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What Place is there for God in Cartesian Doubt?

Lydia Jaeger

Summary

In the accepted view, Descartes is a rationalist philosopher taking human thought as the starting-point of all knowledge, because he establishes the existence of God and of the external world beginning from the *Cogito*. Thereby, knowledge of God seems to be secondary compared to knowledge of one's self. This paper examines the exact place that Descartes attributes to God in his philosophical system as presented in his *Discourse on the Method* and in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. A particular delicate point is the fact that Descartes resorts to God in order to assure himself of the methodological rule which he uses in constructing his metaphysical system: the truth of an idea can be recognised by its clear and distinct nature. The 'evil genius' argument in the *Meditations* makes a similar point in very colourful language. It gives raise to the famous objection of the 'circle', already made by Descartes' contemporaries and answered by himself.

By closely examining Descartes' strategy and following suggestions from French contemporary interpreters Geneviève Rodis-Lewis and Jean-Claude Marion, I will argue that human knowledge, according to Descartes himself, cannot claim to have an ultimate immanent basis in itself, but must inevitably rely on God in order not to collapse. Although the Cartesian circle is not a vicious one, it clearly shows that 'the irreducible duality of the *ego* and of God, far from establishing two rival principles, necessarily subordinates the first *principle*, or starting point, to the only absolute *foundation*, of which the transcendence of God is such that God is inaccessible to our rational discourse.¹ Therefore in Descartes 'the infinite appears [...] as primal. [...]his reversal signifies that the infinite precedes the finite—human thought, which organises and deploys its knowledge—like a horizon always already open to welcome in advance its progress and its desires'.² Even doubt itself (or more precisely the possibility to recognize it as such) is linked to God's existence.

The reading proposed here is situated at the exact opposite of the commonly held picture of Descartes. The reason for this must be sought not only in the

caricature which most if not all great thinkers of the past suffer in the popular imagination. The distortion doubtlessly feeds also off the way in which Descartes himself presents his approach: rather than honestly put God at the starting point of his thinking, he develops, in the *Discourse*, a chain of reasoning in which the existence of God appears as one of the steps, apparently deduced without any trouble from the previous steps. Nevertheless, the rigour of his thinking, aided by a profound intuition of God's power, prevented him from ignoring the radical dependence that all reasoning has on God.

1. *Cogito ergo sum as the solid foundation of knowledge*

The intellectual trajectory which Descartes describes in the Fourth Part of the *Discourse* proceeds in three stages: firstly eliminate everything which is not indubitable, arriving at an absolutely certain foundation, from which we can construct a philosophical system as certain as mathematical knowledge. In the first, destructive, stage, Descartes specifically rejects three categories of commonly accepted affirmations:

- the way that the senses make us imagine the world, since sometimes they deceive us (in optical illusions)
- demonstrations, since some people err in reasoning, even in the simplest matters of geometry
- finally all beliefs about the external world, since in dreams, we have illusory thoughts.

Faced with the demanding criterion of proof, no affirmation is allowed to stand if we can reasonably imagine that it be erroneous. Optical illusions, the fallible reasoning of some, and dreams give Descartes sufficient reason to reject the bulk of what is commonly accepted as true.

Does Cartesian doubt make us sink into scepticism, preventing us from knowing anything? Nothing could be further from the truth. Descartes' critical approach simply aims to uncover the solid foundation from which we can reconstruct a system of thought. The rigour of doubt is there to serve knowledge: the metaphysical conclusions which the *Discourse* arrives at are all the more certain as a result of the uncompromising argumentative method employed.

Where then do we find the solid foundation which allows us to rescue knowledge from the invasion of doubt? This is where the famous *cogito ergo sum* comes into play:

Whilst I thus wished to think that all was false, it was absolutely necessary that I, who thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth: I think, therefore I am, was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the sceptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of the philosophy of which I was in search.³

Among all the affirmations which are weakened by doubt, there is one that resists: the fact that I doubt, in itself, prevents me from doubting that I exist. Only a mad person doubts his own existence.

As the axis of the Cartesian system, the *cogito* argument becomes the *de facto* starting point for Descartes' whole metaphysical construction, the genuine basis on which he seeks to establish all knowledge. This basis is immanent, and more precisely, human, even solipsistic: it is man, as a thinking being, who finds in himself the necessary resource on which to base all of knowledge. In doing so, Descartes well and truly deserves his reputation of 'modern' philosopher, for the human person becomes the starting point of all philosophical contemplation. We can therefore consider the publication of the *Discourse on the Method* in 1637 as the decisive starting gun of the modernity which rejects any kind of external basis (be that divine revelation or even the world perceived by the senses), in order to establish the thinking subject as the definitive source of knowledge.

But does the Cartesian *cogito* make good on its promise to provide the rock-solid base from which we can gain access to knowledge? Before looking at the way in which Descartes intends to construct human knowledge on the *cogito*, let us examine the solidity of the foundation itself: is the *cogito* 'obvious', i.e. is it true that we cannot doubt it without forfeiting our reason? For if it was found that the *cogito* didn't satisfy the high standards that Descartes laid down for all true knowledge, the Cartesian edifice would be left without foundation before it had even begun to be built. It's therefore worth noting that the *cogito* argument presupposes (at least) one conviction of which the proof is not at all obvious: it is only protected against all doubt if I have direct epistemological access to my mind. Only if that is the case can my awareness of my own thinking not lead me astray. Of course, my thinking is not infallible in terms of its content: the Cartesian approach, in its critical phase, had correctly incorporated the possibility of error in any affirmation that I might believe about the outside

world. I could even be mistaken about the content of my own thought (so that, for example, I think I am thinking of a coat, when in reality I am thinking of a boat). But the *cogito* presupposes that there is no possibility for error as to my awareness of myself. To phrase it in analytical terms: ‘I think that I am’ self-evidently implies ‘I am’.

However, it is not self-evident that we can assume that kind of epistemic access to thought. Many philosophers (who we would hesitate to call unreasonable!) consider that man cannot know himself without referring to the exterior. Calvin begins his *Institutes* with what he believes to be ‘the sum of all our wisdom’: ‘only by knowing God can each of us know himself’. According to Calvin, man, when left to himself, cannot truly know himself: ‘It is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God’.⁴ Of course, in the context of his work, Calvin is thinking of affirmations more complicated than the ‘I think that I am’ of the Cartesian argument: man’s moral responsibility and sinful nature. But the consciousness that I am a thinking being, is this so far removed from the more developed knowledge that Calvin is aiming for, that the *cogito* be independent of the knowledge which can only come from an encounter with the Creator?

Nearer to our time, we can point to the thesis of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber: man only discovers himself as ‘I’ in the meeting with the ‘You’. As a result, it is impossible to isolate the awareness that man has of himself from the knowledge that he has of the outside world. Modern psychology also highlights the important role that other people play in the construction of the individual.

In analytical philosophy, Wittgenstein’s private language argument demonstrates the illusion of solitary thinking which would like to find in itself a sufficient basis.⁵ Let us take as an example the affirmation ‘I feel tired’. How can I make such an assertion? What makes me think that the feeling corresponds to tiredness, rather than stress, anxiety or sadness? Is it the similarity of the feeling that I felt the last time when I thought ‘I feel tired’? But these kind of feelings are never exactly the same, and so I need to know in advance what criteria to use, before being able to make a comparison. More generally, what allows me to think that a mental state is the ‘same’ as a previous one, so that I can call both of them ‘tired’? A person in isolation may sigh with exhaustion, but can she *say*—and *think*, ‘I feel tired’? If this line of argument with respect to private language

(and more generally to private thought) is relevant, the solitary approach of Descartes' *cogito* is doomed to failure.

2. Knowledge built on the cogito

Let us leave on one side our doubts concerning the solidity of the foundation proposed by Descartes, and look at the metaphysical construct that he intends to build on it. The inferences that he draws from the *cogito* are not limited to the existence of the thinking subject; otherwise, the Cartesian system would be nothing more than solipsism, which is a minimal position, but certainly not sufficient for doing philosophy. Given the extremely stripped-down base of the *cogito*, the edifice that Descartes builds on top of it is impressive in scope: the soul as distinct from the body, God and the world being among the entities that the philosopher believes he can establish the existence of with certainty.

The first truth that Descartes establishes from 'I think, therefore I am' concerns the dualism between body and mind. As I can conceive of the possibility of not having a body, but not of the possibility of not existing, the 'I' must be distinct from the body. Therefore, I know that I am 'a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place, nor is dependent on any material thing; so that 'I', that is to say, the mind by which I am what I am, is wholly distinct from the body, and is even more easily known than the latter.'

Next, the *cogito* provides the signs by which we can recognise true propositions and distinguish them from errors. For it is the supreme example of knowing a truth, so that its character is paradigmatic for all other knowledges: 'And as I observed that in the words I think, therefore I am, there is nothing at all which gives me assurance of their truth beyond this, that I see very clearly that in order to think it is necessary to exist, I concluded that I might take, as a general rule, the principle, that all the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true.'

Thirdly, Descartes establishes the existence of God, starting from the idea of a perfect being which he discovers in his mind. For on the one hand, he acknowledges that he is himself an imperfect being, given that he doubts and that it is 'a greater perfection to know than to doubt'. On the other hand, he discovers in himself the idea of a perfect being. This idea cannot come from himself. For the less perfect cannot confer existence to the more perfect, any

more than ‘something [could] come from nothing.’ I can conclude from this that the idea of a perfect being ‘had been placed in me by a nature which was in reality more perfect than mine, and which even possessed within itself all the perfections of which I could form any idea; that is to say, in a single word, which was God’. From this chain of argument, Descartes draws two additional conclusions: first, my dependence on this perfect Being (for if I were dependent on myself, my simply wanting to be perfect would be enough to give me all perfections, and hence become God), and then the simplicity of God (since being composed of several parts is an imperfection).

3. God preceding all empirical knowledge

The ‘I’ as thinking being, the soul as distinct from the body, God: these are the principal entities that Descartes establishes; ‘all the other things [...], that we have a body, and that there exist stars and an earth, [...] are less certain’. This result of the *cogito* is surprising, not to say counter-intuitive, and Descartes is obliged to provide an explanation for the fact that the majority of people do not spontaneously adhere to the order of knowledge that he has developed.

Why don’t the majority of people realise that the existence of the soul and of God are more firmly assured than the existence of objects available to the senses? Descartes attributes this common error of judgement to the common slowness of thought, too geared into the world of the senses: ‘They never raise their thoughts above sensible objects, and are so accustomed to consider nothing except by way of imagination, which is a mode of thinking limited to material objects, that all that is not imaginable seems to them not intelligible.’ Descartes is nevertheless convinced that ‘neither our imagination nor our senses can give us assurance of anything unless our understanding intervene’.

The primacy given to reason may surprise someone brought up in the empirical tradition, which goes back to Aristotle and continues today in the dominant scientific way of thinking. But can we really resist the unremitting rigour with which Descartes uncovers the fragile nature of any knowledge developed only on the basis of the senses? He has provided us with many reasons for his conviction according to which ‘whether awake or asleep, we ought never to allow ourselves to be persuaded of the truth of anything unless on the evidence of our reason [...], and not of our imagination or of our senses’. Let us notice, however, that the reliability of reason is only assured on the condition of referring to God:

It is not a dictate of reason that what we thus see or imagine is in reality existent; but it plainly tells us that all our ideas or notions contain in them some truth; for otherwise it could not be that God, who is wholly perfect and veracious, should have placed them in us.

The veracity of God does not, of course, guarantee the infallibility of human reason: we are finite and imperfect creatures who can be mistaken. But divine perfection prevents us from sinking into debilitating scepticism. The development of knowledge may be fastidious and painstaking, but it is not impossible: the creational origin of human thought assures us sufficient access to the truth in order to arrive at knowledge.

When we examine the *Discourse* about the precise role that Descartes gives, at this stage, to the reference to God in the development of knowledge, we find that he resorts to God in order to assure himself of the epistemological scope of the distinction between clear and distinct ideas, and vague and disordered thoughts. In constructing his metaphysical system, he has already used the rule whereby the truth of an idea can be recognised by its clear and distinct nature. He had already stated that the *cogito* allowed him to establish this rule, that clear and distinct thoughts are also true. Now Descartes considers that no rule of reasoning is assured unless we bring God into play:

Even the principle which I have already taken as a rule, *viz.*, that all the things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true, is certain only because God is or exists and because he is a Perfect Being, and because all that we possess is derived from him: whence it follows that our ideas or notions, which to the extent of their clearness and distinctness are real, and proceed from God, must to that extent be true.

And again:

If we did not know that all which we possess of real and true proceeds from a Perfect and Infinite Being, however clear and distinct our ideas might be, we should have no ground on that account for the assurance that they possessed the perfection of being true.

The fact that Descartes uses God at this stage of his reasoning does not in itself condemn his rationalist project to incoherence. For he had already proved (or supposedly proved, if we are not convinced), in a purely deductive way, that

the Being possessing all perfections exists. But is it acceptable that he makes the methodological rule which governed the entire construction of knowledge—including his proof of God—depend on the existence of God? Descartes' reasoning does appear to be circular, and the commentaries have criticised him on it. The 'circle', as it has been called since Descartes' lifetime, continues to the present day to exercise the acumen of those who interpret his work.

4. The truth of clear and distinct ideas faced with the evil genius

As the Cartesian circle is raised in the *Objections to the Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Descartes answered it, it is worthwhile looking at this work to sharpen our understanding of the difficulty encountered and arrive at a fair evaluation. Of course, one should not confuse the argumentative points of view of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations*, the two works being aimed at different audiences, something already reflected by the fact that the language of first publication was not the same (French for the first, Latin for the second). Nevertheless, we find the Cartesian circle in both in a similar enough form for one work to enhance our understanding of the other.

The most noticeable difference between the two works, with respect to our problem of interest, concerns the famous 'evil genius' argument, developed in the *Meditations*: if a sovereignly powerful and deceitful being existed, he could cause impressions in me which were the same in every respect to those that I actually have, without there being any corresponding reality outside of my thinking. The epistemological distance between my sensory impressions and the world was already emphasised in the *Discourse*; the evil genius pushes the concept of doubt to its extreme limits. Faced with the evil demon—all-powerful and no less deceitful—it becomes obvious that only the existence of God—the Being possessing all perfections and therefore omnipotent, but incapable of lying—can guarantee the reliability of any knowledge whatsoever:

I must inquire whether there is a God, [...] and if I find that there is a God, I must examine likewise whether he can be a deceiver; for, without the knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything.⁶

The things which we cannot be certain of, without resorting to God, include truths held to be obvious:

But as often as this [...] opinion of the sovereign power of a God presents itself to my mind, I am constrained to admit that it is easy for him, if he

wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters where I think I possess the highest evidence.⁷

Descartes gives three examples of obvious facts concerning which I can be mistaken, if God, in his almighty power, thus decides: the fact that two plus three make five, the fact that it cannot be true tomorrow that I never existed, given that I exist today, and the fact that I exist when I think I do. Isn't this last example precisely the "indubitable" inference of *cogito ergo sum*? Let's quote the text *in extenso* (the examples come in reverse order) :

As often as I direct my attention to things which I think I apprehend with great clearness, I am so persuaded of their truth that I naturally break out into expressions such as these: Deceive me who may, no one will yet ever be able to bring it about that I am not, so long as I shall be conscious that I am, or at any future time cause it to be true that I have never been, it being now true that I am, or make two and three more or less than five.

However, despite the obviousness with which these affirmations impose on my mind, these are among the things which it would be easy for an almighty God 'if he wishes it, to cause me to err'.⁸

So what is left of the project to ground all knowledge on an immanent foundation? Down to the very basis of the Cartesian system itself—the 'I think, therefore I am'—all reasoning is shown to be dependent on the transcendent: without God, even the most obvious obviousness, as it were, should not win our acceptance, and we are left to sink in the most debilitating scepticism. Of course, in the above passage, it is not the existence of God as such which is required to guarantee the validity of the *cogito*; the non-existence of an evil demon (sovereignly powerful like God, but unlike God, deceitful) is necessary. But Descartes has already warned his reader that it's not enough, to resolve the epistemic impasse which the possibility of the evil demon led us to, to imagine a more limited power behind the creation of the world: 'It is clear (since to be deceived and to err is a certain defect) that the probability of my being so imperfect as to be the constant victim of deception, will be increased exactly in proportion as the power possessed by the cause, to which they assign my origin, is lessened.'⁹

As if to block any ploy from those who think that reason could rest easy, before fully accepting to rely on the Creator, Descartes highlights later on that doubt

itself—such a fundamental element of his philosophical approach—can't be conceived of without reference to the perfect Being:

How could I know that I doubt, desire, or that something is wanting to me, and that I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison of which I knew the deficiencies of my nature.¹⁰

5. *Descartes' answer to the circle*

Let us now come back to the Cartesian circle as it appears already in the *Discourse*: how can we be sure of the existence of God and all that follows (like the existence of the world) if the truth of clear and distinct ideas depends on the existence of God, the proof of whom requires the rule that clear and distinct thoughts are true? Introducing the evil genius in the *Meditations* only makes the answer more urgent, for it leads us to think that right to the 'indubitable' foundation of the *cogito*, the whole Cartesian system is not secure until the existence of God has been laid down.

Descartes summarises his answer to the objection raised by the Jansenist theologian and philosopher Antoine Arnauld (1612-1694) in the following way:

Lastly, as to my not being guilty of circularity when I said that our only reason for being sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true is the fact that we know for sure that God exists, and that we are sure that God exists only because we perceive this clearly [...]

At first we are sure that God exists because we are attending to the arguments that prove this; but afterwards all we need to be certain that God exists is our memory that we did earlier perceive this clearly. This memory wouldn't be sufficient if we didn't know that God exists and isn't a deceiver.¹¹

The key to the problem's solution, according to Descartes, is found in distinguishing between 'perceiving something clearly from remembering having perceived it clearly at an earlier time'.¹² The moment we think an obvious fact, it is: obvious, so that doubt is no longer possible. Since our reason is not capable, however, of thinking of all the obvious facts and their chain of argument simultaneously, the threat of doubt reappears as soon as we turn our attention away from the obvious fact in question. For, as Etienne Gilson comments, '*the memory of an obvious fact is not an obvious fact*'.¹³ But the existence and total goodness of God is therefore not necessary to guarantee the validity of the

starting point of human thought, the *cogito*. We also no longer need God to guarantee the firmness of the chain of argument which leads from the *cogito* to the existence of the soul and of God—as long as we fix our attention on the obviousness of the inferences that are advanced. However, resorting to God becomes indispensable for upholding persuasion, since otherwise, writes Geneviève Rodis-Lewis ‘the philosopher would be, like Sisyphus, condemned to always return to his starting point, currently obvious, if the ‘metaphysical’ doubt [...] was not averted by the demonstration that God is the source of truth’.¹⁴

Rodis-Lewis emphasises the constancy of the answer that Descartes gives to the circle objection, in numerous texts.¹⁵ We will but quote an extract from the letter he sent to Henri De Roy, called Regius, in answer to his comments on the manuscript of the *Meditations* (before he sent the text to father Mersenne):

You say [...] that *the truth of the axioms which are received clearly and distinctly by our mind is manifest by itself*. This too, I agree, is true, during the time they are clearly and distinctly understood, because our soul is such that it cannot refuse to give itself to what it understands distinctly; but because we often remember conclusions which we have drawn from such premisses, without paying attention to the premisses themselves, I thus say that without the knowledge of God we could pretend that they were uncertain.¹⁶

Without referring to God, we therefore can never obtain certainty: ‘Science is persuasion where the reason is so strong that it can never be weakened by a stronger one; which never belongs to those who do not know God.’¹⁷ For as long as the obviousness of a chain of reasoning is not completely present in one’s mind (which is impossible for a finite intellect), an atheist philosopher cannot avoid the possibility of error.

6. *The Cartesian circle reasserted*

Did Descartes provide a satisfactory solution to the circle? The constancy with which he invariably resisted this objection, the stability of the proposed answer, should command our respect. Furthermore, it is always dangerous to accuse a philosopher of incoherence, even more so when the one in question has developed a rational system with such care. Important commentators have held him to be reliable on precisely this point. Thus Gilson resolutely rules out the objection: it ‘was only born because we did not methodically follow the order of ideas as it imposed itself on Descartes’.¹⁸

I must, however, disagree with Gilson's evaluation of the Cartesian approach (although his knowledge of Descartes by far surpasses my own!), when he considers that the proof of the existence of God needs no divine guarantee, 'for since it is grounded on the idea of a perfect being, the being of whom it proves the existence cannot be assumed to be deceitful; the real proof of God by the idea of the perfect expels therefore *ipso facto* the extreme doubt by which the truth of this proof could be threatened'.¹⁹ That the proof be valid *if* God exists is certain; but how do we avoid the extreme doubt induced by the evil genius? By definition, we are talking about a being so powerful that he could lead man astray about any obvious fact. He could therefore also make him believe that God exists, when in fact it were not true. It is possible to fend off such doubt about God's existence induced by the evil-demon objection as soon as one realises that the very idea of an evil genius seems to presuppose the idea of God: Isn't it necessary to have come across the Judeo-Christian concept of an almighty Creator first, in order to imagine an almighty demon?²⁰ But we never leave the circle: if we *pretend* not to know whether God exists, we are unable to defend ourselves against the evil demon.²¹

I have similar reservations about Gilson's treatment of the *cogito* in this context. When he says, 'the obviousness of the *Cogito* is [...] independent of any divine guarantee',²² he certainly correctly expresses Descartes' intention in the *Discourse*. For this proposition draws attention to itself precisely by virtue of the fact that its obviousness is fuelled by the doubt itself which could attack it, making it 'indubitable' in the strongest sense of the term. The *Meditations* confirm this when they make the *cogito* the Archimedean point from which all human knowledge is constructed, for this precisely resists the extreme doubt caused by the evil genius:

But there is I know not what being, who is possessed at once of the highest power and the deepest cunning, who is constantly employing all his ingenuity in deceiving me. Doubtless, then, I exist, since I am deceived; and, let him deceive me as he may, he can never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I shall be conscious that I am something. So that it must [...] be maintained [...], that this proposition: *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.²³

However, is this certainty compatible with the conviction expressed in the Third Meditation, quoted above, according to which God could deceive me, if he wanted to, concerning any obvious fact, even than of the *cogito*?²⁴ Distinguishing

the obvious fact from the memory of it, as Descartes himself does, does not seem to me to be enough to rule out the accusation of contradiction. Once radical doubt has been conceived, I cannot see how to extract from it the tiniest morsel of truth, however obvious it may be. The character of the evil genius in the *Meditations* has the advantage of giving a very colourful form to the argument. But already in the *Discourse*, Descartes writes that ‘even the principle which I have already taken as a rule, *viz.*, that all the things which we clearly and distinctly conceive are true, is certain only because God is or exists and because he is a Perfect Being, and because all that we possess is derived from him’. How then can we apply the rule, without first being certain of the existence of God—which we cannot do without resorting to the rule? We cannot leave the circle.

7. *God at the foundation of knowledge*

Not every circle is a vicious one. Far from invalidating the Cartesian approach, an honest acknowledgement of the circle can provide a perspective which is both unexpected and relevant. Rodis-Lewis brings out the real progression of thought which is implied: at the start we have the statement that apart from ‘natural intelligence [...], I have no other faculty, or power, in myself to distinguish true from false [...] and which I can trust as much’.²⁵ To go beyond the starting-point provided by the *cogito*, I have no better choice than to trust what is obvious to reason. To consider that clear and distinct ideas are also true is at this stage only a methodological *rule*, the relevance of which must be demonstrated afterwards. Once the existence of God is established, the rule then becomes assurance.²⁶

Such a reading turns the circle into a spiral (without radically leaving it), but it also emphasises the crucial place that God holds in the Cartesian system. Contrary to popular belief about Descartes, he holds that human knowledge cannot claim to have an ultimate immanent basis in itself, but must inevitably rely on God in order not to collapse: ‘The irreducible duality of the *ego* and of God, far from establishing two rival principles, necessarily subordinates the first *principle*, or starting point, to the only absolute *foundation*, of which the transcendence of God is such that God is inaccessible to our rational discourse.’²⁷ Jean-Luc Marion is therefore right when he writes that in Descartes ‘the infinite appears [...] as primal. [...] [T]his reversal signifies that the infinite precedes the finite—human thought, which organises and deploys its knowledge—like a horizon always already open to welcome in advance its progress and its desires’.²⁸

The reading proposed by Marion—and which is validated by the foregoing study—is situated at the exact opposite of the commonly held picture of Descartes. The reason for this must be sought not only in the caricature which most if not all great thinkers of the past suffer in the popular imagination. The distortion doubtlessly feeds off the way in which Descartes himself presents his approach: rather than honestly put God at the starting point of his thinking, he develops, in the *Discourse*, a chain of reasoning in which the existence of God appears as one of the steps, apparently deduced without any trouble from the previous steps. It is only at the end that he emphasises that the rule which governed the deductive reasoning is only assured if God exists, because only then anything which is clearly and distinctly conceived must be true.

Neither does Descartes, in the *Meditations*, seem to draw out all the consequences of his conviction that human knowledge must rely on the veracity of God. For example, even at the point where he acknowledges the dependence of any argument on a transcendent foundation, he writes: ‘I must inquire whether there is a God, [...] and if I find that there is a God, I must examine likewise whether he can be a deceiver’.²⁹ Of course, he is right to consider that it is essential to answer these two questions; otherwise no knowledge is possible. But by what reasoning does Descartes count on finding the answer, since he correctly acknowledges that everything depends on God? In a similar vein, we have already noticed earlier his ambiguous treatment of the *cogito*: in the Second Meditation, he considers that the *cogito* escapes the radical accusation of the evil demon,³⁰ while in the Third Meditation, he acknowledges (using practically the same words) that the evil demon could even trick him with respect to the *cogito ergo sum* inference.³¹

When one considers the fervour with which Descartes seeks, using (human) reason, the Archimedean point from which all knowledge can be guaranteed, it is all the more remarkable that he does not suppress the conviction that only its transcendent basis insures the reliability of our knowledge. Although rationalist philosophers since his time have deluded themselves that reason can do without this transcendent anchoring, the rigour of his thinking, aided by a profound intuition of God’s power, prevented him from ignoring the radical dependence that all reasoning has on God. Admittedly, what people remember of his work is almost exclusively limited to the immanent Archimedean point, supposedly found in the *cogito*, but Descartes is also the philosopher who described the

omnipotence of God on which all human knowledge depends. As Auguste Lecerf put it, ‘only God makes the authority of reason intelligible to reason’.³²

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ENDNOTES

1. G. Rodis-Lewis, *René Descartes: Français, philosophe*, Tours, Mame, 1953, p. 276.
2. Jean-Luc Marion, “La raison formelle de l’infini”, in *Christianisme: héritages et destins*, ed. Cyrille Michon, Paris, Livre de Poche, 2002, p. 112.
3. *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One’s Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*, 1637, Fourth Part. All quotes from the *Discourse* are taken from the Fourth Part, in the translation of the Gutenberg Project (<<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/59>>).
4. ‘Institution de la religion chrétienne’ I, I, 1, ed. Jean Cadier, Pierre Marcel, Geneva, *Labor et Fides*, 1955, vol. 1, p. 3.
5. Wittgenstein’s argument is as famous as its interpretation is disputed. The presentation given here follows the reconstruction offered by the late Peter Lipton, in his class *Philosophy of Mind* (February 25, 2000, University of Cambridge) of the interpretation adopted by Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on rules and private language*, 1982.
6. *Meditations on First Philosophy*, original Latin ed. 1641, original French ed. 1647, Third Meditation (IX, 28-29). All quotes from the *Meditations* are provided in the translation by John Veitch, 1901 (<<http://www.wright.edu/cola/cartes/mede.html>>). In brackets, the volume and page numbers are indicated in *Ceuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam, Paul Tannery, Paris, Cerf/Vrin, 1909, 1956-1957, 12 vol.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, First Meditation (IX, 16-17).
10. *Ibid.*, Third Meditation (IX, 36).
11. *Ibid.*, Fourth Replies (IX, 189-190), in the version at www.earlymoderntexts.com.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, texte et commentaire par Étienne Gilson, Paris, Vrin, 1986, p. 361.
14. *René Descartes: Français, philosophe*, Tours, Mame, 1953, p. 274.
15. In addition to the following example, she also quotes *Principles of philosophy*, 1644, I, art. 13 and 45 ; *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Fifth Meditation (IX, 54-55) and the *Conversation with Burman* (Rodis-Lewis, p. 265-271).
16. Letter May 24, 1640, translated from the edition provided by G. Rodis-Lewis:

Rodis-Lewis, p. 265 s (III, 64-65).

17. *Ibid.* According to Descartes, the atheist can ‘be clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles’. But this cognitive possession of his isn’t true and certain knowledge’ (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, Second Replies, in the version presented at <<http://www.earlymoderntexts.com>>, corrected after the French text ; IX, 111).
18. *Discours de la méthode*, texte et commentaire par É. Gilson, p. 360.
19. *Ibid.*
20. It is certainly not by chance that the inventor of the evil demon is a philosopher who, like few others, exalted the almighty power of God (to the point of making the divine nature and mathematical truth depend on it); cf. *Meditations*, Fifth Replies (VII, 380), and Sixth Replies, section 6 (IX, 232 f).
21. O.K. Bouwsma, ‘Descartes’ evil genius’, *Philosophical Essays*, Lincoln, Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965, p. 85-97, offers a different line of rebuttal against the evil genius which does not appeal to God’s existence: he cannot deceive because what he calls illusions are in fact what we call reality (if everything is *as if* the real things exist, it does not make sense for humans to say that there are no *real* things). I beg to differ: the question if things *really* exist independent of their impressions on humans makes sense to me. In addition, Descartes’ argument does not need overall deception: it would be sufficient for the evil genius to deceive me about this or that thought, one thought at a time.
22. *Discours de la méthode*, texte et commentaire par É. Gilson, p. 360.
23. *Meditations*, Second Meditation (IX, 19).
24. *Meditations*, Third Meditation (IX, 28-29), quoted p. 322-3 above.
25. *Meditations*, Third Meditation (IX, 30).
26. Rodis-Lewis, p. 272.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
28. “La raison formelle de l’infini”, p. 112. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic theology*, transl. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1991, vol. I, p. 351, adopts a similar interpretation of Descartes.
29. *Meditations*, Third Meditation (IX, 28-29), quoted above p. 322.
30. Cf. p. 326 above.
31. Cf. p. 322-3 above.
32. *Introduction à la dogmatique réformée*, Paris, Je sers, 1931, vol. I, p. 265.

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