The Problem of the Cartesian Circle: 3 formulations on the 1/18 handout

Van Cleve’s Solution
-based on a distinction Van Cleve (following work by Anthony Kenny) draws between two readings of “I am certain of the truth of clear and distinct perceptions”:

(A) For all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then I am certain that p.
(B) I am certain that (for all p, if I clearly and distinctly perceive that p, then p).
--The difference is that (A) says that whenever I clearly and distinctly perceive any proposition, I will be certain of it (the proposition in question), whereas (B) says that I am certain of a general principle connecting clear and distinct perception with truth. (“Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,” pp. 66-67)

-Van Cleve claims that this distinction enables us to make sense of...the notorious fourth paragraph in the Third Meditation, where Descartes appears to oscillate inconsistently between saying, on the one hand, God or no God, I am certain of things when I clearly and distinctly perceive them, and, on the other hand, I can doubt even the truth of clear and distinct perceptions if I do not know that there is a veracious God. The appearance of consistency is removed if we see Descartes as being uncertain not of particular propositions that he clearly and distinctly perceives, but only of the general connection between clear and distinct perception and truth. What he show us in the paragraph is that at this stage in the Meditations (A) is true of him but (B) is not. (p. 67)

-On Van Cleve’s solution, Descartes’s particular C&DP’s are never in any way doubted (only the general principle connecting C&DP with truth is doubted). Thus, Descartes’s C&DI’s are available for legitimate use as the starting points for Descartes’s building project.

-Problem: Epistemic circularity. An argument is epistemically circular if its conclusion is a statement about the reliability of a faculty or way of forming beliefs, and some of whose premises are beliefs one has only through the faculty or way of forming beliefs in question

-Main Problem: But does this do justice to the apparent expressions of doubt about C&DI’s we looked at on 1/18, including in that “notorious” fourth paragraph of Meditation Three? These passages sure look like they’re calling particular C&DP’s, and not just some general principle, into doubt.

-Let’s look at that paragraph (in a different tr.; see p. 25 of our book); key bits highlighted:

But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. But whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for him, if he so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think I see utterly clearly with my mind’s eye. Yet when I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let
whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something; or make it true at some future time that I have never existed, since it is now true that I exist; or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. And since I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one. But in order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else.

-Suggestion: To make sense of this paragraph and other troublesome passages, I suggest employing a distinction between psychological and epistemic (or evaluative) certainty. The first is a matter of being psychologically incapable of doubting something; the second is a matter of having no good reason for doubting something. These can come apart. You can have even what you recognize to be a good reason for doubting something (and thereby realize that the proposition in question is not an epistemically certain one for you), while finding yourself psychologically unable to doubt the matter for that, or for any other, reason (thereby realizing that this epistemically uncertain matter is nonetheless psychologically certain for you). My suggestion is to read Descartes’s apparent “oscillations” as him asserting, on the one hand, that the matters under discussion (things he c&dp’s, while he’s c&dp-ing them) are psychologically certain for him (he is incapable of doubting them), while admitting that, epistemically, they are not (yet) as certain as he would like (he still has a reason – though it is “a very slight and, so to speak, metaphysical one” – for doubting them). This seems to handle the texts better than does Van Cleve’s suggestion.

The Circle: A Suggested Two-Level Solution
-Retains Van Cleve’s account of how Descartes uses particular C&DP’s to establish, as a C&DP, the general truth that Whatever I C&DP is true.
-But avoids VC’s main problem by construing Descartes as aiming for a level of certainty stronger than that provided by mere C&DP.
-Descartes wants scientia, or perfect knowledge, which is attained only when the general principle connecting C&DP with truth is itself C&DP’d.
-Here is Descartes sounding very two-level-y, in the “Atheist Geometer” passage, from his Replies to the Second Set of Objections (Haldane & Ross translation):

That an atheist can know clearly that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, I do not deny, I merely affirm that, on the other hand, such knowledge on his part cannot constitute truc seigneur, because no knowledge that can be rendered doubtful should be called science. Since he is, as supposed, an Atheist, he cannot be sure that he is not deceived in the things that seem most evident to him, as has been sufficiently shown; and though perrehance the doubt does not oecur to him, nevertheless it may come up, if he examine the matter, or if another suggests it; he can never be safe from it unless he first recognizes the existence of a God.

-And here he is in a letter to Regius (24 May 1640):
In your second objection, you say that the truth of axioms which are clearly and distinctly conceived is self-evident. This too, I agree, is true, during the time they are clearly and distinctly conceived; because our mind is of such a nature that it cannot help assenting to what it clearly and distinctly conceives. But because we often remember conclusions that we have derived from such premises without actually attending to the premises, I say that in such a case, if we lack knowledge of God, we can pretend that they are uncertain even though we remember that they were deduced from clear principles; because perhaps our nature is such that we go wrong even in the most evident matters. Consequently, even at the moment when we deduced them from those principles, we did not have scientific knowledge (scientia) of them, but only a conviction (persuasio) of them. I distinguish the two as follows: there is conviction when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but scientific knowledge is conviction based on an argument so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger argument. Nobody can have the latter unless he also has knowledge of God. But a man who has once understood the arguments which prove that God exists and is not a deceiver, provided that he remembers the conclusion 'God is no deceiver', whether or not he continues to attend to the arguments for it, will continue to possess not only the conviction, but real scientific knowledge of this and all other conclusions whose premises he remembers he once clearly perceived.

-Proposal: We make sense of Descartes's procedure if we understand his goal, scientia, along these lines:

S has scientia of p if and only if (1) S clearly and distinctly perceives that p is true and (2) S clearly and distinctly perceives the truth of the general principle that what S clearly and distinctly perceives is true. (DeRose, “Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and Scientia,” Pacific Phil. Quart., 1992, p. 224)

-Main Question: Is having scientia of p, so understood, really epistemically better (more certain) than is merely having C&DP of p? To answer, we should think mostly about reasons for doubt.

--undercutting (as opposed to opposing) reasons for doubt and D’s supposed advantage over the atheist geometer.

-still a problem (as with Van Cleve): Epistemic Circularity: sect. E (pp. 230-1) of my paper

From the second set of Replies:

First of all, as soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty. (AT 7:144–45; emph. added)
E. Epistemic Circularity. Question: But what kind of "proof" could this be? Even if Descartes could successfully argue from clear and distinct perceptions that his faculty of clear and distinct perception is reliable,¹⁳ wouldn't this argument "beg the question"?

Answer: This is what William Alston has called an epistemically circular argument (see Alston, 1986). But this is just to give a label to a type of argument for the reliability of a way of forming beliefs that takes as its premises the deliverances of that very way of forming beliefs. What is of real interest is that it is not at all clear that such an argument is powerless to improve one's epistemic position vis-à-vis its conclusion. Alston, in fact, argues that one can use an epistemically circular argument to justify one's belief in its conclusion (pp. 11–14) and that one could use such an argument to successfully show or establish its conclusion (p. 15).

While Alston's arguments are plausible, these results (especially the latter concerning showing or establishing) are at the same time questionable, I believe. Still, a brief discussion will suffice to show that it is very far from clear that Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving Descartes's epistemically circular argument would be useless for the purpose of improving

First, recall the results of Part C above. Unlike the type of circularity described by Van Cleve (see the very beginning of Part A, above), I am not ascribing to Descartes a view according to which the following three mutually inconsistent claims hold for any two propositions \( p \) and \( q \) and any single epistemic status \( J \):

1. My belief that \( p \) can have status \( J \) only if my belief that \( q \) first has status \( J \).
2. My belief that \( q \) can have status \( J \) only if my belief that \( p \) first has status \( J \).
3. My belief that \( p \) and/or my belief that \( q \) is of status \( J \).

Claims (1) and (2) above set up a circularity between one's belief in \( p \) and one's belief in \( q \). This circularity is clearly vicious: It obviously cuts one off from attaining status \( J \) for either belief. In contrast, on my interpretation, as I pointed out in Part C, where \( p \) and \( q \) are Van Cleve's \( P \) and \( Q \), then if \( J \) is clearly and distinctly perceiving, Descartes can deny (2), and if \( J \) is having scientia, he can deny both (1) and (2). Thus, the epistemic circularity I ascribe to Descartes is not so clearly vicious. His claims to having attained scientia do not generate any easily seen contradiction with any other commitments I ascribe to him.

Next, as Alston has pointed out (Alston, 1985, p. 449), we should remember that the use of a faculty could result in one's coming to learn that the faculty is unreliable. Alternatively, it might issue no result regarding its own reliability. In light of this, if Descartes were right that his faculty of clear and distinct perception is self-verifying (rather than self-undermining), this would by no means be an obviously worthless result. Such an epistemically circular verification may well be of some significant value.

It is worth noting that, as several people have pointed out to me, when a faculty and its resulting beliefs are otherwise highly suspect, an epistemically circular self-verification of the faculty seems to be of little to no value. (The reader is left to construct her own examples to show this.) It is when a faculty and its resulting beliefs are seen as already having something epistemically going for them prior to such self-verification that this process plausibly seems to bestow further epistemic virtue on them. As will become most evident in the next section, on my reading of him, Descartes does take his clear and distinct perceptions as having a good deal of epistemic merit even before his faculty of clear and distinct perceptions has verified itself.

F. But Is it Enough? Answer to Van Cleve. On my reading, then, Descartes sought clear and distinct perceptions which were buttressed by a "proof" of the epistemic principle behind them. This "proof", as I've admitted, would have to be an epistemically circular one. In the previous section, I pointed out that this epistemic circularity does not clearly render the argument worthless. But even if this argument were of some epistemic value, how could it possibly constitute a proof of its conclusion? How could it serve the purposes of Descartes, who seems to have wanted some kind of guarantee of truth?

My first response will be specific to the disagreement between Van Cleve and me. Van Cleve raised this question regarding a lack of a guarantee of truth against the solutions of Alan Gewirth and Fred Feldman. These solutions were, like mine, two-level solutions according to which, roughly, one reaches the higher level of certainty by attaining lower level certainty of a fact that renders one safe from undermining sceptical hypotheses. Van Cleve charges Gewirth and Feldman with thereby setting Descartes's standards for certainty far too low. Since my solution resembles those attacked by Van Cleve, one might wonder whether it may also fall prey to this criticism.

Gewirth's and Feldman's mistakes lie in making the lower level of certainty too low. Gewirth's lower level is that of "psychological certainty," which seems to amount to nothing more than being psychologically incapable of doing the proposition in question,¹⁴ while Feldman identifies the status as "practical certainty," which is nothing more than the level of certainty needed to live up to ordinary, everyday requirements for knowledge.¹⁵ Van Cleve is probably right that having one of

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