Descartes: Truth and Self-deception

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of self-deception in Descartes' *Meditations*. It claims that although Descartes sees self-deception as the origin of our false judgments, he consciously uses it for his searching for truth. He finds that self-deception is a very productive tool in our searching for truth, since it expands our ability to free ourselves from our old certainties; logical thinking enables us to doubt our certainties but only self-deception enables us to really suspend them.

Descartes, then, proposes a logical-psychological method in first person for philosophical investigation, in which self-deception plays a crucial role. The *Cogito* should be understood accordingly as a first psychological truth rather than a first philosophical truth. Nevertheless, it is a crucial step in Descartes' philosophical investigation and exposes the relations between the logical aspect and the psychological aspect of philosophical thinking.

Socrates defines the wise man as one who does not imagine knowing what he does not know. The wise man, according to this definition, does not necessarily know anything, but he is necessarily aware of the status of his beliefs. This idea of the wise man deviated radically from the commonly accepted conception of the wise man in ancient times. Instead of a wise man who has access to secret wisdom (a prophet or a poet), Socrates introduces a model of wise man whose virtue is self-awareness. By doing so, he constitutes philosophy as a very personal and skeptical mode of thinking, one that depends on the individual's capability to struggle against his own deluded certainties. Descartes expresses this philosophical legacy at the end of the first meditation in his *Meditations*:

> […] and if I cannot attain the knowledge of any truth by this method, at any rate it is in my power to suspend my judgment. That way I shall take great care not to accept any falsity among my beliefs and shall prepare my mind well for all the ruses of this great deceiver that, however powerful and artful he may be, he will never be able to mislead me in anything.[1]

[1] René Descartes, *The Meditations Concerning First Philosophy* in *Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Laurence J. Lafleur (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), 59–143, 80.

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Descartes is certain that the method he adopts in the *Meditations* fits his philosophical goal, not because it will necessarily lead him to truth, but because it will enable him to avoid false beliefs (imagining knowing what he does not know). In this respect Descartes is a follower of Socrates, who sees in the struggle against his own false certainties an essential step in the direction of true knowledge. This could explain Descartes' use of the hyperbolic doubt: it is his way of ensuring that his consciousness remains clear of false certainties. The originality of the *Meditations* lies in Descartes' methodological use of self-deception as a central means for achieving this philosophical goal, which could be defined as avoiding self-deception. That is to say, Descartes uses self-deception in order to exclude the possibility of self-deception. Is it paradoxical?

I believe the answer to this question is negative. Descartes finds that self-deception is a very productive tool in the struggle against false certainties, since it expands our ability to free ourselves from our own convictions. Therefore, although it might sound wrong or even absurd to employ self-deception for the purpose of avoiding self-deception, one should examine Descartes' strategy carefully. After all, this strategy leads him to great philosophical insights.

1. Why doubting? Why in first person?

Descartes is a Christian believer and a scientist. Hence one would expect him to rely on some religious or scientific truths, or at least on certain religious or scientific methods of investigation in his searching for truth. Yet, Descartes chooses not to rely on religion or science in his investigation. Instead, he embarks on a kind of personal journey which relies only on his own thinking. Why does he not employ religious or scientific method for this investigation? Why does he assume that his self-thinking is superior to these authorities?

One could find a personal and psychological answer to these questions at the opening of Meditation One:

> There is no novelty to me in the reflection that, from my earliest years, I have accepted many false opinions as true, and that what I have concluded from such badly assured premises could not but be highly doubtful and uncertain.[2]

Descartes goes on to confess that he spent years in a state of distress as a result of this recognition. He realized that he could not trust his

[2] Ibid., 75.

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certainties, since they were time and again revealed to be false. This is a very destructive existential state. Yet, it took Descartes a long time to find the time, the conditions and the ability to cope with it. This might explain the importance that he assigns to this investigation, but it does not provide an answer to the original questions: Why does he not turn to science or religion for coping with this epistemological and existential discontent? Why does he assume that philosophical investigation is better suited to his goal? Do these questions send us back to Descartes' psychology?

I believe the answer lies elsewhere. Descartes is indeed embarking on a very personal journey, but its rationale does not lie in Descartes' unique psychology. It is, rather, the Socratic legacy of preferring self-thinking over any external authority which guides Descartes in his way. Descartes does not invent a new way of thinking, though he certainly forms it in his own image. By turning to philosophy, Descartes actually expresses his distrust in religion and science. Philosophy, in contrast to religion and science, recognizes no authority beyond the individual's own thinking. However, since self-thinking can potentially be arbitrary and biased, each philosopher must suggest his own way for preventing these fallacies. Descartes believes he has found a foolproof way to do this.

Descartes is well aware of the fact that our personal psychology determines our beliefs no less than our thinking. Therefore, he suggests a methodological doubt which is based on two moves: one is logical, the other psychological. The logical move is the hyperbolical doubt, which takes us from the actual to the possible. It employs our capacity for imagining speculative possibilities in order to cast doubt on our actual beliefs. This move often defies common sense, but finds its justification in logic: logical validity lies in the sphere of the possible rather than the actual. The psychological move completes the logical one by engaging our capacity of self-deception. This capacity enables us to think against the grain of our own beliefs and thus to distinguish between our philosophical inquiry and our daily, common beliefs. Its role in Descartes' investigation is to help us keep in mind the conclusions of the logical move, against our tendency to return, unconsciously, to our old beliefs. The climax of this move is the conception of the evil spirit with which Descartes ends his first Meditation.

Descartes, then, proposes a logical-psychological method in the first person as a way to search for true certainty. Certainty is the ultimate goal of philosophical investigation, but it is also its greatest enemy, since nothing misleads us in self-thinking more than our false certainties. Descartes' method aims at coping with this challenge by

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using the most powerful faculties of our mind: our logical thinking and our capacity of self-deception.

Descartes uses logical thinking for doubting his own beliefs, *i.e.* for testing his certainties. His first analysis distinguishes between two groups of beliefs according to their source: the senses or the intellect. He doubts the first by pointing out the fallibility of each concrete sense-perception. His 'dream argument' takes a step further by demonstrating that our world of perceptions does not necessarily correspond to reality. This is logically sufficient for eliminating the senses as a reliable source for certainty. Yet, the logical move is not sufficient for an investigation which based on self-thinking, since it does not remove the certainty we *feel* in our perceptions. This is the reason why the logical move must be complemented by a psychological one:

> So let suppose now that we are asleep and that all these details, such as opening the eyes, shaking the head, extending the hands, and similar things, are merely illusions; and let us think that perhaps our hands and our whole body are not such as we see them.[3]

We are asked to imagine that we are sleeping and that all our present perceptions are nothing but illusions, while we feel certain that we are not sleeping and cannot avoid believing in the reality of our perceptions. Descartes sends us off on a tough psychological experience that goes beyond logical thinking. It is one thing to recognize that our sense perceptions are not totally reliable, and entirely another thing to persuade ourselves that our present perceptions are merely illusions. This is a very difficult psychological task, since we usually feel just the opposite; it requires a great effort of self-deception. This is the first way in which Descartes uses self-deception in his philosophical investigation.

The second way relates to Descartes' doubt concerning the intellect as a source of knowledge. Since mathematical truths do not depend on sensual reality, they escape the first doubt. And yet, Descartes argues, the certainty we feel about these truths should also be doubted: since we have often been certain of the truth of a mathematical judgment which was later found to be false, it is not impossible that every time we feel certain, we are in fact wrong. Here again, Descartes makes a logical move that extends the actual recognition of fallibility into an all-encompassing doubt in the truths of the intellect.[4] And again, the psychological move of self-deception completes the logical move:

[3] Ibid., 77.

[4] Frankfurt rightly argues that Descartes' doubt of mathematical judgment is general and not specific to these kinds of judgments:

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> Thus I find that, in the future, I should [withhold and suspend my judgment about these matters, and] guard myself no less carefully from believing them than I should from believing what is manifestly false if I wish to find any certain and assured knowledge [in the sciences].[5]

The doubtful should thus always be considered false in our investigation for certainty. Why not consider it merely as doubtful? Descartes does not actually explain here, but does explain this later when he introduces the methodological idea of the evil spirit. In this step, he only implies that it is better for a fallible mind to take preventive measures in its search for certainty. Again, the investigation relies on our ability to manipulate ourselves in order to advance our search for true certainty.

Casting doubt on our two sources of knowledge does not satisfy Descartes. He is still afraid that our psychological tendency to return to our old beliefs threatens his investigation:

> That is why I think that I would not do badly if I deliberately took the opposite position and *deceived myself* in pretending for some time that all these opinions are entirely false and imaginary, until at last I will have so balanced my former and my new prejudices that they cannot incline my mind more to one side than the other, and my judgment will not be [mastered and] turned by bad habits from the correct perception of things [and the straight road leading to the knowledge of truth].[6]

Descartes explicitly suggests self-deception as a methodological tool in the search for true certainty. He justifies such an apparently

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> His aim is not to call attention to any logical gap in the relation between mathematical judgments and the grounds on which they are affirmed. He is simply calling attention to the well-known propensity of men to settle upon judgments that do not reflect a proper grasp of the material with which they are dealing, but reflect only their own vagaries and misconceptions.

Harry G. Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers and Madmen* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), 78.

It is, however, important to note that although Descartes points out a psychological bias, he turns it into philosophical doubt by a logical move: from the recognition of actual misjudgment to the possibility of permanent misjudgment.

[5] Op. cit. note 1, 79.

[6] Ibid., 79–80.

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paradoxical move by the need to free his thoughts from the unintentional and uncontrolled affects of his old beliefs, assuming that by deceiving himself that these beliefs are false rather than just doubtful, he will achieve better control over his thoughts. Whereas the doubtful old beliefs affect his thought unwillingly and sometimes unconsciously, the process of self-deception is in his own hands. This is the reason why Descartes believes self-deception advances him in his effort to achieve mastery over his thoughts.[7] His logical capacity enables him to doubt his own beliefs; his capacity for self-deception enables him to consider them as false for the purpose of his investigation. Descartes is aware of the risk of using self-deception as a tool in the search for true certainty, but he is confident that he can control it because he is in a process of meditation. For the double purpose of deceiving himself and controlling his own self-deception, he creates the image of the evil spirit[8]:

> […] I will therefore suppose that, not [a true] God, who is 'very good' and who is the supreme source of truth, but a certain evil spirit, no less clever and deceitful than powerful, has bent all his effort towards deceiving me.[9]

[7] Bair argues that Descartes failed to control his own self-deception, and wrongly considered his feigned denials to be genuine in order to conclude that he can be a thinking being without a body. She goes on to claim that his objectors, Mersenne, Arnould and Gassendi, pointed out his mistake

Annette C. Bair, 'The vital but dangerous art of ignoring: selective attention and self-deception', in *Self and Deception*, edited by Roger T. Ames and Wimal Dissanayake (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 53–72.

This would be true if Descartes' argument were empirical rather than logical. From a logical point of view, 'feigned' denial is as good as 'sincere' denial, since the sphere of the possible, not the actual, matters in logic. Hence, if Descartes can prove his existence as a thinking being even under an entirely speculative assumption that he has no body, then he has logically proved that the body is not necessary for his existence as a thinking being. In making this remark, I don't reject the possibility that Descartes may have lost control over his self-deception, but I'm emphasizing my claim that one should carefully distinguish between the psychological aspect and the logical aspect of Descartes' investigation.

[8] Frankfurt expresses it very well: 'The demon hypothesis does not simply refresh his awareness that he may be deceived in all the judgments at issue; it entails that he is deceived in all of them.' (Op. cit. note 4, 86) Yet Frankfurt interprets this in Descartes' terms of an external deceiver ('he is deceived') and not as a process of self-deception.

[9] Op. cit. note 1, 79–80.

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By projecting self-deception outside as an image of evil spirit, Descartes puts himself in a better position to control it. The elusive internal psychological process of self-deception turns into a clear picture of an external enemy. This, at least apparently, disentangles Descartes from the ambivalent stance of deceiver and truth-seeker, and enables him to direct his efforts solely towards the search for truth. The struggle is transformed into one of a truth-seeker against an omnipotent deceiver who uses all its power to mislead him. In this speculative situation, the only advantage of the truth-seeker is his awareness of the existence of this deceiver. This awareness alone, Descartes claims, could promise him philosophical achievement:

> I will remain resolutely attached to this hypothesis; and if I cannot attain the knowledge of any truth by this method, at any rate [it is in my power to suspend my judgment. That is why] I shall take great care not to accept any falsity among my beliefs and shall prepare my mind so well for all the ruses of this great deceiver that, however powerful and artful he may be, he will never be able to mislead me in anything.[10]

By depending on the hypothesis of the evil spirit, which in fact represents the threat of self-deception, Descartes protects himself from imagining he knows what he does not know. This is a philosophical achievement, according to the Socratic legacy, and a kind of solution to Descartes' distress. Yet, Descartes is searching for true knowledge, and hence does not stop his philosophical investigation at this point. He believes that he is not taking a great risk by doing it, since the hypothesis of the evil spirit protects him from taking false certainties to be true. But what about the counter risk? Isn't Descartes troubled by the possibility that his extreme hypothesis might cause him to take true certainties to be false?

When our only goal is not imagining we know what we do not know, it is reasonable to use hyperbolic doubt, without being troubled by the possibility that this doubt may cause us to imagine that we do not know what we actually know; when our goal lies in one direction (not taking the false to be true), we are not concerned about the other direction (taking the true to be false). Descartes, however, is looking for true knowledge, and therefore should be troubled by the other direction as well. Apparently, Descartes assumes that true belief is stronger than any doubt. He does not explicitly argue it but it is implied by his definition of truth as 'beyond any

[10] Ibid., 80.

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doubt'. By defining truth in this way, Descartes assumes not only that the doubtful may be false, but also that the true is indubitable. This is a psychological assumption, and therefore a truth based on this assumption is psychological as well. Descartes, as I'll demonstrate later, is aware of this psychological status, but nevertheless uses it for advancing his epistemological investigation: the psychological truth of the *Cogito* will be a crucial step in revealing the first ontological truth of the existence of God.

2. First psychological truth and first philosophical truth

The formulation of the *Cogito* in Descartes' *The Principles of Philosophy* emphasizes its psychological status:

> […] but we cannot in the same way suppose that we are not while we doubt of the truth of these things; for there is a repugnance in conceiving that what thinks does not exist at the very time when it thinks. Accordingly, the knowledge, *I* THINK, THEREFORE *I* AM, is the first and most certain that occurs to one who philosophizes orderly.[11]

[11] Descartes, René, *The Principles of Philosophy*, translated by John Veitch (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010 [1644]), 17.

I quote from this translation, since it is a more successful reflection of the original Latin text (emphasis mine, S.F):

> […] non autem ideò nos, qui talia cogitamus, nihil esse: *repugnat enim*, ut putemus id quod cogitat, eo ipso tempore quo cogitat, non existere. Ac proinde haec cognitio, *ego cogito, ergo sum*, est omnium | prima & certissima, quae cuilibet ordine philosophanti occurrat.

René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Vol. VIII-1. Translated by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1964a), 7.

The Cambridge translation, for example, is problematic at this point:

> But we cannot for all that suppose that we, who are having such thoughts, are nothing. For *it is a contradiction* to suppose that what thinks does not, at the very time when it is thinking, exist. Accordingly, this piece of knowledge – *I am thinking, therefore I exist* – is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way.

René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol 1, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 194–195.

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Is a feeling of repugnance a philosophical justification? Why is it an indication of truth and not of psychological weakness?

The first truth is based on a psychological argument: I cannot doubt it, therefore it is true. Furthermore, this argument, in first person, is valid only for the one who thinks it and depends on his feeling of repugnance rather than on logical or epistemological justification. That is to say, the *Cogito* finds its justification in psychological resistance rather than in logical or epistemological proof: we feel such a strong repugnance when we try doubting our own existence when we think, that the hypothesis of the evil spirit collapses and leaves no space for doubt. Furthermore, this psychological experience is so strong and deep that it causes us to wrongly consider the *Cogito* as the first ontological truth. Descartes reveals this mistake in the first demonstration of the existence of God:

> […] I see manifestly that there is more reality in infinite substance than in finite substance, and my notion of the infinite is somehow prior to that of the finite, that is, the notion of God is prior to that of myself. For how would it be possible for me to know that I doubt and that I desire – that is, that I lack something and am not all perfect – if I did not have in myself any idea of a being more perfect than my own, by comparison with which I might recognize the defect of my own nature?[12]

Descartes' analysis of the idea of God reveals that the *Cogito* is not a first philosophical truth, since the truth of the existence of God is prior to it. Furthermore, this prior truth is the origin of the process of doubting, which leads to the *Cogito*, and gives it its justification. Thus, the demonstration of the existence of God reveals that it was a mistake to take the *Cogito* to be the first philosophical truth.[13] Yet chronologically this truth was revealed first and serves as a crucial step on the way to the philosophical proof of the existence of God. That is to say, the truth of the existence of God is (logically) prior to the *Cogito*, but (psychologically) could be understood more clearly after the *Cogito*.

Descartes, it should be clear, speaks about a psychological experience rather than a logical recognition.

[12] Op. cit. note 1, 102.

[13] Spinoza, as a Cartesian discipline, starts his *Ethics* with the idea of God and does not repeat Descartes' 'mistake'.

See: Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, translated by W. H. White (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2001 [1677]).

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The central axis of Descartes' investigation up until the *Cogito* is psychological. It is a process in the first person, in which he searches for the truth by doubting his own beliefs. Since he is aware of the tendency to unconsciously revert back to old beliefs, he uses his capacity for self-deception in order to neutralize this bias. He is taking a risk by using this manipulation, but he is confident he can control it. This inner confrontation between Descartes and himself ends with the recognition of the *Cogito*. He takes this psychological experience to be philosophical truth, since it satisfies his criterion of indubitable certainty. Only after analyzing this truth logically, Descartes reveals his mistake of taking it to be the first philosophical truth. This mistake, however, rescues him from a psychological breakdown. Thus, Descartes at the beginning of Meditation Two, just before the revealing of the *Cogito*:

> Yesterday's Meditation has filled my mind with so many doubts that it is no longer in my power to forget them. Nor do I yet see how I will be able to resolve them; I feel as though I were suddenly thrown into deep water, being so disconcerted that I can neither plant my feet on the bottom nor swim on the surface.[14]

The *Cogito* serves as a psychological lifeline for Descartes. This might explain why he tenaciously holds onto it and wrongly considers it to be the first philosophical truth. Yet, Descartes' philosophical experience and understanding don't allow him to stop his philosophical investigation with this undefined recognition. He moves beyond it, carefully attempting to clarify the meaning and status of this truth. First, he examines what thinking is. He concludes that it is surely not a corporeal thing, but finds difficulties in defining it properly: 'But what then am I? A thinking being [*res cogitans*]. What is a thinking being? It is a being which doubts, which understands [which conceives], which affirms, which denies, which wills, which rejects, which imagines also and which perceives.'[15]

Descartes includes under the title of 'thinking' all the modes of our mental life, not only our intellect.[16] It is true that in his discussion he does distinguishes between the intellect and other faculties of the mind more than once; nevertheless, every time he summarizes his

[14] Op. cit. note 1, 81.
[15] Ibid., 85.
[16] Bernard Williams notes that the Latin verb *cogitare* and the French verb *penser* have a wider meaning than the English verb *to think*. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London: Routledge, 2005), 62.

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view concerning thinking, he returns to the plural view of all the faculties of the mind. Thus, in the beginning of the third Meditation: 'I am a thing which thinks, that is to say, which doubts, which affirms, which denies, which knows a few things, which is ignorant of many, [which loves, which hates,] which wills, which rejects, which imagines also, and which senses.'[17] Thinking is for Descartes, at this stage of the investigation, the entirety of his inner life.[18] This enables the interpretation that he speaks about existential experience rather than abstract definition. At this point, his existential experience is stronger than any definition or argument, and Descartes focuses on it. He reveals that 'in this first conclusion, there is nothing else which assures me of its truth but the clear and distinct perception of what I affirm.'[19] There is no abstract idea or argument that justifies Descartes' conclusion besides a strong feeling of certainty, which he cannot resist. One might think that this recognition would bring Descartes back to his starting point, where he doubted certainty as a sign of truth. Yet, Descartes does not think this should return him to his starting point. Just the opposite: he believes he has found a new principle of truth:

> But this would really not be sufficient to assure me that what I affirm is true if it could ever happen that something which I conceived just as clearly and distinctly should prove false. And therefore it seems to me that I can already establish as a general principle that everything which we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is wholly true.[20]

Descartes turns this experience into a principle of truth, despite the fact that it is only subjective feeling. Its strength lies in its high level of certainty; its weakness is that it is just a subjective *feeling* of certainty. Descartes goes back to his first doubts in order to examine them from this new perspective. He finds that while the

[17] Op. cit. note 1, 91.

[18] Later in the investigation, he will distinguish between willing and thinking.

[19] Ibid., 92.

[20] Ibid.

Descartes was attacked in relation to this psychological principle of truth. This is probably the reason why in Principle 45 of his later book, *Principles of Philosophy*, under the title 'What Constitutes Clear and Distinct Perception', he writes in an ironic yet apologetic manner that 'there are indeed a great many persons who, throughout their whole lifetime, never perceive anything in a way necessary for judging it properly'.

Op. cit. note 11, Descartes 2010, 23.

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new principle serves to strengthen the doubts concerning sense-perceptions, it requires a reexamination of the doubts concerning the intellect. The latter doubt is based on the very hypothetical possibility that the intellect is always wrong. Although this possibility is entirely hypothetical and even sounds absurd, Descartes nevertheless knows he should refute this possibility for relying on his clear and distinct criterion of truth. He does it by proving the existence of God.[21] Thus, the circle is closed: the *Cogito* leads to the clear and distinct criterion and the criterion leads to God, yet this criterion is justified by God, and the *Cogito* is justified by the criterion. Does this circularity invalidate Descartes' conclusions?

Logically, there is no problem with circularity. Every deduction is in fact circular, since in deduction the conclusion should be found in the assumptions. The question, if so, is not a logical but an epistemological one. Descartes examines his first conclusion and discovers that although his experience of his own existence is the first thing he cannot doubt, a logical analysis of this experience reveals that logically there is a truth prior to this truth (the existence of God). That is to say, Descartes gives priority to logical analysis over psychological experience. This is not only a legitimate move in philosophical investigation but even a required one. Yet, is his revelation of the first philosophical truth a sufficient answer to his original distress?

3. The will and the intellect

In Meditation Four, under the title 'Of the True and the False', Descartes suggests an analysis of the psychological origin of wrong judgments. This analysis leads to the conclusion that it is our will, not our intellect that is responsible for our wrong judgments. It causes us to make judgments even when we know that we do not know. Descartes actually argues that our false judgments necessarily

[21] Tlumak argues that the acknowledgment of God is the first metaphysical truth and the turning point of the *Meditation*, since God, as Eternal Being, is the only being that the certainty concerning its existence at any moment could be considered an irreversible truth. This is the reason why Descartes, after demonstrating God's existence, can rule out preposterous possibilities which enable metaphysical doubts. See: Jeffery Tlumak, 'Certainty and Cartesian method', In *Descartes: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by Michael Hooker (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 40–73.

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involve self-deception. How does Descartes explain the possibility of such a paradoxical psychological process?

Descartes relates the capacity of affirming and denying, like the capacity to do something or not to do it, to our will and not to our intellect. By means of the intellect, he claims, we conceive ideas but we do not judge them as true or false. Only with the cooperation of the will, which holds the power to affirm and deny, we make judgments. In other words, wrong judgments are not a fallacy of our faculty of understanding (*i.e.* the intellect) but a result of our manipulative use of our own will. Yet, although the will is more expansive than the intellect and therefore enables wrong judgments, the intellect, according to Descartes, is stronger than the will. The will cannot go against the intellect when the latter achieves clear (and distinct) understanding. When this happens, the will has no choice but to follow the intellect, and this, claims Descartes, is the highest level of freedom we can attain: by following our intellect we are free from any external influences.[22] Wrong judgments are possible, according to this view, only when our understanding is unclear. In these cases, our intellect does not guide our will and, therefore, the will moves indifferently between given alternatives. Its choices can lead arbitrarily to truth or falsity, to good or bad, and it is vulnerable to manipulation.[23] Descartes illustrates our capacity to manipulate our will, which means, in effect, to manipulate ourselves, by using self-deception in his own philosophical investigation:

> For however probable may be the conjectures which incline me to a particular judgment, the mere recognition that they are only conjectures and not certain and indubitable reasons is enough to give me grounds for making the contrary judgment.

[22] This is the rationalist idea of freedom upheld since Plato: real freedom means the freedom to act according to reason. Kant is, perhaps, the last great thinker who continues this line of thinking when he claims that the moral law expresses our freedom to obey our reason:

> [T]his self-legislation of the pure, and therefore practical, reason is freedom in the positive sense. Thus the moral law expresses nothing else than the autonomy of pure practical reason.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Thomas Kingsmill, Abbott (Mineola: Dover Publishing. 2004 [1788]), 34.

[23] It is interesting to note that this is the first time in his epistemological investigation that Descartes mentions ethical terms such as good and bad or sin. This strengthens the interpretation that he considers his epistemological investigation to be an existential task.

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> I have had sufficient experience of this in these past few days when I assumed as false all that I had previously held to be very true, merely because I noticed that it was somehow possible to doubt it.[24]

We can manipulate ourselves into believing that we know what we do not know, since it is our will and not our understanding that determines our judgments.[25] Our capacity for this self-manipulation, Descartes emphasizes through this example, is very high, and is even at times able to turn very probable truths on their head. Only when our understanding is entirely clear (and distinct), we are not threatened by this manipulation. For Descartes, the recognition that we are able to control our will is very promising, since it enables us avoiding wrong judgments:

> And certainly, there can be no other cause that the one I have just explained, for whenever I restrict my volition within the bounds of my knowledge, whenever my volition makes no judgment except upon matters clearly and distinctly reported to it by the understanding, it cannot happen that I err.[26]

Descartes believes he has discovered not only the first philosophical truth, but also the foolproof way for avoiding false certainty: keeping our will within the limits of our intellect (*i.e.* understanding). This, indeed, was Descartes' goal at the beginning of his investigation. Descartes has found the answer to his distress in a proper use of the will. The way to this recognition, however, demanded that he go against his most basic intuitions concerning the material world. Descartes feels he should now return to this issue, armed with his new recognition, in order to release himself from his troubling doubts:

> There are many other questions for me to inquire into concerning the attributes of God and concerning my own nature, or the nature of my mind. I may, perhaps, pursue this investigation some other time; for the present, *having noticed what must be*

[24] Op. cit. note 1, 115.

[25] This calls to mind Freud's definition of illusion: 'Thus we call a belief an illusion, when a wish-fulfillment is a prominent factor in its motivation […]'

Sigmund Freud, 'The future of illusion [1927]', In *The complete psychological works*, Vol. XXI. Translated by James Strachey (London: The Hograth Press, 1961), 5–56, 31.

[26] Op. cit. note 1, 117.

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> *done or avoided in order to arrive at the knowledge of the truth*, my principal task is to attempt to escape from [and relieve myself of all] the doubts into which I have fallen in these last few days, and to see if we cannot know anything certain about material objects.[27]

Descartes returns to his doubts concerning the existence of material objects with his new epistemological recognition, and finds that their existence is probable but cannot be proved true. In other words, Descartes claims that when we limit our will to the limits of our understanding, we must recognize our own existence as thinking beings, as well as the existence of God; but we cannot be certain about the existence of material objects.

This conclusion can be perceived as evidence of the imperfection of the human mind, but also of the superiority of the spiritual world over the material one. Whatever our interpretation of this conclusion may be, it seems that Descartes has achieved the goals of his investigation. He has found the solution for false certainties, and he has even arrived at true knowledge (about God and about his own existence) Yet, Descartes ends his book with a short pessimistic statement that stands in stark opposition to his philosophical achievement: '[…] and we must in the end recognize the infirmity [and weakness] of our nature'.[28]

How should one read this statement? Does it imply that Descartes is not satisfied with his philosophical achievement? Should one limit this statement to our knowledge of the material world? Is the reason for this statement to be found in his recognition, stated in the sixth Meditation, that 'the nature of man, insofar as he is composed of mind and body, cannot escape from being sometimes [faulty and] deceptive?'[29]

My interpretation is that Descartes was indeed not completely satisfied with his conclusions. The threat that troubled him and motivated his intensive investigation still troubles him at its end. This is the philosophical threat of self-deception, which was defined by Socrates as imagining we know what we do not really know. Descartes has found an explanation for this fallacy, and even a way to avoid it. Yet his investigation also confirms his fear that we cannot totally escape this fallacy. He relates it to the fact that we are composed of body and mind, a fact which he cannot prove since

[27] Ibid., 118.
[28] Ibid., 143.
[29] Ibid., 142.

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according to his view, the existence of the body is only probable. Therefore, it can be argued that Descartes' pessimistic statement at the end of his *Meditations* expresses his distressing recognition that man cannot absolutely avoid false certainties. If, as I argue at the beginning of the paper, Descartes is motivated by the philosophical goal of utterly avoiding false certainties, then his conclusion is that this goal is unachievable, despite his great philosophical achievements. We are affected by different forces of which we are unaware, and which we cannot control (for example, the forces which are responsible for our imagining corporeal things), and therefore our mind is not entirely in our own hands. According to Descartes' analysis, however, it is not these forces that deceive us, but our own will. Our will has the power to judge (true or false, good or bad), and when we have not reached a clear (and distinct) understanding, we can use our will to manipulate ourselves. We make judgments of true or false (good or bad) even when we know that we do not have sufficient knowledge to make these judgments. This analysis enables me to claim that Descartes conceives our epistemological mistakes (and also our ethical mistakes) to be a result of self-deception. He is aware of this capacity, and even recruits it for the good of his philosophical investigation, but in the end, he cannot find an ultimate answer to its threat. He explains the possibility of self-deception in the gap between our infinite will and our finite intellect. The intellect indeed controls the will, and this is the source of our epistemological power, but only insofar as the will confines itself to the boundaries of the intellect. Therefore, although Descartes thanks God for giving us infinite will, he is nevertheless troubled by his recognition that we cannot escape using it in order to manipulate ourselves. As paradoxical as it might sound, Descartes recognizes that even the revelation of absolute truth (the existence of God) cannot protect us from being deceived by ourselves.

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