Spinoza on Cartesian Doubt

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1.   To raise, and then to overcome, a certain form of skeptical doubt was at the heart of Descartes' procedure for attaining certainty. Scholarly work on Descartes has not resolved basic questions about the form and scope of the skeptical doubt he employed. Here I want to make no claims about how we should understand Descartes; my concern is only with Spinoza's construal of Cartesian doubt. The following view roughly expresses Spinoza's understanding of his predecessor and I will call it "Cartesian":[1] we are unsure whether we have the general ability to discern the truth, and as a consequence, we cannot be certain in any particular case that what we take to be true is really so. Descartes illustrated uncertainty about our truth discerning power by questioning whether a deceitful god made us so that we are continually convinced by what is false. This uncertainty about our cognitive faculties gives a genuine reason to doubt about everything else. Although some things are quite evident (clear and distinct) to us, we do not have genuine certainty about any of them until we establish that what is evident is true.

Spinoza, too, was concerned to find a method for securing certainty, and he was fully aware of the importance Descartes placed on meeting the skeptical challenge. But when Spinoza gives his own account of certainty in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (and later, more briefly, in the *Ethics*), he firmly rejects any procedure like Descartes' as ill conceived. He argues that ". . . true method does not consist in seeking the signs of truth after the acquisition of the idea, but that the true method teaches us the order in which we should seek for. . . ideas" and that "the truth needs no sign" (E, 14; G II, 15; also *Ethics*, II, p. xlviii, note).[2] Although Descartes is not mentioned in this connection, it is clear that Spinoza's position is anti-Cartesian. Cartesian method attempts

to show that what is evident is true, in response to the skeptics' suggestion that it may be false; seeking for that sort of "sign of truth" has no role in correct method as Spinoza understands it.

It is not surprising nowadays to find a philosopher who rejects Cartesian method. The hypothesis of a deceiving god, like more current skeptical devices, may seem too outrageous to pose even an initial threat to certainty. This was not the attitude in the 17th century when many philosophers, distinguished ones among them, adhered to some form of skepticism. Spinoza must have been too impressed with the challenge of skeptical ways of reasoning to dismiss them explicitly without thoroughly reasoned grounds for doing so.

Even though Spinoza takes skeptical reasoning seriously, he might still be expected to reject Cartesian procedure simply because it fails to remove skeptical doubt. Two formidable difficulties are often mentioned: (i) there is no sound argument for the existence and veracity of God and (ii) the reply to the skeptical challenge is suspected of vicious circularity. But Spinoza's rejection of Cartesian procedure is based on neither of these familiar points. The knowledge of God will not concern me here; but I do want to discuss Spinoza's treatment of the problem of circularity. This is of some interest in its own right, and it prepares the way for Spinoza's ultimate rejection of the Cartesian way to certainty.

As it turns out, Spinoza had no reservations at all about the *success* of the Cartesian way. His defense against the circularity charge is offered in the early *Principles of Descartes' Philosophy*, but it is repeated in the later *Treatise*. Once skepticism based on the hypothesis of a deceiving god has been removed, "no further grounds of doubt are possible" (E, 30; G II, 30). Spinoza is in a position to maintain that Cartesian method succeeds entirely in removing skeptical doubt. When nevertheless he rejects that method, it is apparently because he thinks there is a better, more direct way to counter skepticism. Like Descartes, he is aware that skeptical argument is alleged to be a barrier to certainty and he thinks the barrier can be broken; but unlike this predecessor, Spinoza thinks he can strip skeptical argument of even its initial force as grounds for doubt about what is evident.

I first discuss Spinoza's contention that Cartesian method can succeed without vicious circularity and then go on to consider why he still rejected it as the correct means for attaining certainty. The second step involves unraveling the anti-Cartesian strain in Spinoza's argument for the dictum that the truth needs no sign; this same argument supports Spinoza's own enigmatic view about the

nature of certainty and is closely connected with his accounts of true and adequate ideas. I intend to discuss as little as possible Spinoza's positive views on these matters and to focus, instead, on his attack on the cogency of Cartesian skeptical reasoning. If I understand him correctly, Spinoza's views on this are, even for us today, an unusually perceptive treatment of the Cartesian form of skeptical argument.

2.   Spinoza's solution of the circularity problem is given most fully in his early work on Descartes' philosophy.[3] Before expounding Descartes' main doctrines, Spinoza briefly recounts the method of doubt (H, 14-17; G I, 142-46). He reports that Descartes "reduced all things to doubt" by rehearsing a series of reasons to doubt what he formerly believed. When he came to things not received by the senses, such as mathematical claims,"...he found a reason for doubting them. . .chiefly because an opinion had long been established in his mind that God exists, who can do all things, and who created him exactly as he is, and who, accordingly, had perhaps made him to be deceived in those very things which seemed clearest to him." Further on, Spinoza reports that Descartes inquires into the nature of God, "For when he discovers that a perfect being exists, . . .for whom it is naturally incompatible to be a deceiver, then that reason for doubting which he had because he was ignorant of his own cause will be destroyed." Without giving Descartes' "proof" of a perfect being, Spinoza continues at once: "Accordingly, mathematical truths and everything which seems to him evidently true could by no means be suspect."

It is at this point that Spinoza introduces an objection:

> Before finishing this section, perhaps I ought to satisfy those who argue as follows: Since the existence of God is not known to us through itself (*per se*), we apparently can never be certain of anything; and we can never know that God exists. For from uncertain premises (since we have said that all things are uncertain so long as we are ignorant of our origin) nothing certain can be concluded. (H, 18; G I, 146)

He goes on to give what he takes to be Descartes' response (citing material from *Meditations*, V, the "Second Reply," and *Principles*, I, 13); I will not reproduce it.[4] The main point is that Spinoza dismisses it, saying it "may not satisfy everyone." He then gives his *own* reply, and only after that does he endorse Descartes' conclusion that we "cannot doubt God's existence, and we cannot doubt any mathematical truth."

Let us get clear about what objection Spinoza is raising before

going on to consider his own response; his reply is easy to see
once the problem is understood. It is a version of the problem of
circularity; roughly put, in Descartes' "proof" of the existence of
God, his reliance on the truth of the premises assumes they are
free from doubt when doubt has not yet been removed. One may
at first think that this is the familiar charge of circularity, made
by Arnauld (among others) in the objections to the *Meditations*.
Spinoza does indicate that his objection had been raised by others,
but as far as I can discover this is not correct. Spinoza's problem
cannot be exactly the familiar problem of the circle. The difference
is important, for it stems from two quite different ways of un-
derstanding the logical structure of Cartesian skeptical argument.

It is central to Spinoza's objection that Descartes does not take
the existence of God to be known in itself, but rather derives it
from (uncertain) premises. On the other hand, Spinoza clearly
thinks that if the truth of the conclusion were known directly,
without need of reasoning from premises, the problem would not
arise. The charge is not that Descartes takes a proposition to be
true when every proposition has been placed in doubt, but rather
that he relies on the truth of the *wrong* proposition in face of met-
aphysical doubt.

Compare this with Arnauld's famous charge of circularity:

> The only remaining scruple I have is an uncertainty as to how a
> circular reasoning is to be avoided in saying: we are assured that
> the things we clearly and distinctly perceive are true, only because
> God is or exists.

> But we can be sure that God exists, only because we perceive this
> very clearly and very distinctly; therefore prior to being certain that
> God exists, we must be certain that *all* thing we clearly and distinctly
> perceive are true. (HR I, 92; emphasis added)

Now it is not clear exactly what Arnauld's objection is.[5] I will take
it that his complaint is that Descartes said that *whatever* is clear
and distinct is uncertain because of the metaphysical doubt; but
then he cannot credit anything that is clear and distinct as a means
of removing doubt. Doubt extends to what is clear and distinct,
simply because it *is* clear and distinct. Arnauld faults Descartes
for taking anything that is clear and distinct as true (for all such
things are in doubt). In contrast, Spinoza objects that Descartes
takes his premises to be true instead of the existence of God, itself.

These contrasting objections show that Spinoza pictures the
basis of Cartesian doubt quite differently than Arnauld. For both,
the doubt begins with our uncertainty about a deceiving god. I
will refer to this as:

UDG:
> We are rational neither to affirm nor to deny[6] that
> we are creatures of a deceiving god who causes us
> to be mistaken about those things which are evident
> to us.

But Spinoza differs from Arnauld over why this state of uncertainty is supposed to cast doubt on what is evident.

Arnauld thinks we should assume there is a deceiving god and all evident propositions are unreliable. Then all it takes (paradoxically) to show that something is dubious is to point out that it is evident. In other words, this version of metaphysical doubt employs the following argument schema in which premise (1) is granted to be true:

(1)   All evident propositions are uncertain (i.e. none can rationally be affirmed or denied).
(2)   _____ is an evident proposition.
(3)   Therefore, _____ is uncertain.

I say that this argument form captures Arnauld's picture of Cartesian doubt, for there is no metaphysical doubt unless (1) is granted, but no evident proposition can be accepted unless that concession is retracted. Even if (1) became evidently false, we could not credit its falsity without reneging on what was granted when the doubt was raised. Hence, Arnauld's complaint: having countenanced the doubt, Descartes was not entitled to rely on *any* evident proposition until the doubt was removed.

Notice that UDG does not occur in the argument schema and premise (1) is not deduced from it. In fact, (1) does not follow from UDG; the reason will come out in discussion of Spinoza's dismissal of Cartesian skeptical argument (Sec. 3). More important for present concerns, the universal prohibition against crediting an evident claim cannot be maintained if (1) is put forward as evident. Faced with a sound convincing argument for (1), a skeptic would be forced either to rely on something uncertain or to abandon this argument form.

In contrast, Spinoza stresses that the reason for metaphysical doubt is a certain ignorance: ''. . .all things are uncertain as long as we are *ignorant* of our origin.'' He reports that when Descartes discovers God's perfection, ''that *reason* for doubting which he had because he was *ignorant* of his own cause will be destroyed'' (emphasis mine). The sort of skeptical doubt he has in mind is deduced from UDG:

(1)   We are rational neither to affirm nor to deny that
      we are creatures of a deceiving god who causes us

to be mistaken about what is evident to us. (UDG)
(2)   Therefore, we are rational neither to affirm nor to
       deny that all evident propositions are true.
(3)   _____ is a proposition which is evident.
(4)   Therefore, we are rational neither to affirm nor to
       deny that _____ is true.

Now UDG is a claim about our epistemic situation and its truth
value will change if that situation does. Instances of this argument
form are sound only while we remain ignorant about our creator.
Spinoza's contention is that this ignorance will be erased as soon
as God's nature becomes evident to us; then, the crucial first prem-
ise changes from true to false. Hence, Spinoza's objection to Carte-
sian procedure: the premises of a ''proof'' of God's existence
succumb to arguments of the form described, because when they
are asserted UDG is true. The only way to remove doubt is by
immediate recognition of the perfection of God.[7]

      Spinoza claims that immediate apprehension of God's nature
avoids the circularity objection:

      . . . the pivot of the entire matter is this, that we can form a concept
      of God which so disposes us that we cannot with equal ease suppose
      that he is a deceiver as that he is not, but which compels us to
      affirm that he is entirely truthful. But when we have formed such
      an idea, the reason for doubting mathematical truths is removed
      . . . Provided only we have this idea . . . it will suffice to remove
      every doubt. (H, 21; G I, 148)

Spinoza goes on at once to indicate that when we form such an
idea of God that we are ''compelled to affirm'' that he is veracious,
we see evidently (clearly and distinctly) that our creator is no de-
ceiver. The pivotal point is that when we see this evidently, we
are rational, at least to some degree, to affirm it. It is then no
longer true that we have no reason to deny that we are creatures
of a deceiving deity. UDG is false and the reason for doubt about
mathematics, and other evident things, has been removed.

      Everything turns on the claim that even before the doubt has
been removed, we can have a certain rationality in denying that
we are creatures of a deceiving god. Spinoza addresses the re-
servations one might have about whether this illicitly assumes that
metaphysical doubt has been removed. He says that a critic would
have to maintain that we cannot have a clear and distinct idea of
God (rationally affirm something about God's nature) as long as
we are ignorant about whether our creator deceives us (meta-
physical doubt remains).[8] Spinoza answers that surely we *can* have

clear and distinct ideas while ignorant of our creator and still in the throes of doubt; that is precisely our situation when we have metaphysical doubts about arithmetic.[9]

The special fascination of Cartesian skepticism is that while admitting that evident things are highly credible, it proposes grounds to override the *prima facie* rationality of affirming them. Spinoza merely credits this *prima facie* rationality. When we see evidently the veracity of God, we can rationally affirm (pending reason to doubt it) that our maker is non-deceiving. This eliminates uncertainty about our maker, for we *have* no reason to doubt it: UDG gives grounds for doubt only while we cannot rationally affirm the truthfulness of our creator (and no other reason to doubt is in view[10]). So, Spinoza can destroy the basis of Cartesian doubt without illicitly presupposing that doubt has been removed.

Someone might still protest: the very issue raised by Cartesian doubt is whether the sort of evidence Spinoza credits is a reliable guide to truth; when he takes the evidence of God's veracity to be adequate to support belief, he assumes the issue has been resolved and he argues in a circle. The protest subtly misrepresents the issue posed by our uncertainty that what is evident is true, for it presupposes that *everything* evident is under suspicion. This view I attributed (perhaps unjustly) to Arnauld. As we saw, the policy of eschewing all evident claims conflicts with possession of rational grounds for doubt about what is evident; if it were evident that what is evident is uncertain, the policy would bar us from accepting the claim. Spinoza sees that if ignorance about the truth of what is evident gives a reason to doubt various things evident to us, then acceptance of those things is barred *on condition* that the ignorance persists. But this is not wholesale indictment of the evident. Evident perception that we are so made that what is evident to us is true removes, at one stroke, the uncertainty and the reason to suspect evident claims. Spinoza is right that doubt can in principle be eliminated without presupposing that the doubt has been removed. (This is not to say, of course, that he is right in claiming that it *is* evident that we are creatures of a non-deceiving god.)

Spinoza's success in avoiding circularity is especially notable, because of his robust, non-arbitrary construal of Cartesian doubt. Matters of the most evident sort are suspect as long as doubt remains. So it is not for Spinoza, as some have suggested it is with Descartes, that no circle is involved in removing doubt, because a large class of beliefs (those that are clear and distinct) were never cast into doubt.[11] Spinoza claims only one proposition that

does not succumb, and he is careful to show that metaphysical doubt fails in this case because of its logical structure. Keep in mind, however, that in his own account of certainty, Spinoza denies the need to overcome Cartesian doubt. He is holding something back when he concedes (nearly) unrestricted force to the skeptical reasoning.

3.   In spite of his assurance that Cartesian method succeeds against Cartesian doubt, Spinoza rejects it. As I have said, this is clearly implied in his famous remark on method: in order to have certainty, we need seek no sign of truth. I want now to turn to Spinoza's argument for this claim and its implicit dismissal of Cartesian skepticism. This involves interpretation of a familiar, and even for Spinoza a cryptic, passage from the *Treatise*. I will first present the passage with a minimum of comment; then I want to make a few general points about it and finally to argue for a certain interpretation of the argument found in it.

   The passage begins with a distinction between an idea and its object:

   The idea of a circle is not something having a circumference and a center as a circle has; . . . Now as it is something different from its object, it is capable of being understood through itself (*per se*).

A few lines later, there is a more extended illustration:

   For example, Peter is something real, the true idea of Peter has Peter's essence as its object (*idea Petri est essentia Petri objectiva*) and is in itself something real and quite distinct from Peter. Now as this true idea of Peter is something real and has its own peculiar essence, it will also be capable of being understood, i.e., the object of another idea, which contains objectively all that which the idea of Peter is formally. And again, this idea of the idea of Peter has its own essence which can be the object of another idea, and so on indefinitely. (E, 12-13 (with minor changes); G II, 24-25)

As I said, I want to avoid detailed discussion of Spinoza's doctrine of ideas; as it happens, it will be possible to avoid a number of difficult questions about his views. The passages at hand make only minimal demands on the concept of an idea: to have the idea of something is to conceive of that thing in some terms or other and to affirm that the thing is as conceived. For instance, to have the idea of a circle is to conceive a circle, as *inter alia* a plane figure with all points equidistant from one interior point. The true idea is a conception in terms of a thing's essence.

   So far, Spinoza has stressed that an idea has an essence distinct

from that of its object and that it can be the object of another idea. He goes on to give another, rather surprising, illustration:

> This everyone may make trial of for himself, by reflecting that he knows what Peter is, and also knows that he knows, and further knows that he knows that he knows, &c.

This same indefinitely long sequence of items forms the premise for his anti-Cartesian argument; the passage continues:

> Hence, it is plain that, in order to understand the actual Peter, it is not necessary first to understand the idea of Peter, and still less the idea of the idea of Peter. This is the same as saying that, in order to know, there is no need to know that we know, much less to know that we know that we know. This is no more necessary than to know the nature of a circle before knowing the nature of a triangle. But, with these ideas, the contrary is the case: for, in order to know that I know, I must first know. Hence . . . it is also evident that, for the certitude of truth, no further sign is necessary beyond the possession of a true idea: for, as I have shown, it is not necessary to know that we know that we know.

I want to make a couple of general points about the context of the argument in this passage before turning to a detailed inter- pretation of it.

It is crucial to keep in mind that Spinoza does not recommend avoiding the Cartesian brush with skepticism because he thinks the skeptics will win the encounter. One influential commentator on our passage has taken this view; Stuart Hampshire suggests Spinoza's view is that any attempt to defend what is evident against skeptical attack must beg the question or embark on an infinite regress (Hampshire, 1962, p. 105). This is, of course, just what the *skeptics* claim, and what Spinoza shows to be false by his solution to the ''problem of the circle.'' It is essential to see that Spinoza's claim that the truth needs no sign is in no way a concession to skepticism.

And it is also important to keep in mind that Spinoza's position on method *is* anti-Cartesian, and no doubt deliberately so. The dictum that for certainty, we need no sign of truth implies, among other things, that there is no need to validate what is evident. So, the argument in our *Treatise* passage, which supports Spinoza's dictum about the sign of truth, must at the same time expose the emptiness of the threat to certainty from Cartesian skepticism.

One further preliminary point about the argument in our pas- sage: the key thesis is that it is not necessary to know you know in order to know. One might think that this is meant to point to

an incoherence in the view that knowing you know is a precondition of knowing.[12] For instance, one might think the point is about the temporal order of coming to know: it is inconsistent to demand that we know we know something at a time before that at which we know it.

But neither the wording of Spinoza's thesis nor its intended anti-Cartesian force supports this sort of interpretation. Notice, in the first place, that Spinoza does not claim it is contradictory or absurd to suppose knowing you know is a condition of knowing; he makes instead the milder remark that the former is not necessary for the latter. In the second place, the key thesis is derived from the idea/object distinction and the doctrine that one idea can be the object of another. But no claim about the temporal relations among ideas follows, it seems, from the distinction between idea and object. A final objection stems from the fact that the key thesis must bear the weight of Spinoza's dismissal of Cartesian skepticism. To urge that it is incoherent to place knowing you know as a temporal precondition on knowing is hardly to make an anti-skeptical point. A Cartesian skeptic makes it seem that we cannot have knowledge until we know that what is evident is true; if this makes knowledge impossible, so much the better for the skeptic. To summarize: we should look for a way of understanding the key thesis that is consonant with the mildness of its actual wording, shows it to be a consequence of the idea/object distinction, and also shows that it supports the anti-Cartesian conclusion that we do not need to validate evident perception in order to have certainty.

I suggest that the key thesis, that in order to know it is not necessary to know you know, should be understood in this way:

> T: There is a way to know (rationally affirm, pending some reason to doubt)[13] p that does not involve recognizing that you know p and concluding p.

Thesis T is intended to bring out that some things are immediately evident. They are known, but they have not been deduced from the fact that they are known.

This interpretation of the key thesis meets the requirement of preserving the mildness of Spinoza's language. It meets the second requirement, too. That is, we can see that thesis T is supported by the idea/object distinction. Spinoza illustrates the distinction by an indefinitely long sequence of iterated knowledge claims. As I see it, the sequence goes like this:

(1)   You know what Peter is. For instance, you know:

P1:   Peter is a man.

Your knowing this requires that you have an idea of Peter (Peter, conceived *inter alia* as a man). Let this be idea 1. As I understand it, idea 1 is the affirmation of P1.

(2)   You know you know that Peter is a man. Here you know:

P2:   Your idea of Peter as a man (idea 1) constitutes knowledge.

Your knowing this requires that you have an idea of idea 1 (idea 1, conceived *inter alia* as constituting knowledge). Let this be idea 2.

(3)   You know you know you know that Peter is a man. Here, you know:

P3:   Your idea of idea 1 as constituting knowledge (idea 2) constitutes knowledge.

Your knowing this requires an idea of idea 2 (idea 2, conceived *inter alia* as constituting knowledge).

And so on.

The sequence illustrates the difference between idea and object in cases where it might be overlooked. In order to affirm something of an idea (in particular, that it constitutes knowledge), you must make that idea the object of a second idea. At stage (1), you have only idea 1 and that affirms something about Peter. To affirm that what is said of Peter *is known*, you need a second idea that has as its object idea 1. Thus, what idea 1 affirms (stage (1)) is just that Peter is a man, not that *you know* Peter is a man (idea 1 constitutes knowledge). Idea 1 constitutes knowledge if you can affirm that Peter is a man, whether or not you arrive at the affirmation by deduction from the fact that you know you can affirm it.

Spinoza's point here is subtle and his way of making it, rather skillful. To bring out that knowing is epistemically independent from knowing you know, he relies on the metaphysics of the idea/object distinction. It might seem better to make the point by showing that you can know *without* knowing that you do. In fact, this is not easy to do. Some have argued that you can know that two plus three is five without having the concepts needed to understand what it is to know or, again, without having entertained the thought

that you know. But these points have limited usefulness, for they do not apply to someone who has met and understood a Cartesian skeptic. Simply to insist that such a person does know without knowing it, begs the question against the skeptic. Moreover, Spinoza rejects the position that anyone does know without knowing it; this is quite clear in passages other than the one we are studying (E, 9; G II, 10; also *Ethics,* II, p. xxi, note and II, p. xliii). (In other words, he holds that you know if and only if you know you know.) But he still wants to show that knowing you know is not intrinsic to knowing, and he appeals to the sequence of ideas, or iterated knowledge claims, to make the point. In that way, he shows the way is open for an immediate, evident perception that is not in itself a perception that you know.

But is what is immediately evident vulnerable to Cartesian doubt? My third requirement on thesis T is that it should show that we do not need to refute the hypothesis of a deceiving god, or validate evidence as a sign of truth, in order to be certain. Thesis T should help us to see the fallacy of the argument form by which a Cartesian skeptic purports to derive doubt about other things from UDG. Thesis T brings out that you can immediately, evidently see, for instance, that two and three are five. It follows that in order to see what the sum is you do not *need* to infer it from the premises: (i) it is evident that two and three are five and (ii) what is evident is true. This is the anti-Cartesian argument.

Cartesian skepticism begins by pointing out that premise (ii) is uncertain (e.g. because the veracity of our creator is unknown). In that case, we cannot rely on the reasoning from (i) and (ii) to affirm that two and three are five. But, as thesis T points out, there is *another* way of coming to see what that sum is, we can immediately and evidently see it. Keep in mind that our uncertainty about a deceiving god gives no reason to believe that what is evident is false. At most, what might seem to follow from UDG is that we are rational neither to affirm nor to deny that what is evident is true.[14] Clearly then, if we can avoid relying on the (uncertain) premise that what is evident is true, and still rationally affirm that two and three are five, our original uncertainty about a deceiving god provides no basis whatsoever to doubt that two and three are five. The skeptic made it seem as if there was reason to doubt by an invalid argument.

An analogy helps to illustrate the problem with the skeptics' argument. Suppose you consult the instructor's manual for a logic text; it says that the answer to a certain Exercise 10 is 'p v q,' but you have no reason to affirm, or to deny, that the author gave the correct answers in the manual. Now a skeptic might reason:

> You are rational neither to affirm nor to deny that the author of the manual is malicious and the answers given in it are wrong.
>
> If the answers in the manual are wrong, then the answer to Exercise 10 is not 'p v q.'
>
> Therefore, you are rational neither to affirm nor to deny that the answer to Exercise 10 is 'p v q.'

The skeptical conclusion will be true, *if* your only way to find the answer is to consult the manual. But if you find the answer by working it out yourself, then you *can* rationally affirm that the answer is (is not) 'p v q.' The argument is thus invalid. Your original uncertainty about the manual is no grounds for uncertainty about your own work. (I say "original uncertainty," because you can check the manual's answer against your own work and thereby cease to be uncertain whether it is totally inaccurate (or accurate); what I mean by the expression is your lack of reason, *apart from* a check against answers found without consulting the manual, to affirm or deny the manual's accuracy.) Similarly, if you are (originally) uncertain about whether there is a deceiving god and evidence is a sign of truth, *that* gives you no grounds to doubt that two and three are five, once you see it evidently.

A Cartesian skeptic might object. Although Spinoza's treatment grants "original" uncertainty about whether what is evident is true, it seems to imply that we can eventually attain certainty on this epistemic point, and certainty in theology, as well. For, a person who has reflected on Cartesian skepticism can hardly fail to see that from (a) two and three are five, and (b) it is evident that two and three are five, it follows that (c) at least one evident proposition is true. And thus if we can be certain of (a) and (b), it seems we can be certain about (c); but then we can also be certain that there is no deceiving god. The skeptical objector will insist, however, that we are *not* certain that there is no deceiving god, and so neither are we certain about the sum of two and three.

Now the objector may well be right that the argument from (a) and (b) falls short of making it certain that there is no deceiving god. I think Spinoza would agree, on grounds that genuine certainty comes only with immediate, evident perception. Of course, the fact that we lack immediate, evident perception that there is no deceiving god (if it is a fact) constitutes no objection to Spinoza's claim that we are certain that the sum of two and three is five. The objection to that claim would have to be that we do not have *the sort of* certainty about a deceiving god that we would have if

we could be certain that the sum of two and three is five. But the objector has not established that we lack *that* sort of certainty.

Let me push one further point on the skeptics' behalf. Although there will not be space here to discuss if fully, an indication of the reply available to Spinoza, as I understand him, will help to bring out the force of the thesis I have ascribed to him. Cartesian skepticism is based on a state of uncertainty about whether what is evident is true. An aggressive skeptic might point out that we have sometimes thought a proposition was evident which turned out later to be false; so, the skeptic argues, either some evident propositions are false or a proposition can seem to be evident when it is not. When we affirm that two plus three is five instead of four, it seems the only basis for this is the evidence of the sum's being five; but this turns out to be no *reliable* basis at all. There is, then, reason to doubt that the affirmation is true.

To counter this new argument, I think Spinoza can appeal again to thesis T: there is a way rationally to affirm that two plus three is five without deducing it from the fact that it is (seemingly) evident. The skeptic wants to know what this way consists of and, if the reply is, 'we evidently see what the sum is,' to urge that this is not a generally reliable test for truth. Spinoza's reply is, in effect, that we do not need to have the correct epistemic theory in order to do arithmetic. The skeptic may be right that we are uncertain what, if anything, makes it rational to affirm that two plus three is five. That would be a reason to doubt that two and three are five, *if* we were forced to arrive at that opinion by deducing its truth from its epistemic credentials. As it is, however, what moves us to affirm the sum is the evident perception of *it*, not its conformity to some epistemic principle. The skeptic may push the point that some seemingly evident claims are false, and that they seem just as evident as those that are true. The response will be to look at a particular claim. If it is, for instance, that the sum of two and three is five, then we can see that it is true (not one of those seemingly evident claims that are false).

This completes my account, and defense, of Spinoza's anti-Cartesian view on method. Before concluding, I want briefly to go back to the problem of circularity, for Spinoza's exposé of the fallacy in the skeptical argument puts that problem in rather a different light. It now emerges that nothing we evidently see was *really* placed in doubt by the hypothesis of a deceiving god. Doubt based on that hypothesis touches only the existence of a god who makes whatever is evident false. (More accurately, it extends to those things that are known to be evident, but are not evidently

seen.) Thus, the premises of Descartes' "proof" of a veracious god can be accepted without presupposing certainty about a deceiving god, provided only that one sees them evidently.[15] The circularity problem, which Spinoza takes pains to resolve, arises because he ignores the fallacy in the skeptical argument.

Spinoza's dismissal of Cartesian skepticism can be summed up by saying that if you see something evidently, it is impossible to have reason to entertain Cartesian doubts about it (doubts based on uncertainty about whether, or how, we discern the truth). Spinoza's own method, accordingly, is directed to the discovery of what is genuinely evident. I have scarcely discussed here his views about the evident, or his "positive" account of certainty and how it is to be secured; but I hope to have shown that he had solid reasons for the "negative," anti-Cartesian aspect of his stance on method.

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NOTES

[1] I use the term 'Cartesian' to refer to arguments, aims, etc. that Spinoza regarded as Descartes'. I reserve the term 'Descartes' 'for arguments, etc. which I mean to identify as Descartes'.

[2] Passages from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* are quoted from *Chief Works of Spinoza,* translated by R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), vol.II (abbreviated 'E'). Quotations from *The Principles of Descartes' Philosophy* are from *Spinoza: Earlier Philosphical Writings,* translated by A. Hayes (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963) (abbreviated 'H'). I have made minor changes where noted. I also give the locations of passages in *Spinoza Opera,* edited by Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winters, 1925) (abbreviated 'G').

[3] Spinoza's solution has been discussed in an excellent article, by Doney (1972). My interpretation of Spinoza's solution differs only slightly although the problem is not discussed there in the context of Spinoza's concomitant rejection of Cartesian doubt.

[4] Apparently, he thought Descartes replies by excluding from the scope of doubt things that are clear and distinct and things currently seen to follow from clear and distinct premises. Spinoza may have thought this diminishes the significance of Cartesian doubt; his own treatment allows the doubt much wider scope.

[5] Arnauld's objection is sometimes taken to be the complaint that Descartes' *reason* for crediting the premises which remove doubt is that they are clear and distinct, whereas

that is an acceptable reason only if the doubt has been removed. I will later point out a third possible interpretation (note 7). It is not clear to me what objection Arnauld actually intended.

⁶Descartes and Spinoza believe that one's ignorance about God may be only temporary and that we "have" all along (in some sense) the resources for rationally affirming the perfection of God. When I use the expression 'we are rational neither to affirm nor to deny that *p*,' I mean *roughly* that, at a given time, we cannot fairly easily think of anything that makes it reasonable to affirm or to deny that *p*. (I will not generally specify the time, but it will be sufficiently clear in context.) I do not mean to suggest that in order for it to be rational to affirm (deny) that *p*, one must know that it is rational to do so; but I do suppose that what makes it rational for one to affirm (deny) that *p* is (at least in part) the ability fairly easily to think of something that makes it very clearly seem that *p*.

⁷We can now see another alternative to my interpretation of Arnauld's objection. He might take the basis of doubt to be: we are rational neither to affirm nor deny that what is evident (clear and distinct) is true. Then he might object because Descartes argues that what is evident is true *from the premise* that God is non-deceiving: Descartes is not entitled to accept that premise until the basis of doubt has been removed. On this construction, what is needed to remove doubt is that it should be immediately evident that what is evident is true. Recall that Arnauld says that before we can be certain that God exists, "we must be certain that all the things we clearly and distinctly perceive are true." Is this prior condition that the proposition expressed by 'What is clear and distinct is true' should be evident? Or, as I have assumed, that the prohibition against accepting anything clear and distinct should have been lifted?

⁸". . . if anyone should wish to argue against me, his argument will have to run as follows: we can be certain of nothing before we have a clear and distinct idea of God. But we cannot have a clear and distinct idea of God so long as we do not know whether the author of our nature deceives us. Therefore, we can be certain of nothing so long as we do not know whether the author of our nature deceives us, and so forth." (H, 20; G I, 148)

⁹"To this I reply by granting the major and denying the minor. For we have a clear and distinct idea of a triangle, although we do not know whether the author of our nature deceives us; and provided we have such an idea of God as we have just described, we cannot doubt his existence, and we cannot doubt any mathematical truth." (H, 21; G I, 149)

¹⁰Spinoza is confident no new reason to doubt can be proposed. When doubt based on ignorance of God has been removed, "no further grounds of doubt are possible" (E, 30; G II, 30). But an inventive skeptic will propose a new possible cause of error in our faculties; and the proposal can be dismissed only if we immediately see its evident falsity, for to *derive* its falsity from the veracity of God would be to argue in a circle. To see how Spinoza would deal with a new skeptical sally, and whether he can maintain a sharp distinction between immediate and derived knowledge, we need to study the *Treatise* account of the cognitive context of evident apprehension. (Recall his emphasis on the order of apprehending things.)

¹¹Many commentators on Descartes defend his argument in this way; to name just a few: Kenny (1968); Curley (1978); and Williams (1978). Others have complained that such a restriction on what is subject to doubt is *ad hoc* and, moreover, goes against Descartes' (apparent) proclamation that he cannot be certain of *anything* until metaphysical doubt has been removed; for instance, Nakhnikian (1969) and Wilson (1978).

¹²This sort of analysis of Cartesian skepticism was developed in Prichard (1950).

¹³I assume that for Spinoza, to know a proposition is to be able rationally to affirm it (pending reason to doubt it). Thus, to know a proposition is evidently to perceive it, as I have been using the phrase. When discussing the circularity problem, Spinoza allows that one who evidently sees a mathematical claim may have reason to doubt it due to ignorance of God. But we will see that Spinoza actually denies the validity of the argument from UDG to uncertainty about other things.

¹⁴Strictly speaking, UDG does *not* entail that we are uncertain that what is evident

is true. What follows from UDG is that we cannot establish that what is evident is true by deduction from the veracity of God; but we may come to know it in some other way (e.g. immediately).

[15]A similar analysis of metaphysical doubt, and defense of *Descartes* against the circularity charge was, I think first given by Kenny (1968); it has been developed by several others, including Williams (1978) and Van Cleve (1979).

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