deductively. Analysis requires demonstrating concepts and principles that are abstract and removed from sensory experience. Essentially, through

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[71] René Descartes, *The Correspondence of René Descartes*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 237.

[72] E. J. Ashworth, "Descartes' Theory of Clear and Distinct Ideas," in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1972), 99.

[73] E. M. Curley, "The *Cogito* and the Foundations of Knowledge," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 41.

[74] E. M. Curley, "Analysis in the Meditations: The Quest for Clear and Distinct Ideas," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 153–55.

the analytic method, Descartes aims to make implicit knowledge explicit and to transform common-sense ideas into clear and distinct ones through rigorous analysis.

In the Cartesian system, clear and distinct ideas are given a special epistemic status, serving as Descartes' primary response to the problem of skepticism. Descartes argues that these ideas are considered true not only because they are self-evident but also because their truth is guaranteed by the nature of a benevolent God. According to Descartes, a perfect and non-deceptive God would not permit us to be systematically misled regarding the things that are clearly and distinctly perceived.[75] This divine guarantee plays a crucial role in overcoming radical doubt, as it assures that the rational intuitions we have, are indeed true. By linking the certainty of clear and distinct perceptions to the reliability of a benevolent God, Descartes offers a foundational solution to skepticism, reaffirming the possibility of secure knowledge despite the radical doubt introduced in the First Meditation.

To support this, Descartes offers several proofs or arguments (depending on one's views) for the existence of God, arguing that the idea of a perfect being must have come from a perfect source. This theological basis is important to Descartes' assertion that the clear and distinct perception of ideas is always certain.

With the *cogito* as a starting point and the criteria of clear and distinct ideas as a guide, Descartes proceeds to rebuild the edifice of knowledge. All these criteria are used by Descartes in different areas of life, and, in this way, he develops a well-structured system of knowledge. In mathematics and the sciences, clear and distinct ideas are used to lay down the axioms and theorems to arrive at true

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[75] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 36.

conclusions. This ensures that scientific knowledge is built on a foundation of certainty, free from the errors of empirical observation.

In metaphysics, clear and distinct ideas help Descartes establish the nature of the self, the existence of God, and the reality of the external–material world. By utilising these criteria, he wants to dispel the doubts that led him to the inquiry in the first place and prove that there is certain knowledge available through reason.

Nonetheless, the criteria of clear and distinct ideas that are at the heart of Descartes' epistemology are not without their problems. Critics have argued that these criteria can offer a sound basis for knowledge only when human cognition is an infallible process, a condition which can hardly be met. Furthermore, the use of God's mercy as the ultimate guarantor of truth has been accused of importing theological assumptions into epistemology.[76]

Descartes responds to these challenges by falling back on the self-evident nature of clear and distinct ideas. He argues that when the mind is properly focused and not clouded by presuppositions, it can identify these ideas without making mistakes.[77] Furthermore, God's function is not to present new truths but to guarantee the reliability of the cognitive faculties that grasp clear and distinct ideas. This divine assurance is intended to strengthen our assurance of our rational insights rather than to replace them with theological doctrines.

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[76] Pierre Gassendi, *The Fifth Set of Objections to the Meditations, and Descartes' Replies*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 180–190.

[77] René Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15.

As we have seen, Descartes' methodological skepticism and the criteria for clear and distinct ideas form the bedrock of his epistemological project. By employing rigorous doubt, Descartes is able to eliminate all beliefs that are not certain and to reveal foundational truths that are immune to skepticism. True knowledge is based on clear and distinct ideas so that each stage of the argument is completely certain and provable. The method proposed by Descartes is a viable way of attaining epistemic certainty, which makes his philosophical endeavour relevant to this day.

1d. Foundationalism, Doubt and the Quest for Certainty

Building on the previous section's exploration of skepticism and the criteria for clear and distinct ideas, this chapter delves into Descartes' foundationalist methodology, which was introduced as a response to skepticism.[78] In this section, I shift the focus to evaluate Descartes' foundationalism not only in its historical context but also in light of contemporary philosophical debates. By examining how current scholars interpret and critique Descartes' approach to foundationalism, this section bridges the historical analysis with ongoing discussions about the nature of epistemic certainty and the limits of foundationalism. At this point, it is important to note that doubt here (and not radical doubt) is again under investigation, this time as a foundationalist tool and not as a mere repetition from earlier portions of this paper.

As previously mentioned, Descartes adopts a foundationalist approach to knowledge in his pursuit of certainty, seeking to establish an unshakeable foundation for a secure system of knowledge. Here, certainty is seen as a relational property involving a person, a proposition, and a time, rather than as

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[78] Audi, *The Structure of Justification*, 108–10.

an intrinsic property of propositions themselves.[79] This chapter explores Descartes' foundationalist methodology, the role of doubt in dismantling uncertain beliefs, and the subsequent construction of a cognitive system rooted in indubitable truths and certainty.[80] Essentially, as mentioned in section 1a, Descartes' process for attaining certainty is built upon five important things: i) Methodological Doubt, which has been already dealt with and will, here, be re-evaluated as a tool for foundationalism; ii) Foundationalism *per se*; iii) Clear and Distinct Ideas (see previous section); iv) The Role of (the benevolent) God; v) Logical Deduction. All of these concepts will be analysed further.

Foundationalism as a theory of knowledge holds that certain beliefs are basic and self-justifying, and on these all other beliefs depend.[81] Descartes' epistemology can be considered one of the best examples of foundationalism.

In *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, William P. Alston distinguishes between two main types of foundationalism: simple foundationalism and iterative foundationalism.[82] Simple foundationalism holds that certain beliefs are directly justified without needing further justification from other beliefs. These so-called foundational beliefs then indirectly support other justified beliefs. The qualification for iterative foundationalism is more stringent, since it demands that not only are the foundational beliefs directly justified but that the believer must also be justified in their belief that they are directly justified. These categories are also referred to as first-order and second-order

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[79] Jeffrey Tlumak, "Certainty and Cartesian Method," in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. M. Hooker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 41.

[80] Nowhere does Descartes explicitly state what it means for something to be dubitable; thus, it is necessary to derive an analysis of dubitability from the places where he describes things that are dubitable. For more, see: David Cunning, "Descartes on the Dubitability of the Existence of Self," *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 74 (March 2007): 111–31.

[81] James Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle," *Philosophical Review* 88 (January 1979): 74.

[82] William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 19–38.

foundationalism, respectively.[83] This additional requirement is meant to help in making the whole structure of knowledge more sound.

Having set up the *cogito* as his first principle, Descartes goes on to develop a system of knowledge based on this premise.[84] This construction of his system of knowledge is marked by strict logical deduction and by the application of the criteria for clear and distinct ideas that Descartes considers to be the only way to guarantee the truth of conclusions. Using the process of logical deduction, Descartes tries to arrive at other conclusions from the basic assumptions. Thus, by using logical reasoning, Descartes aims at increasing the stock of certain knowledge. This entails establishing the existence of (the benevolent) God, the existence of the external material world, and the existence of the self as a thinking *rēs* that is separate from the body.

As we have seen, at the heart of Descartes' approach is the principle that all knowledge must be derived from clear and distinct perceptions. The fourth of Descartes' *Meditations* serves as proof of how Descartes uses clarity and distinctness as means of obtaining both normative certainty and indubitability as a psychological phenomenon (or descriptive indubitability, according to Harry Frankfurt).[85] Descartes emphasises that when he restricts his judgments to clear and distinct ideas, he is incapable of error. This condition makes sure that his beliefs are aligned with the truth, because God has promised that what is clear and distinct is indeed true. This divine assurance is important to Descartes as it provides a link between objective reality and the cognition of the individual.

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[83] Frederick F. Schmitt, "Why Was Descartes a Foundationalist?," 504–8.

[84] Husain Sarkar, *Descartes' Cogito: Saved from the Great Shipwreck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

[85] For more, see: Jonathan Bennett, "Truth and Stability in Descartes' Meditations," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (Supplement) 16 (1990): 75–108.

Descartes argues that a perfect, non-deceptive God ensures that clear and distinct ideas are true, extending this guarantee from the certainty of the *cogito*. This claim that God is not a deceiver proves that Descartes sought to reach normative certainty and not simply psychological assurance, as some experts indicate.[86] This divine guarantee is important as it offers the much-needed assurance that his fundamental beliefs and the knowledge that stem from them are indeed certain.

Besides the distinction between psychological and normative certainty, Fred Feldman makes a distinction between practical and metaphysical certainty in his paper "Epistemic Appraisal and the Cartesian Circle."[87] Practical certainty refers to the degree of certainty that is sufficient to support the actions and convictions of people's day-to-day lives. This degree of certainty concerns propositions that are sure enough in our practical experience of the world, though there may remain some questions about them in more theoretical terms. For example, practical certainty can explain why one should believe in sensory perceptions and basic arithmetic, despite their demonstrated unreliability in certain circumstances, since these are useful in everyday life.

Metaphysical certainty is the higher level of certainty that is required for foundational philosophical questions. It includes axioms that are beyond any conceivable doubt, even the most hyperbolic or the most skeptical doubts. Metaphysical certainty is the kind of certainty that Descartes tries to achieve in the *Meditations*, where he attempts to establish certain foundations of knowledge. Metaphysical certainty means that the propositions concerned cannot be doubted at all, not even in the case of being deceived by an evil demon. According to Feldman, Descartes' epistemological programme hinges on obtaining a metaphysical warrant for foundational propositions, including the existence of

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[86] Della Rocca, "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God," 15.
[87] Fred Feldman, "Epistemic Appraisal and the Cartesian Circle," *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1997): 38.

God and the reliability of clear and distinct ideas, to eliminate even the most skeptical doubts about other beliefs.[88]

According to Aristotle, *scientia* is knowledge that is not only certain but also systematic. The same is true for Descartes. Nevertheless, Descartes's approach to *scientia* is somewhat innovative. In the Aristotelian framework, the certainty of *scientia* was supposed to be derived from the first principles of a specific discipline followed by their inevitable conclusion. As the geometer grasps how the theorem follows from axioms which, upon consideration, are obviously true, her understanding increases in certainty. In Descartes' case, *scientia* is gained through the mastery of one's field.[89] As we have seen, Descartes maintains that there is yet a higher grade of certainty available for the geometer—that which stems from her knowledge of herself as a thinking subject and her position in the world.

From the *cogito* and the certainty that comes with clear and distinct ideas, Descartes tries to build up his system of knowledge. This system encompasses theism, the reality of the physical world, and the nature of the self as a thinking thing that is separate from the body. Every step in this reconstruction is obtained through a process of reasoning from the certain truths that have been laid at the foundation.

Descartes applies the same foundationalist strategy to mathematics and the sciences as well.[90] Using the same level of definition and avoiding any ambiguity, Descartes aims to build scientific knowledge

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[88] Feldman, "Epistemic Appraisal and the Cartesian Circle," 53.
[89] John Carriero, "The Cartesian Circle and the Foundations of Knowledge," in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 314–16.
[90] Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 120.

on a stable foundation. This entails redefining the scientific process in a way that is consistent with the rationalistic approach, where knowledge is arrived at through reason and logic rather than through empirical observation.

As we have seen, methodical doubt and the search for certainty are the features of Descartes' foundationalism which is a new approach in the history of epistemology. Through the elimination of all the doubtful beliefs and the creation of a system of knowledge based on truths that cannot be doubted, the Cartesian approach allows one to attain epistemological certainty. This foundationalist project is based on the identification of clear and distinct ideas and the assurance of the existence of a benevolent God which makes the knowledge gained from this foundationalist project certain and trustworthy. This systematic and rational approach is still evident in contemporary philosophical thought, which proves the enduring relevance of Descartes' quest for certainty. Having analysed all five foundations upon which Descartes' certainty and perfect knowledge are built, the next section of this paper will deal with the shape of the resulting perfect knowledge, viz. the Cartesian circle.

1e. The Cartesian circle as the "shape" of perfect knowledge

On the basis of the aforementioned foundational concepts and, specifically, the Cartesian use of foundationalism and the search for certainty through the method of doubt, this chapter examines the detailed structure known as the Cartesian Circle— primarily a critical label used to question Descartes' argument that was later considered a reflection of the intricate relationship between different aspects of Descartes' philosophy, rather than merely a logical flaw. This concept is vital in the analysis of Descartes' epistemology as it focuses on how Descartes is able to justify the certainty of clear and distinct ideas by considering the proof of the existence of God. The Cartesian circle is Descartes' attempt at demonstrating the structure of perfect knowledge, the relation between epistemology and metaphysics.

The Cartesian Circle is the label given to a possible logical fallacy in Descartes' reasoning for the certainty of knowledge. According to Descartes, a benevolent God, who cannot deceive, ensures that clear and distinct ideas are true, including the clear and distinct idea of God's own existence, thereby proving God exists. This apparent circularity is one of the major issues that have concerned Cartesian philosophers and has raised questions concerning the consistency of Descartes' epistemology.

At the core of Descartes' thesis, there is the ontological proof of the existence of God, which insists that the idea of God as an absolutely perfect being also means that God must exist. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes points out that existence is as much a part of the perfection of a being as having three angles is part of the perfection of a triangle.[91] This argument tries to prove that God's existence is obvious, because there is the clear and distinct concept of the Perfect Being.

Descartes' first ontological argument (or sub-argument, according to other scholars)[92] is found in his work *Meditations on First Philosophy*, specifically in the Fifth Meditation*:*

> But, if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything that I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God? Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one that I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature.[93]

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[91] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 46.

[92] Lawrence Nolan, "Descartes," in *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, ed. Graham Oppy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 67.

[93] There are four different passages that include the argument: Descartes, *Oeuvres*, 7:65, 116–17, 150–1, 166–7; Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, 2:45, 83, 106–7, 117.

The argument can be broken down into these key premises:

1) Premise 1: The concept of God is that of a supremely perfect being.

2) Premise 2: Existence is a form of perfection.

3) Conclusion: Therefore, God exists.

Correspondingly, Descartes' second ontological argument, which is more subtle, suggests:

1) Premise 1: I have an idea of a supremely perfect being (God).

2) Premise 2: Necessary existence is a perfection.

3) Conclusion: Therefore, a supremely perfect being (God) necessarily exists[94]

This argument hinges on the self-evidence of God's existence, as it claims that the very idea of a perfect being necessitates existence. Descartes believes that this clear and distinct idea is so self-evident that it cannot be doubted when properly understood.

In order to avoid the problem of circularity, Descartes makes a clear distinction between various levels of certainty. At first, the author uses the clear and distinct idea of the *cogito* as the basic truth.[95] From this self-evident premise, Descartes wants to demonstrate the existence of God using the ontological argument. Having thus arrived at the existence of God, Descartes then proceeds to employ the idea of a godly being to confirm the veracity of all clear and distinct perceptions.

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[94] See Footnote 95.

[95] For more on why the *cogito* is used as a basic truth, see: Willis Doney, "The Cartesian Circle," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16 (June 1955): 324–38.

1. First Stage - *Cogito*: The certainty of the *cogito* serves as the initial indubitable truth. This foundational belief is achieved through methodical doubt, which strips away all uncertain beliefs.

2. Second Stage - God's Existence: Using both the causal and the ontological argument, Descartes seeks to establish the existence of a perfect being. This stage relies on the clear and distinct perception of God's nature, which includes existence as a necessary attribute.

3. Third Stage - Validation of Clear and Distinct Ideas: With God's existence secured, Descartes argues that a benevolent God ensures that clear and distinct ideas are true. This divine guarantee provides the necessary foundation for all other knowledge.[96]

Descartes' response to the circularity challenge lies in the sequential nature of the epistemic stages. The certainty of the *cogito* does not derive from God; rather, it is one of the few truths that are self-sufficient. The subsequent establishment of God's existence then retroactively proves that clear and distinct ideas can be trusted.[97] In making this distinction, Descartes attempts to show that his thinking is not circular and that he has a logical progression towards the attainment of true knowledge.

The Cartesian Circle ultimately highlights the interconnectedness of Descartes' epistemology and metaphysics. The existence of God is important in the attainment of perfect knowledge since it provides the certainty of both the existence and truthfulness of clear and distinct ideas. This divine guarantee solves the problem of skepticism by offering an ultimate basis for knowledge. Michael Della Rocca, in his article "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God," has tried to

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[96] Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1968), 44–52.
[97] Alan Gewirth, "The Cartesian Circle," *Philosophical Review* 50 (July 1941): 395.

show that Descartes' epistemology can stand independently without the existence of God, as an assertion with which I completely disagree.[98]

Della Rocca's attempt to separate Descartes' epistemology from its metaphysical foundation overlooks the integral role that divine assurance plays in Descartes' system. According to Descartes, such a perfect and beneficent God would not allow such an evil to befall people by allowing them to be deceived about the very nature of existence. This assurance permits him to believe that the clear and distinct ideas he has, which are as certain as the *cogito*, are indeed true. Thus, God in Descartes' epistemology helps to overcome the gap between the human mind and the external reality to guarantee the validity of rational ideas.

In Descartes' philosophical framework, the concept of perfection—and, therefore, perfect knowledge—is anchored in divine assurance. This guarantee enables Descartes to reconstruct his system of knowledge, extending the certainty of the *cogito* to other areas of inquiry.

There are several objections, however, that have been made by critics concerning Descartes' attempts at solving the circularity challenge. One major objection is that while the existence of God is used as a criterion for clear and distinct ideas, this is a form of begging the question.[99] Critics have pointed out that if Descartes cannot provide an independent proof of God's existence, then the whole of his epistemology is shaky.

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[98] For more, see: Della Rocca, "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God," 1–33.
[99] Gary Hatfield, "The Cartesian Circle," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 130–32.

In response to this, Descartes argues that he has arranged the stages of his reasoning in a manner that ensures that each stage is more certain and complex than the previous one.[100] Descartes claims that the initial certainty of the *cogito* is sound, and that it does not require the existence of God. The subsequent proof of God's existence through clear and distinct ideas is used to confirm the validity of these ideas rather than to introduce them.[101] In this way, Descartes aims at distinguishing between these stages to show that his reasoning is not circular.

Some contemporary philosophers have come up with other interpretations of the arguments made by Descartes in a bid to solve the circularity problem. According to them, one way to look at the Cartesian Circle is not as a weakness but as a system in which all the parts are interconnected and reinforce each other.[102] In this interpretation, the connection between clear and distinct ideas and God's existence is viewed as a dialectical process that strengthens the overall structure of Descartes' philosophy.

There are also several different strategies that philosophers have used to address the issue of circularity. The first, the Antecedent Exemption Strategy, holds that Descartes' initial certainty of clear and distinct perceptions does not rely on the validation of God's existence at all. This strategy suggests that there are certain foundational beliefs that Descartes can trust even before proving God's existence.[103] In contrast to the first, the second strategy, the Subsequent Exemption Strategy, suggests that while initial clear and distinct perceptions do require a guarantee (such as the existence of God), once this guarantee is established, subsequent clear and distinct perceptions do not need to be

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[100] Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, 120–121.
[101] Anthony Kenny, "The Cartesian Circle and the Eternal Truths," *Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1970): 690.
[102] John Cottingham, *A Descartes Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 35–37.
[103] Alan Nelson, "The Cartesian Circle," in *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, ed. Lawrence Nolan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 113.

independently verified. The initial step of proving God's existence exempts future clear and distinct perceptions from requiring further validation.[104] According to a third strategy, the Cognitive Transformation Strategy, the process of recognising the existence of a non-deceptive God fundamentally transforms the cognitive state of the perceiver. After this transformation, the perceiver's faculties are seen as fundamentally reliable, and thus all subsequent clear and distinct perceptions are inherently trustworthy.[105]

In "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and Scientia," Keith DeRose presents a "two-level" solution to the problem of the Cartesian Circle, which seeks to avoid the charge of vicious circularity in Descartes' epistemology. According to DeRose, Descartes' method involves two levels of certainty: i) Initial Level of Certainty, or the level at which one perceives a proposition as truth, and ii) Higher Level of Certainty (Scientia), or the level at which one perceives clearly and distinctly.[106] DeRose explains that this two-level reading helps to avoid the charge of vicious circularity by distinguishing between two levels of certainty in Descartes' epistemology. Essentially, DeRose's solution embodies the principles of the Epistemic Priority Reading, which offers another layer of justification by proposing that Descartes initially establishes the cogito and clear and distinct ideas as independent certainties prior to proving the existence of a benevolent God. DeRose contrasts his interpretation with those of other scholars like James Van Cleve, Alan Gewirth, and Fred Feldman. Van Cleve proposes a single-level solution, which DeRose finds problematic because it does not adequately address the need for a higher epistemic status for clear and distinct perceptions. Gewirth and Feldman propose lower levels of certainty (psychological and practical certainty, respectively), which DeRose argues are insufficient for achieving the level of certainty required by Descartes.[107]

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[104] Nelson, "The Cartesian Circle," 114–16.
[105] Nelson, "The Cartesian Circle," 115–17.
[106] Keith DeRose, "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and Scientia," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1992): 223–25.
[107] DeRose, "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and Scientia," 231–32.

Another prominent approach is the Virtuous Circular Reasoning perspective, which reinterprets the Cartesian Circle as not inherently problematic but as an essential component of a coherent system where the mutual reinforcement of clear and distinct perceptions and God's existence forms a "virtuous circle."[108] This reasoning highlights that Descartes' reliance on God for epistemic assurance is a necessary step in constructing a robust philosophical system that intertwines epistemological and metaphysical elements, ultimately reinforcing rather than undermining the certainty of knowledge.

Finally, the Foundationalist Skeptic Strategy (or Approach) addresses the concerns of a more moderate skeptic compared to an absolute skeptic, focusing on foundational beliefs that can be intuited clearly and distinctly. Descartes aims to defeat a "restrictive foundationalist skeptic" who accepts only those beliefs that can be clearly and distinctly perceived without immediate doubt. By proving the reliability of clear and distinct perceptions through the existence of a veracious God, Descartes seeks to establish a foundation that satisfies this skeptic's requirements.[109]

In *Cartesian Truth*, Thomas Vinci identifies three subjective indicators that anyone using the Cartesian method can employ to distinguish genuine intuitive awareness from other forms of perception. These indicators are: Passivity (does not involve acts of the will); Irresistible Inclination (of the will to affirm a proposition based on clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect); and Validation with Irresistible Inclination (ensures the validation of clear and distinct ideas alongside the criterion of irresistible inclination only after establishing God's existence, as in *Meditation III*).[110]

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[108] For more, see: Smith, Michael P. "Virtuous Circles." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (1987): 207-220.
[109] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 24, 36.
[110] Vinci, *Cartesian Truth*, 52–53.

Among the various interpretations of Descartes' approach to the Cartesian Circle—including the Foundationalist Skeptic Strategy, Vinci's Subjective Indicators in Cartesian Truth, the Dialectical Strength of Interconnectedness, and Virtuous Circular Reasoning—I find Keith DeRose's Two-Level Solution particularly compelling. DeRose's interpretation aligns closely with the themes of foundationalism and the gradation of certainties that have been previously analysed in this dissertation. His Two-Level Solution, which encapsulates the principles of the Epistemic Priority Reading, suggests that Descartes' foundational certainties—the cogito and clear and distinct ideas— are epistemically established prior to and independently of the proof of God's existence. DeRose emphasises that these certainties are grounded in their intrinsic clarity and distinctness, making them self-evident and reliable without immediate recourse to divine validation. By framing foundational certainties as initially independent from God's assurance, DeRose effectively addresses the charge of circularity, presenting Descartes' epistemology as a sequence where the cogito and clear and distinct perceptions provide a secure basis for further knowledge claims. Given this dissertation's focus on the hierarchical structure of knowledge and the pursuit of indubitable truths in Descartes' philosophy, DeRose's interpretation is particularly apt. It highlights that Descartes' epistemology is not simply a closed loop but rather a thoughtfully constructed progression where foundational beliefs serve as the groundwork for validating subsequent knowledge, thereby navigating skepticism without falling into epistemic circularity. However, the further validation of clear and distinct ideas through God's existence is crucial to ensure that what seems self-evident and true (clear and distinct perceptions) is not undermined by the possibility of deception. Without God's guarantee, even the most self-evident truths could be doubted.

The Cartesian Circle is one of the most important elements of the Cartesian method in search of truth. As we have seen, using the method of doubt and the concepts of clear and distinct perception,

Descartes aims to arrive at truths that are beyond doubt and that can be used as a basis for all knowledge. The ontological argument for God's existence is particularly important in this framework as it offers the divine guarantee needed for clear and distinct ideas. Although a charge of circularity can potentially be made, Descartes' systematic method tries to prove the consistency and soundness of his epistemological program. In this way, Descartes endeavours to gain complete knowledge based on the concept of clear and distinct ideas and the existence of a benevolent God who does not deceive.

1f. Is the External and Material World Provable?

Following the proof of God's existence, Descartes turns to the question of whether the existence of the external and material world can be proven. This section analyses three possible options for an external substance to cause sensation, incorporating insights from various academics.

Descartes considers three possible explanations for the cause of sensations: 1) the external world itself, 2) God or some higher being, and 3) the self or internal faculties.[111]

The first and the most obvious reason for the existence of sensations is that they are evoked by an external and physical object. This is the common-sense realism that Descartes examines, where the physical world exists independently and impacts the sensory input. This explanation aligns with our intuitive understanding of reality. For instance, when we look at an object such as a tree, it is quite clear that there is a real tree out there producing this perception within our mind. Nevertheless, using his methodical doubt, Descartes raises doubts about the veridicality of the sensory experience. Although the explanation makes sense, we need more evidence to prove its credibility.

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[111] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 54.

The second option that Descartes explores is that sensations are caused by God or another higher power. This view suggests that an all-good God injects sensory information into our brains directly. Descartes admits that this is a possibility, only to dismiss it. If sensations were implanted by God, they would not have any relation to the external world—this is in conflict with what Descartes wants to achieve.

The third account is that sensations are produced by internal causes that do not involve any stimulus from the environment. This view, similar to idealism, posits that there may not be a physical reality and that everything that one perceives is merely an illusion. This option is also problematic for Descartes, as it does not explain why there is objectivity, consistency, and reliability of the senses. If sensations were purely internal, the similarities in sensory perceptions across different people could not be explained.

Clarke, in his analysis of Cartesian proof of matter, gives due attention to the causal argument. Clarke argues that Descartes views the existence of material objects as essential for explaining sensory experiences. Clarke highlights Descartes' reliance on the principle of sufficient reason: the sensation that we (humans) receive must have a cause and the best explanation for this cause is the presence of objects.[112] Thus, Clarke's analysis supports the hypothesis that the external world is the best explanation of sensory experiences.

Arthur Danto, in *The Representational Character of Ideas and the Problem of the External World*, explores the representational nature of ideas. Danto emphasises that Descartes' clear and distinct

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[112] Desmond M. Clarke, "Descartes' Proof of the Existence of Matter," in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 174–75.

ideas serve as reliable indicators of there being an external reality.[113] In Danto's view, the fact that ideas are representational eliminates the distinction between the subject and the object and thus substantiates Descartes' assertion that external objects cause sensory experiences.

John Cottingham examines Descartes' dialectical approach to proving the existence of the external world. Cottingham points out that Descartes employs a method of exclusion in order to eliminate other (less-)possible causes of sensory experiences. Cottingham highlights Descartes' reliance on God's goodness to guarantee that clear and distinct perceptions are identical to the objects.[114] This is evident in the way that Cottingham shows how Descartes systematically develops the argument for the existence of the external world and strengthens it with the assurance of theology.

Having considered and rejected the second and third options, Descartes returns to the first explanation: that sensations are caused by external objects. To validate this conclusion, Descartes relies on the assurance of God's existence established earlier. Since God is benevolent and non-deceptive, He would not allow us to be systematically deceived about the existence of the external world.

In the sixth *Meditation*, Descartes attempts to prove the existence of material objects by following a structured argument. Clarke outlines this argument as follows: First, Descartes recognises that he has a passive faculty of sensory perception, responsible for receiving and recognising sensory ideas. Second, Descartes admits that this passive faculty would be meaningless without an active faculty that

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[113] Arthur C. Danto, " The Representational Character of Ideas and the Problem of the External World," in *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Michael K. Hooker (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 297.

[114] John Cottingham, "Descartes' Sixth Meditation: The External World, 'Nature'," in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series*, no. 20 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 141.

produces these sensory ideas. Third, the active source of sensory ideas must be either within his own mind or some external reality. Fourth, Descartes rules out his own mind as the source since sensory ideas do not depend on his will and occur even when he does not want them to. Therefore, the source of these sensory ideas must be an external reality distinct from his mind. The argument includes four more premises and a second and final conclusion excluding God as the source of those sensory ideas and proving that corporeal things exist.[115] I exclude the other four premises here because they extend the argument beyond the immediate focus of establishing the existence of an external reality, which is central to the project at hand.

According to Descartes, the fact that the sensory experience is orderly, consistent, coherent, and predictable is a very powerful reason to believe that there exist material things outside us.[116] The regularity of sensory data, combined with the divine guarantee of truth of the physical matter, leads to the conclusion that an external physical reality exists. This external world interacts with our senses to produce the rich tapestry of sensory experiences we encounter daily.

Thus, Descartes comes to the conclusion that there is an external material world by a process of elimination and the assurance of the benevolence of God. As previously shown, by analysing the three possible options for the cause of sensations, Descartes comes to the conclusion that the most reasonable and rational assumption is that there are objects in the external world which trigger our sensations and, thus, the existence of the physical world is proved. The views of modern scholars like Desmond Clarke, Arthur Danto, and John Cottingham also substantiate this conclusion and show how sound and valid Descartes' reasoning is and how contemporary is his approach to philosophy.

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[115] Desmond M. Clarke, "Descartes' Proof of the Existence of Matter," 173–74.
[116] Janet Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 173.

1g. Self-Knowledge

The relation between mind and body in the Cartesian system has always attracted a lot of attention from scholars. According to Cartesian dualism, the mind is defined as a substance that thinks and has no material substance, while the body is a substance that has extension and is made up of material.[117] This chapter explores Descartes' approach to self-knowledge in light of this distinction, examining whether we can perfectly know our own mind or self, and how this links Descartes' ideas with contemporary philosophy.

Descartes commences the quest for self-knowledge with the *cogito*, which proves the existence of the self through thinking.[118] Thus, the given premise highlights the idea that the thinking "I" is beyond the shadow of a doubt, establishing a close connection between methodological doubt and self-knowledge.[119] According to Descartes, the fact that the mind can have ideas that are clear and distinct gives it a basis for certain knowledge. It is in the mind, which is a non-physical substance, that one can grasp truths that are clear and distinct without being influenced by the body in one way or another. Descartes' most specific exploration of the self as the thinking thing is found in his second Meditation.[120] Here, Descartes explains the difference between the body and the self; the body can be denied while the self as a thinking thing cannot be.[121]

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[117] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Mind–Body Dualism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, June 4, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/mind-body-dualism.

[118] Dicker, *Descartes*, 85–86.

[119] Janet Broughton, "Self-Knowledge," in *A Companion to Descartes*, ed. Janet Broughton and John Carriero (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 179.

[120] According to Descartes, even thinking *per se* is self-presenting. For more, see: Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 10.

[121] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 16.

A central characteristic of both Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and his Rules *for the Direction of the Mind* is the idea that all cognitive activity is centred in the mind. Of the mind, Descartes writes in his *Meditations*:

> When applying itself along with [corporeal] imagination to the [corporeal] "common" sense, it is said to see, touch etc.; when applying itself to the [corporeal] imagination alone . . . it is said to remember . . . or to imagine or conceive; and lastly, when it acts on its own, it is said to understand [intelligere].[122]

However, the question remains whether it is ever possible to know one's own mind completely. Descartes suggests that while the mind has a unique access to its own thoughts and can achieve clear and distinct perceptions, it is not infallible. This means that there is the possibility of making a mistake when the mind moves from these clear and distinct perceptions to making assumptions or forming opinions about the world. This is a more subtle understanding that takes into account the fact that, even within the paradigm of Cartesian certainty, there are certain bounds to what is possible for the human mind to know.

In his work, Thomas Vinci elaborates on Descartes' self-knowledge through the use of three main arguments: the Sufficient Condition Argument, the Res Cogitans Argument, and the Paradigm Argument.[123] The Sufficient Condition Argument posits that the clear and distinct perception of oneself as a thinking thing is sufficient for knowledge. Since we can be certain of our own thoughts, we possess perfect self-knowledge. In contrast to this first argument, the Res Cogitans Argument emphasises that the essence of the self is thought. Descartes argues that we cannot doubt our existence as thinking beings, even if we doubt the existence of our body or the external world as a whole. Lastly, the Paradigm Argument suggests that self-knowledge serves as a paradigm for all other

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[122] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 48–49.
[123] Vinci, *Cartesian Truth*, 31–39.

knowledge. The certainty of self-knowledge, derived from the *cogito*, provides a model for achieving certainty in other areas of knowledge.

Contemporary philosophy continues to grapple with Descartes' insights into self-knowledge. Today, academics tend to focus on the consequences of Descartes' dualism in relation to the nature of consciousness and individuality.[124] Phenomenology and existentialism are two of the many streams of thought that have been shaped by Descartes' tenacity on the transparency of mental states, whereby one is said to have direct access to one's own thoughts. These fields focus on aspects of human consciousness and on the self's ability to recognise its own existence, which is reminiscent of Cartesianism.

Another important sphere in which the Cartesian ideas resonate with contemporary philosophy is in the debate over the nature of consciousness. Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers, among others, have built on Cartesian ideas to claim that consciousness has a subjective aspect that cannot be explained in physical terms.[125] This is in agreement with Descartes' assertion that the mind has attributes that cannot be accounted for by bodily functions, as it is a non-physical substance.

In conclusion, Descartes' exploration of self-knowledge and the mind–body relationship provides a foundational framework that continues to influence philosophical discourse. His dualistic approach emphasises the fact that the thinking self is real and certain, although there is room for error in the opinions that result from our thoughts. Contemporary philosophy develops from these ideas,

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[124] For more, see: Robert McRae, "Descartes' Definition of Thought," in *Cartesian Studies*, ed. R. J. Butler (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 57.
[125] For more, see: Thomas Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435-450; David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

analysing such concepts as consciousness and individuality, which can be considered the further development of Cartesianism.

As we transition to the next chapter, which is devoted to Malebranche, I will try to show how Descartes' ideas were adapted, developed and challenged by his successors. Malebranche's occasionalism and his focus on vision in God and offer a valuable critique of Cartesian dualism, thereby illustrating how philosophy evolved (and is still evolving) in the wake of Descartes' innovations.

Chapter 2: Malebranche's Epistemology

2a. Integration of Descartes' Rationalism with Augustinian Thought

Building upon Descartes' exploration of knowledge and the mind-body relationship, Malebranche's epistemology represents a significant attempt to synthesise Cartesian rationalism with Augustinian thought, thereby offering a unique perspective on the nature of human understanding and a more solid or redefined version of Cartesianism. In contrast to Descartes, who emphasised the autonomy of human reason and the clarity of innate ideas, Malebranche introduces a crucial modification by integrating the concept of divine illumination, a central concept in Augustinian epistemology. This synthesis not only bridges the gap between reason and faith but also redefines the role of human intellect in perceiving truth.

Malebranche's philosophical project can be seen as an effort to refine and extend Descartes' rationalism by addressing its perceived limitations. As previously shown, in his pursuit of foundational knowledge, Descartes proposed that the mind, through reason, could attain clear and distinct ideas that serve as the basis of true knowledge. However, Malebranche argues that while reason is essential,

it is not entirely autonomous or infallible, as Christian theology indicates.[126] For Malebranche, the human mind, even at its most rational, remains limited and prone to error without the guiding light of divine illumination. This idea draws directly from Augustine, who maintained that all human knowledge is dependent on God's illuminating presence in the intellect.

The synthesis of Cartesian and Augustinian ideas leads Malebranche to propose a unique epistemological framework centred around the concept of "vision in God." According to this framework, the human mind does not directly access ideas; instead, it perceives them through a divine intermediary or "through the eyes of God."[127] This implies that all ideas are contained in God, and that the human mind is only able to receive these from God. This is in opposition to Descartes' view in which the mind is capable of producing and understanding ideas on its own. For Malebranche, the mind's ideas are not its own but are instead divine archetypes that the mind perceives through its relationship with God.[128]

Malebranche's epistemology also reinterprets the nature of human error. According to Descartes, error is a consequence of the will extending beyond the capacity of the intellect to perceive clear and distinct ideas.[129] Malebranche accepts this but adds a crucial dimension: error occurs not merely because of the overextension of the will but also because the human mind fails to perceive ideas in their true divine context.[130] Without the divine light, human reason is like a man who is born blind and cannot see things as they are. Hence, for Malebranche, the way out of the problem of error is not

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[126] Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, trans. and ed. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 235.
[127] Lawrence Nolan and John Whipple, "Self-Knowledge in Descartes and Malebranche," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32 (2005): 57.
[128] Nolan and Whipple, "Self-Knowledge in Descartes and Malebranche," 74.
[129] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 37–43.
[130] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 235.

simply through the use of clear and distinct ideas but through a more profound dependence on divine

light to make sure that these ideas are, in fact, divinely inspired.[131]

Another significant aspect of Malebranche's epistemology is his critique of the Cartesian notion of the

self-sufficient *cogito*. Descartes' famous dictum "*cogito*, *ergo sum,*" asserts the self-evidence of the

thinking self or subject. However, Malebranche challenges this by arguing that while the *cogito* reveals

the existence of the self, it fails to provide a complete foundation for knowledge. For Malebranche,

the *cogito*'s limitation lies in its isolation of the self from its dependency on God. Rather, Malebranche

holds that true knowledge must acknowledge that the self is not an autonomous entity but

fundamentally dependent on God, who illuminates the mind.[132] In this sense, the self is not an isolated,

self-sufficient entity but is fundamentally relational, existing and thinking only within the context of

its relationship to God.[133]

Malebranche extends this relational understanding of knowledge to his theory of perception. In the

Cartesian approach, perception is defined as the direct interaction of the mind with the sensory

stimuli, after which it proceeds to rational analysis of the stimuli. Malebranche, however, challenges

this directness, arguing that what we perceive is not the external world itself but rather the ideas of

the external world as they exist in God.[134] This doctrine of "occasionalism" holds that God is the only

true cause and that what we perceive are not direct interactions or experiences with the world but

ways for God to illuminate our understanding.

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[131] Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 66.
[132] Desmond Connell, *The Vision in God: Malebranche's Scholastic Sources* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), 24–31.
[133] Connell, *The Vision in God*, 50–52.
[134] Andrew Pyle, *Malebranche* (London: Routledge, 2003), 102–103.

Finally, Malebranche's epistemology emphasises the importance of being humble and pious in the quest for knowledge.[135] While Descartes' rationalism relies on reason, Malebranche is more skeptical about the capacity of human reason and, instead, underlines the importance of divine grace. For Malebranche, wisdom cannot be gained through the use of reason without recourse to God. This Augustinian humility is strikingly at odds with the Cartesian emphasis on self-reliance and highlights Descartes' ignorance of Augustine's works.[136] Essentially, this Augustinian humility serves as a reminder of the theological context within which Malebranche's philosophy operates.

In synthesising Cartesian rationalism with Augustinian thought, Malebranche creates an epistemology that is both rational and deeply theological. Malebranche remains loyal to the Cartesian commitment to reason and the clarity of ideas, but he situates these within a broader framework that acknowledges the indispensable role of divine illumination in a Christianized Platonism. This fusion leads Malebranche to propose a method that is not merely a tool for avoiding error, as in Descartes, but one that actively seeks to align the human mind with divine truth.[137] This very synthesis not only offers a profound critique of Cartesianism but also provides a solid and more philosophical foundation for understanding the relationship between human knowledge and divine truth. Through this integration, Malebranche not only advances the philosophical discourse of his time but also offers insights that resonate with contemporary discussions on the nature of knowledge, perception, and the divine.

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[135] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book I, Part 1, Chap. 2, 13–15.

[136] Marjorie Grene, *Descartes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 185. However, Michael Ayers claims that the *cogito* has Augustinian roots and considers Descartes' own claim of ignorance of Augustine somewhat implausible. For more, see: Ayers, "Theories of Knowledge and Belief," 1011, 1052. I think the best explanation for the Augustinian roots in Descartes lies in Gary Hatfield's chapter in which he recognises two theological traditions—the Ignatian and the Augustinian—that were familiar with Augustine's theology and came into contact with Descartes, either during his school days or his oratory days. I believe Descartes was mostly exposed to the Ignatian context which assumes an Aristotelian account of cognition, and that Descartes categorised this account as scholastic, having not read Augustine *per se*. For more see: Gary Hatfield, "The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises," in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 48–49.

[137] For more see: Thomas M. Lennon, "Malebranche and Method," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8–15.

2b. Vision in God and Divine Illumination

Building on the synthesis of Cartesian rationalism and Augustinian thought discussed in the previous section, Malebranche's theory of "vision in God" is a significant advancement in his theory of knowledge, which shows how human knowledge is ultimately based on divine light.[138] This not only sets Malebranche apart from other philosophers of his time but also shows the extent to which he was willing to incorporate metaphysical and theological ideas into his epistemology.

At its core, Malebranche's theory of knowledge remains fundamentally Cartesian, drawing on Descartes' dualistic view of soul and body as substances with mutually exclusive attributes. Malebranche agrees with Descartes that the essence of corporeal reality lies in extension—defined by spatial relations, rest, movement, and figure—while the essence of the mind is rooted in thought or consciousness.[139] However, Malebranche takes this foundation and extends it by emphasising the mind's dual capacity: the capacity for understanding, or receiving ideas, and the capacity for forming inclinations via the will. In this way, Malebranche draws a parallel between mind and matter. Just as matter possesses the capacities of receiving figure and movement, the mind is endowed with the faculties of understanding and will. These faculties, however, are not to be understood as separate entities any more than the capacities of matter are distinct from the substance of matter itself.

Malebranche also builds on this parallel to stress that neither mind nor matter possesses any inherent power or activity of their own. Just as God is the ultimate cause of all physical movements in the realm of extension, so too is He the universal cause of all ideas and inclinations within the mind. Consequently, the mind is essentially passive, with the will being secondary in nature and not included

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[138] It is a vision in God and not of God. For more see: McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, 253.
[139] Morris Ginsberg, introduction to *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, by Nicolas Malebranche, trans. Morris Ginsberg (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923; reprint, Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 27–28.

in the mind's essence.[140] This passivity of the mind is crucial to Malebranche's epistemology, as he posits that the mind's true nature consists in its ability to receive ideas, rather than to actively generate them.

In this context, "intelligible extension" plays a critical role in Malebranche's understanding of knowledge; a notion which was introduced somewhat *en passant* to address the objection that the soul could contain the bodies it represents.[141] Intelligible extension refers to the ideal, non-material form of spatiality that exists eternally in the mind of God and is perceived by human beings through divine illumination. Unlike physical extension, which pertains to the spatial dimensions of material objects, intelligible extension represents the pure essence of spatiality itself, as conceived by divine reason. This concept is epistemologically significant because it allows humans to attain true knowledge of spatial properties and relationships, beyond the limitations and imperfections of sensory experience.[142] For example, when we contemplate the idea of a perfect circle, we are not engaging with any flawed physical object but with the intelligible extension in God's mind, which provides us with a clear and distinct understanding of geometrical truths. Through intelligible extension, Malebranche underscores the dependence of human knowledge on divine illumination and the access it grants to immutable, eternal truths.

Malebranche distinguishes between three modes of knowledge: pure understanding, imagination, and sensation.[143] Through pure understanding, the mind perceives spiritual things, universals,

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[140] Nicholas Jolley, "Malebranche on the Soul," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.

[141] Tad M. Schmaltz, "Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 74.

[142] For more see: Jasper Reid, "Malebranche on Intelligible Extension," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11, no. 4 (2003): 581–608.

[143] Ginsberg, introduction to *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, 28.

common notions, and ideas of perfection—such as the infinite, perfection, and the properties of extension. Imagination, on the other hand, allows the mind to know material things in their absence, by means of "traces" in the brain. Sensation occurs when the mind perceives sensible objects through impressions made upon the sense organs by the objects themselves when they are present, or by the animal spirits when they are absent.[144] Importantly, Malebranche argues that both sense and imagination are ultimately functions of the understanding when it interacts with the body's organs, further reinforcing the passive nature of the mind.[145]

In Malebranche's epistemology, judgment plays a significant role, much like in Descartes' philosophy. For Malebranche, judgment involves the will's acquiescence to what the understanding presents. The understanding itself does not judge but merely perceives or "apperceives" ideas, while the will is free to either consent to or reject these ideas.[146] This distinction highlights the source of error in human cognition: like Descartes, Malebranche argues that error arises not from the understanding but from the will. When the will consents to ideas without sufficient evidence or clarity, it leads to false judgments. Essentially, in Malebranche's view, God causes the inclinations of the will, but the will retains a certain freedom in its capacity to consent or withhold assent to the ideas presented to it by the understanding. While God causes the inclinations, human beings are responsible for making correct judgments based on divine illumination. The will is free in its consent but can misuse this freedom by consenting to ideas that are not sufficiently clear. Therefore, in Malebranche's view, the mind must rely on divine illumination to perceive ideas accurately and to guide the will in its judgments.

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[144] Sensation and the nature of the mind is a significant topic for both Descartes and Malebranche, with both ontological and epistemological relevance. For a more thorough examination, see: Antonia LoLordo, "Descartes and Malebranche on Thought, Sensation, and the Nature of the Mind," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43, no. 4 (2005): 387–402.

[145] Nicholas Jolley, *Causality and Mind: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44.

[146] Ginsberg, introduction to *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, 28.

As we have seen, the concept of divine illumination plays a crucial role in this epistemological framework. Malebranche draws on Augustine's notion that human knowledge requires the light of God to be true and reliable. Augustine had argued that just as the physical eyes need light to see, so too does the mind need the light of God to perceive truth.[147] Malebranche extends this analogy by asserting that without divine illumination, the human mind is incapable of perceiving ideas in their true form.[148] It is only through God's illumination that the mind is able to grasp the eternal and immutable truths that exist in the divine intellect. In this framework, when individuals perceive the world, they do not directly apprehend external objects or even representations of those objects within their own minds. Instead, they see these objects through the divine ideas in God, who is the source of all truth and knowledge. Therefore, "vision in God" is not just a figure of speech for divine knowledge; it is a real depiction of how people acquire knowledge.

This idea of divine illumination addresses a key problem in Cartesian epistemology: the reliability of human cognition. Descartes famously posited that clear and distinct ideas are the mark of truth, but he also acknowledged the possibility of error when the will extends beyond the intellect's capacity to perceive clearly. Malebranche accepts this basic premise but adds a significant dimension by arguing that even clear and distinct ideas require the context of divine illumination to be fully reliable. For Malebranche, it is not enough that an idea is clear and distinct; it must also be perceived within the divine framework provided by God's illumination.[149] Without this, even the clearest ideas could lead to error, as the human mind alone is insufficiently equipped to perceive truth without divine

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[147] Rudolph Allers, "St. Augustine's Doctrine on Illumination," *Franciscan Studies* 12, no. 1 (1952): 27–46, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41974505.

[148] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book VI, Chap. 2, 319.

[149] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book I, Chap. 2, 10–11.

assistance. Essentially, for Malebranche, the mind is a *lumen illuminatum* (illuminated light), not a *lumen illuminam* (illuminating light).[150]

In conclusion, Malebranche's concept of vision in God and his emphasis on divine illumination represent a profound development in early modern epistemology. By integrating Augustinian theology with Cartesian rationalism, Malebranche offers a vision of human cognition that is both deeply dependent on God and oriented toward the divine truth. This epistemological framework not only critiques and refines Cartesian ideas but also presents a robust account of how human beings can attain knowledge in a world where God is the ultimate source of all truth. Through this synthesis, Malebranche underscores the importance of divine illumination in the pursuit of knowledge, making it clear that true understanding is always a participation in the infinite wisdom of God, and laying the groundwork for his theory of occasionalism.

2c. Occasionalism and Divine Concurrence in Human Cognition

Building on Malebranche's concept of divine vision, which asserts that all ideas are perceived through God, we turn now to his doctrine of occasionalism and the role of divine concurrence in human cognition. Occasionalism is a fundamental aspect of Malebranche's philosophy, addressing not only the interaction between mind and body but also the broader question of causality in the world. According to Malebranche, creatures possess no true causal power; instead, God is the sole cause of all events, and what we perceive as causes in the natural world are merely "occasions" for God's will to manifest itself.[151] This doctrine has profound implications for understanding how human beings think, perceive, and interact with the world.

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[150] For more see: Jolley "Intellect and Illumination in Malebranche." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32: 209–24.

[151] Daisie Radner, *Malebranche: A Study of a Cartesian System* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1978), 25–6.

Malebranche's occasionalism is rooted in his critique of Cartesian dualism, which posits a strict separation between mind and body as two distinct substances. Descartes maintained that the mind and body interact through the pineal gland, with the mind exerting causal influence over the body and vice versa. However, Malebranche finds this explanation inadequate. Malebranche argues that it is impossible for a non-material substance (the mind) to cause changes in a material substance (the body) and vice versa.[152] In his view, such interaction can only be explained by divine intervention. Thus, Malebranche proposes that God, not the mind, is the true cause of all bodily movements and mental states. When the mind wills to move the body, it is not the mind itself that causes the movement, but God who, on the occasion of the mind's volition, causes the body to move.

As previously mentioned, divine concurrence in human cognition functions similarly. In Malebranche's epistemology, human beings do not directly apprehend ideas; rather, they perceive ideas as they exist in God. This process involves divine concurrence because it is God who illuminates the human mind, allowing it to perceive these ideas. The mind, therefore, does not have an active role in generating or accessing ideas; it merely receives them through God's grace. [153] Just as God is the true cause of physical movements in the body, He is also the cause of all cognitive acts. The human mind, in this sense, is entirely passive, depending on God's continual concurrence to perceive and understand the world. Malebranche's occasionalism also addresses the problem of error in human cognition. Therefore, divine concurrence is not just necessary for physical movement or cognitive activity but is also essential for attaining true knowledge and avoiding error.

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[152] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, Book VI, Part 2, Chap. 3, 446–452.
[153] Pyle, *Malebranche*, 132–3.

This reliance on divine concurrence sharply contrasts with Cartesian dualism, where the mind is seen as an active agent capable of understanding and causing effects in the body.[154] In Malebranche's framework, the mind's role is diminished; it is not the source of its own ideas or actions but a recipient of divine action.[155] The occasionalist doctrine thus reconfigures the relationship between mind and body, with God serving as the essential link that makes all interaction possible.

Occasionalism works as a solution for a problem which Daisie Radner identifies. For Radner, Malebranche's challenge lies in explaining how individual objects in our perception are distinct from one another if they are all perceived through the ideas in God.[156] Since all ideas exist in God and are perceived through divine illumination, the question arises: How can we explain the individuation of these objects as distinct entities in our perception?

Radner suggests a solution rooted in Malebranche's occasionalism. According to this view, the distinction between individual perceptual objects is not intrinsic to the objects themselves but is instead a result of the specific circumstances and occasions in which God wills the perception of different objects.[157] The perception of different objects is therefore individuated by the different occasions or contexts in which God presents these ideas to our minds.

In conclusion, Malebranche's doctrine of occasionalism and the role of divine concurrence represent a radical departure from Cartesian dualism. By attributing all causal power to God, Malebranche

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[154] For more see: Tad M. Schmaltz, *Malebranche's Theory of the Soul: A Cartesian Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 49–59.

[155] Nicholas Jolley, *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 100.

[156] Daisie Radner, "Malebranche and the Individuation of Perceptual Objects," in *Individuation and Identity in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. K. Barber and J. Gracia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 59–65.

[157] Radner, "Malebranche and the Individuation of Perceptual Objects," 65–71.

redefines the nature of human cognition and the interaction between mind and body. The mind's passivity and dependence on God for all cognitive and physical activity highlight the profound significance of divine concurrence in Malebranche's epistemology, making it clear that true understanding and knowledge are ultimately gifts from God, mediated through His constant presence and action in the world.

2d. Distinction between Sensations, Ideas, and Efficacious Ideas

Malebranche's categorisation of mental content further refines our understanding of how human beings perceive and interact with the world. In his epistemology, Malebranche distinguishes between sensations, ideas, and what he refers to as efficacious ideas, each playing a distinct role in cognition and knowledge.

Malebranche's distinction begins with sensations, viz. subjective experiences arising from the body's interaction with the external world. Sensations is an umbrella term that includes the sense of inner sentiment, modifications of the mind, and secondary qualities like perceptions of colour, taste, sound, and pain, among others.[158] They are inherently tied to the body and are often deceptive, as they do not directly correspond to the true nature of the external objects that cause them. For Malebranche, sensations are not ideas in the strict sense because they are not representations of eternal truths in the mind of God; rather, they are contingent and variable, shaped by the specific conditions of the body and the environment.[159] Sensations, therefore, provide information about the body's state rather than about the objective reality of the world.

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[158] Alison Simmons, "Sensations in a Malebranchean Mind," in *Topics in Early Modern Theories of Mind (Studies in the History and Philosophy of Mind: Volume 9)*, ed. J. Miller (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 120–22.
[159] Steven Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26.

Ideas, in contrast, are universal and immutable. Ideas are neither bodies nor minds, and they cannot be equated with any states or modes of our minds.[160] They exist in the mind of God and are perceived by human beings through divine illumination. Ideas represent the true essences of things and are the foundation of all genuine knowledge. Unlike sensations, which are tied to the physical and temporal world, ideas are timeless and unchanging.[161] For example, the idea of a triangle, as understood by Malebranche, exists eternally in God's mind and can be perceived by any intellect, regardless of the physical or sensory conditions in which cognition is taking place. This distinction underscores Malebranche's belief that true knowledge comes not from sensory experience but from the intellectual apprehension of divine ideas.

Malebranche uses four different arguments to claim that ideas are located in God and are necessary for both pure and sensory perception. The first argument is known as the Object of Perception, and states that every cognitive act must have an actual object, even in cases like dreams—implying that ideas, rather than physical bodies, serve as these objects. The second is the Strolling Soul; since the soul cannot move to perceive bodies directly, something distinct from the body must be present to the soul, reinforcing the need for ideas. The third is Arguments from Properties, which supports the assertion that ideas possess immutable and eternal properties that are incompatible with the transient nature of mental states, further suggesting that these ideas exist in God. Last is the Elimination Argument, by which Malebranche evaluates other possible explanations for perception and dismisses them, finding only vision in God viable.[162]

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[160] Andrew Pessin. "Malebranche's 'Vision of God.'" *Philosophy Compass* 1, no. 1 (2006): 39.

[161] Andrew Pessin, *Malebranche on Ideas*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 34, no. 2 (2004): 254.

[162] Pessin. "Malebranche's 'Vision of God,'" 37–8.

Malebranche's final category of mental content, that of efficacious ideas, holds a special place in his theory of cognition. Efficacious ideas are ideas that not only represent truths but also have the power to produce effects in the world, specifically in the understanding of the mind.[163] Efficacious ideas are those that lead to action or deeper comprehension; they are not merely passive representations but are active in shaping the mind's perception and judgment. For instance, the idea of justice, when truly understood, compels the mind toward just actions, demonstrating its efficacy in moral reasoning. Malebranche sees efficacious ideas as a bridge between the intellectual world of ideas and the practical world of human action, guided by the divine will.[164]

This distinction between sensations, ideas, and efficacious ideas has significant implications for understanding human perception and knowledge. Malebranche's categorisation suggests that while sensations are necessary for navigating the physical world, they are unreliable as sources of truth.[165] Ideas, perceived through divine illumination, are the true objects of knowledge, providing the mind with access to the eternal truths of God's intellect. Efficacious ideas, meanwhile, ensure that knowledge is not static but dynamic, influencing both thought and behaviour. Generally, Malebranche's theory of ideas is characterized by a strong anti-psychologism, where he argues against conflating logic with psychology.[166]

By distinguishing these three types of mental content, Malebranche further emphasises the passivity of the human mind in relation to divine illumination. Sensations arise from the body's interaction with the external world and provide subjective experiences, but they do not lead to true knowledge of reality. Ideas, on the other hand, are directly perceived in God and provide the foundation for all

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[163] Nolan, "Malebranche on Sensory Cognition and 'Seeing As'," 27–28.
[164] Susan Peppers-Bates, *"Does Malebranche Need Efficacious Ideas?" Journal of the History of Philosophy* 43, no. 1 (2005): 84–85.
[165] Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 25–26.
[166] For a more analytic exposition of Malebranche's anti-psychologism, see: Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 55-74.

intellectual understanding, offering true knowledge beyond mere sensory experience. While sensations tell us how we experience things, ideas give us true intellectual knowledge about the nature of things, as they are grounded in divine reality. Efficacious ideas take this a step further by actively shaping the mind's moral and cognitive development, underscoring the role of divine concurrence in guiding human action and thought.

2e. Skepticism

Skepticism, particularly regarding the nature of the external world and the certainty of knowledge, posed significant challenges in early modern philosophy. As previously shown, Descartes offered responses to this issue, but his approach reveals important differences with Malebranche that are rooted in their philosophical cornerstones.

Malebranche's response to skepticism is deeply intertwined with his doctrine of vision in God treated in section 2b. For Malebranche, human beings do not perceive the world directly; rather, they perceive ideas that exist in God. This divine illumination serves as the foundation of all knowledge, ensuring that the ideas we perceive are true because they are God's ideas, not merely human constructs. Malebranche contends that our knowledge of eternal truths and the nature of the world is grounded in these divine ideas, which are immutable, necessary, and objective. This framework effectively counters skepticism by asserting that the certainty of our knowledge is guaranteed by its divine origin.

Steven Nadler highlights the strengths and limitations of Malebranche's response to skepticism. While Malebranche's doctrine addresses skepticism about the nature of the external world by ensuring the objectivity and immutability of ideas, it does not fully resolve skepticism concerning the existence of

material bodies and other minds.[167] The ideas perceived in God, according to Malebranche, do not provide information about the existence of objects, only their nature. Thus, while Malebranche effectively counters skepticism about knowledge and eternal truths, he does not completely dispel doubts about the existence of the external world. This comes into contrast with Descartes' methodological doubt or skepticism that arrives at the conclusion that the only indubitable truth is the existence of the self as a thinking being.

Nicholas Jolley points out that while Descartes' approach relies on the trustworthiness of God to guarantee the truth of clear and distinct ideas, Malebranche goes further by positing that these ideas are directly perceived in God, providing an even stronger shield against skepticism.[168] For Descartes, God's role is to ensure that our mental faculties do not deceive us; for Malebranche, God is the very source of our ideas, eliminating the possibility of deception at its root.[169]

In summary, Malebranche's response to skepticism, rooted in his doctrine of vision in God, offers a robust counter to skeptical doubts by tying human knowledge directly to divine ideas. While his approach effectively addresses skepticism about the nature of knowledge and eternal truths, it does not entirely eliminate doubts about the existence of the external world. In contrast, Descartes' methodological skepticism establishes certainty through radical doubt and the trustworthiness of God but does not provide the same level of assurance as Malebranche's direct reliance on divine illumination. Both philosophers offer significant, yet distinct, contributions to the ongoing philosophical battle against skepticism.

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[167] Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 145-49.
[168] Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 80.
[169] Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, trans. N. Jolley and D. Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 218.

Chapter 3: Evaluative Analysis and Implications for Contemporary Philosophy

As we have seen, René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche have both made significant contributions to epistemology, particularly concerning knowledge and certainty. Despite their shared Cartesian heritage, their approaches diverge in important ways, reflecting distinct foundational principles and epistemic goals.

I believe one of the most significant similarities between Descartes and Malebranche lies in their commitment to a form of rationalism. Both philosophers emphasise the role of reason in the acquisition of knowledge, rejecting the empiricist view that sense experience alone can provide a secure foundation for certainty. Descartes, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, employs methodical doubt as a means to achieve certainty. For Descartes, the certainty of self-existence as a thinking being becomes the bedrock upon which all further knowledge is built.[170] Malebranche, influenced by Descartes, similarly views reason as essential to true knowledge.[171] However, he introduces the doctrine of divine illumination, positing that humans see all things in God.[172] This Platonic notion, reinterpreted through a Christian lens, suggests that true knowledge comes not from within the self—as Descartes' *cogito* might imply—but from a divine source. For Malebranche, the mind, in its finite capacity, cannot access truths independently; rather, it perceives them in God, who illuminates the mind and allows it to grasp eternal truths.[173] This has interesting parallels in contemporary discussions about the role of social and communal contexts in knowledge acquisition, such as in social epistemology, where the focus is on how knowledge is influenced and supported by communal practices and external authorities.[174]

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[170] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 16–19.
[171] Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 27–29.
[172] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 232.
[173]Tad M. Schmaltz, "Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God, 71–76.
[174] For more, see: Alvin I. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The divergence between Descartes and Malebranche becomes apparent in their methods. Descartes' methodical doubt aims to strip away all beliefs that could be subject to even the slightest doubt, leading to the identification of indubitable truths.[175] This foundationalism is built upon the idea that certainty must be rooted in self-evident principles.[176] In contrast, Malebranche's method is less about doubt and more about the recognition of human limitations, a key concept in Christian theology.[177] He emphasises the dependence of human cognition on divine grace, arguing that without God's illumination, humans would be prone to error and illusion.[178]

Descartes' foundationalism is both a strength and a weakness. Its strength lies in foundationalism's rigorous commitment to certainty, ensuring that only indubitable beliefs are accepted as knowledge.[179] This could provide (and, I believe, historically did provide) a robust framework for science and philosophy, establishing a clear criterion for truth. However, its weakness is evident in the challenge of finding truly indubitable beliefs beyond the *cogito*. Descartes' reliance on clear and distinct perceptions as the mark of truth is criticised for being too subjective, as what appears clear and distinct to one may not be so to another.[180] Nevertheless, Descartes' legacy remains vital in contemporary debates, challenging philosophers to refine the concept of foundational beliefs; thus,

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[175] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 12–15.
[176] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 24–26.
[177] Stuart Brown, "The Critical Reception of Malebranche, from His Own Time to the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 269.
[178] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 217–219.
[179] Michael Della Rocca, "René Descartes," in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 62.
[180] For more on Descartes' subjectivism, see: Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 200–214.

leading some to favour coherentism, which allows for a more holistic and less rigid structure of knowledge (even though foundationalism still has some defenders due to the fear of relativism).[181]

Malebranche's divine illumination theory offers a compelling alternative by grounding knowledge in the infinite and immutable God, thereby avoiding the subjectivity that plagues Descartes' system.[182] The strength of Malebranche's approach lies in its recognition of human cognitive limitations and its emphasis on the necessity of divine assistance for true knowledge.[183] This view avoids the potential solipsism of Descartes' *cogito* by situating knowledge within a communal framework grounded in the divine. However, the weakness of Malebranche's approach is its reliance on theological premises (or ontological, according to one's views), which may not be acceptable to all and may be seen as introducing an unnecessary metaphysical complexity.[184]

Regarding the mind–body problem, Descartes famously posits a dualistic framework, where the mind and body are distinct substances interacting through the pineal gland.[185] This interaction, however, remains enigmatic, and Descartes struggles to explain how two fundamentally different substances can causally interact. Descartes' emphasis on the mind as a distinct, non-material entity continues to inform discussions on the irreducibility of consciousness and the "hard problem" of explaining subjective experience.[186]

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[181] Laurence BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 36–37, 59.
[182] Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 146.
[183] Nadler, *Malebranche and Ideas*, 42–46.
[184] Jolley, *The Light of the Soul*, 79-80.
[185] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 50–62.
[186] For more, see: David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, 1996.

In contrast, Malebranche, influenced by this problem, offers the theory of occasionalism, where God is the true cause of all interactions between mind and body.[187] This view elegantly resolves the interaction problem by removing any direct causal relationship between mind and body, yet it raises issues regarding the autonomy of human action and the problem of divine intervention in the world.[188] Furthermore, occasionalism's reliance on a divine intermediary challenges today's philosophers to consider the role of external or transcendent factors in causation, particularly in discussions about the nature of mental causation and the limits of physical explanations.[189] To conclude, I strongly believe that each philosopher's strengths address the other's weaknesses, offering two distinct yet related paths in the pursuit of knowledge and certainty.

In comparing Descartes and Malebranche, my preference diverges depending on the context: philosophically, I am more aligned with Descartes, but theologically, I am drawn to Malebranche. Descartes' approach, particularly his commitment to the cogito as a foundational certainty and his methodical progression from self-evident truths, offers a robust framework for addressing skepticism without immediate recourse to divine validation. This independence preserves the autonomy of human reason and establishes a clear sequence where divine assurance enhances rather than initiates epistemic certainty.

On the other hand, as a theologian, I appreciate Malebranche's emphasis on divine illumination, which beautifully integrates the role of God in the philosophical acquisition of truth and knowledge. Malebranche's view that we see all things in God places the divine at the centre of epistemology, which aligns closely with a theological understanding that prioritises divine intervention in human

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[187] Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, 315–318.
[188] Marleen Rozemond, *Descartes's Dualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 175.
[189] For more, see: Patterson, Sarah. "Epiphenomenalism and Occasionalism: Problems of Mental Causation, Old and New." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2005): 239–57.

cognition. While this theological perspective risks subordinating human reason to divine influence, it offers a compelling vision of knowledge as inherently linked to the divine light. Essentially, Malebranche combines many good aspects (if not most) of Descartes and Augustine and I believe he is underestimated academically. While Malebranche's synthesis of theological and philosophical truths is notably balanced and elegantly conceived, his thought is often perceived as lacking the originality of figures like Augustine or Descartes. This may explain why Malebranche, despite his insightful integration of divine illumination into epistemology, has not achieved significant influence as a standalone theological figure. His reliance on certain metaphysical assumptions—such as those related to divine causality and illumination—rests on grounds that remain highly contentious, particularly within broader philosophical debates, including the philosophy of religion. This reliance can undermine the broader philosophical appeal of his system, as it presupposes metaphysical truths that are far from universally accepted. Therefore, philosophically, Descartes' framework of foundationalism and epistemic independence remains more convincing in addressing the Cartesian Circle, but Malebranche's integration of theology into the pursuit of knowledge resonates deeply from a theological/philosophical standpoint.

Conclusion

The philosophical interest in the nature of knowledge, certainty, and how we come to have knowledge has been a perennial concern in the discipline of philosophy. The ideas of René Descartes and Nicolas Malebranche are some of the most significant in this ongoing debate. Despite the fact that both philosophers belong to the rationalist school of thought, their views on epistemology are quite contrasting and this divergence can be attributed to the differences in their metaphysical and theological beliefs.

Central to Descartes' epistemology is the method of doubt, which is a form of skepticism that seeks to eliminate all that is not beyond doubt. This process leads him to the foundational certainty of the

cogito, "I think, therefore I exist," which is the cornerstone of his philosophy. From this vantage of certainty, Descartes goes on to build an epistemological system that is grounded on clear and distinct concepts, which he asserts are assured by the presence of God. This non-deceptive God ensures that the mind's clear and distinct ideas are true, thereby providing a firm foundation for knowledge.

The three aspects of Descartes' philosophy that were revolutionary include his emphasis on the autonomy of reason, his use of clear and distinct ideas, and his foundationalist approach to knowledge. He laid the foundation for modern philosophy and shaped the rationalist tradition that followed him, including the thought of Spinoza and Leibniz, as well as the empiricists Locke and Hume. Thus, Descartes' search for truth through rationalism set the standard for future philosophy that emphasised the importance of reason and logical thinking and paved the way for the formation of modern science.

However, as powerful as Descartes' system seems to be, it is not without its problems. The Cartesian Circle—the possibility of the argument being circular, in using God's existence to justify the truth of clear and distinct ideas while at the same time using these ideas to justify God's existence—is still debatable. Additionally, Descartes' use of reason in the search for truth and knowledge poses the question of how far one can go on reason alone. Is it possible that reason is capable of giving one access to all types of truth or are there some aspects of truth that cannot be reached by reason?

Nicolas Malebranche provides a counterview to some of these issues. As a Cartesian rationalist and an Augustinian theologian, Malebranche offers an epistemology that affirms the finitude of human reason and the need for divine light. According to Malebranche, true knowledge is not something that the human mind can acquire on its own; it is possible only through the "vision of God." This idea means that all ideas are in God and only by seeing these ideas in God can one have true knowledge.

Malebranche's doctrine of occasionalism also differentiates his epistemology from that of Descartes. Whereas Descartes wrestled with the issue of how the mind and body can interact given their dual nature, Malebranche neatly sidesteps this problem by arguing that only God can be said to cause things. In this perspective, the cause-and-effect relations that we observe in the natural environment are just opportunities for God's will to be displayed. This theological solution not only solves the problem of causality but also enhances the idea that reason is God-dependent.

Malebranche's critique of Descartes extends to the very foundation of Cartesian epistemology—the *cogito*. While Descartes saw the *cogito* as the ultimate self-evident truth, Malebranche argued that this conclusion, while indubitable, is incomplete. The *cogito* reveals the existence of the self but fails to acknowledge the self's dependence on God. For Malebranche, the self is not an autonomous, self-sufficient entity but one that exists in relation to God. Knowledge, therefore, must be understood not as a product of human reason alone but as something that is ultimately grounded in the divine.

The comparison between Descartes and Malebranche shows two different ways of understanding the issue of knowledge in the early modern period. Thus, Descartes can be seen as an example of the secularisation of philosophy, which relies on reason and logic as the means of gaining knowledge. He was one of the early philosophers who paved the way for the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution, which emphasised individualism and reason. Malebranche, on the other hand, embodies a further development of the harmony between philosophy and theology, which makes us aware of the finite nature of reason and the need for divine help in the search for truth.

In post-Cartesian and post-Malebranchean philosophy, and in contemporary philosophy in general, the discussions are still ongoing. The foundationalist–versus–coherentist debates in epistemology, the

debates on the limits of reason, and the discourse of science and religion can all be traced back to the problems that these two philosophers addressed. The methods of doubt and reason that Descartes advocated for are still relevant in epistemology and the philosophy of science. However, Malebranche's integration of reason with faith and his doctrine of occasionalism provide an alternative view that is not entirely compatible with the secular perspective of philosophy, indicating that there may be some things that cannot be explained by reason.

In conclusion, the epistemological contrasts between Descartes and Malebranche reflect deeper philosophical commitments about the nature of reality, the role of God in human understanding, and the limits of human cognition. Descartes' system, with its emphasis on reason and autonomy, has had a profound influence on the development of modern philosophy and science. Malebranche's critique, however, serves as a reminder of the limitations of a purely rationalist approach and the importance of considering the divine in the pursuit of knowledge. Together, these two philosophers provide a rich and nuanced foundation for ongoing philosophical inquiry, offering insights that remain relevant to contemporary debates in epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion.

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