

Intellectual Autonomy and the Cartesian Circle

ABSTRACT: This paper explores an underappreciated interaction between Descartes' epistemology and his metaphysics of the self, with the aim of explaining two puzzling features of his response to skepticism. The first feature is that Descartes vindicates the reliability of reason using reason, but not the reliability of other sources like sensory perception or testimony using sensory perception or testimony. The second is that Descartes grants momentary knowledge (*cognitio*) of a geometrical theorem to an atheist, who lacks proof of the reliability of his own cognitive faculties, yet denies this knowledge can persist when the atheist is not consciously entertaining the theorem's demonstration. The resolution of these puzzles, I argue, can be found only if we go beyond the epistemology to Descartes' views on free will and mind-body interaction. According to Descartes, the difference between knowledge and true belief is that the knower is in control of whether he assents to the truth, whereas the believer is dependent on external events working out in his favor. Descartes furthermore thought that the immaterial mind interacts with a material brain, and that our freedom and responsibility extend only to what is internal to the mind. The internal includes the faculties of reason and intellectual memory, but sensory perception, imagination, and sensory memory require the mind to interact with the brain and sensory organs in a manner roughly analogous to a homunculus using a surveillance camera and a diary. For illustration, when one demonstrates that God exists using reason, one's knowledge that God exists remains intact even when one is not consciously attending to the demonstration. But when one appeals to mental images in demonstrating a geometrical theorem, as on my reading the atheist geometer does, the images are recorded "offline" in one's brain, like a diagram written in one's diary. Because the geometrical demonstration itself is stored externally, standing geometrical knowledge depends on knowledge of the reliability of the faculties used to arrive at the demonstration. And so the atheist geometer, who lacks knowledge of their reliability, can know the geometrical theorem only when he is consciously attending to the demonstration itself.