

Doubt and the Evil Genius

1. The Point of View of the *Rules* and the Point of View of the *Meditations*

The *Meditations* unfolds in conformity with the rules of a method requiring us to follow the necessary linkage of reasons. Consequently, it seems it should come under the jurisdiction of that method, whose validity has already been constituted before it. On the other hand, the conclusions to which the *Meditations* leads us would be without force if the validity of that method were not firmly established. But this validity can only be founded by the *Meditations* itself, which constitutes the highest philosophy. From this it appears that the enterprise can only succeed by revealing an ultimate foundation that, while derived from the method, possesses intrinsic evidence such that, once attained, it appears as valid by itself, independently of the process by which it has been attained.

The point of view of the *Meditations* can therefore only be rigorously defined in contrast with the point of view of this method, considered in isolation, that the *Meditations* must employ and establish at the same time.

This method is revealed to us by the *Rules* (to which the *Discourse on Method* refers implicitly). The special character of the *Rules* is that the work of science is not related in it to any other principle except the human faculty of knowledge. No doubt many metaphysical theses can be perceived in it already: for example, the reduction of the material world to extension and movement; the real distinction between extension and thought; the theory of imagination and corporeal faculty; the link between doubt and the criterion of evidence; the relation between the Cogito and God's existence—*Sum, ergo Deus est*, etc.¹ Nonetheless, these conceptions appear only as examples, not as points of support. The method is presented as having a validity independent of metaphysics and as founded immediately on the inherent certainty of human reason in its original authentic manifestation, meaning mathematics.

This special character has led some authors, Natorp especially,² to think that Descartes had begun a kind of theory of knowledge related to the critique; they believed to have found in this a way, among others, to bring Descartes nearer to Kant. For Descartes, science would rest on the human faculty of knowledge, and the external intrusion of metaphysical questions would have transformed and distorted the first presentation of the true problem. In the *Rules* Descartes deals only with the mental. In the *Meditations* there appears another Descartes who raises some old questions.

The above conception does not deal fully with the concerns of our philosopher. In truth, the *Rules* is situated at the point at which the method is being formulated, but at which the problems that will be treated by that method have not yet arisen. They will arise once this method has been absolutely generalized, that is as soon as, vigorously putting to work the principle of not accepting anything as true that is not absolutely evident, Descartes poses the question of the validity of the mathematical evidence that was first considered by him as self-sufficient, without any other justification—in brief, when he asks himself how we are authorized to have faith in the evidence of clear and distinct ideas themselves.

Thus the two main questions that require the deep philosophical process of the *Meditations* are posed:

1) Can we judge validly that an idea, even if it is supposed true, corresponds with something real—in brief, does the reality external to me respond to the internal requirements of the understanding? This question is imposed forcefully on Descartes as soon as he begins to deal with a complete physics of the universe, instead of isolated questions of physics—in brief, once he rises to the mechanistic conception of extension and movement. In fact, this conception was the only one that responded to the requirements of clearness and distinctness of the understanding. However, does the universe conform to these requirements? From this the fundamental problem results: By what right can we conclude from true essences to existences outside these essences? Is what is valid for the former valid for the latter?

2) Another question is superimposed on the first. It concerns not only whether existing things correspond to the truth that I perceive in essences, but whether my clear and distinct ideas themselves are essences—in brief, whether what I affirm, in the name of reason, is truly the expression of an objective universal reason, and not the expression of necessities inherent to my subjective nature—whether the links I establish between these ideas have an objective validity, or whether they are valid only within the limited sphere of my self.

This second question is itself specified in two ways:

i) Is it possible that I be deceived even in what I call the intuition of ideas?

ii) If this question is resolved negatively, if one can be assured that what we know as intuition is true, can I be assured that it will remain true when I cease to have an intuition of it—that when I recall an idea captured by intuition or properties I have demonstrated, will this idea and these properties always be true, having remained immutable while I was no longer thinking of them? In brief, does there correspond to the conservation of items of knowledge in the extrarational faculty of memory, which all deduction presupposes (since all deduction takes place in time), a conservation, outside of me, of the truth in itself?

The affirmative reply to these various questions requires all of

Descartes' metaphysics. It is only because of such a reply that science, according to Descartes, is legitimated. Far from supposing that a methodological idealism can suffice, Descartes has never admitted that the human mind can define and posit the reality of things by virtue of its own proper necessities. He has never thought it possible to rest certainty on the human mind alone, whose imperfection he senses. In this way he differs completely from Kant, whom he resembles, on the other hand, when he poses the question of the objective validity of our a priori knowledge.

2. Characteristics of Methodological Doubt

The appearance of metaphysical questions is conditioned, as we have just seen, by the concern to establish certainty in an unshakeable fashion by pushing the investigation to its limit, meaning by putting to the test even the certainty of mathematics, from which the universal method arose. Thus, in order to end up with complete certainty, Descartes wishes to examine the whole sphere of certainty. He does not wish merely to have an illusion of certainty, to have blind faith in a certainty that is not itself controlled—in brief, in a certainty that is not certain by itself—not knowing whether this certainty is established and in what way it is established. Not to rely on a certainty before having required from it “its certificate of believability,” meaning before having submitted it as a whole to a critique, and to examine the entire sphere of certainty, are two traits of Cartesian philosophy that incontestably draw it nearer to Kantian philosophy.³

And, if we wish to end up with complete certainty, we must not admit in ourselves anything that is not absolutely certain—in other words, we must doubt everything that is not certain with absolute certainty, and also we must absolutely exclude from ourselves everything that is stricken by doubt.

From this a threefold necessity arises:

- 1) The necessity for preliminary doubt.
- 2) The necessity to exclude nothing from doubt as long as doubt is not radically impossible.
- 3) The necessity to treat provisionally as false the things touched by doubt—which carries the necessity to reject them entirely.

There corresponds to this threefold necessity three characteristics of Cartesian doubt: it is *methodological*, it is *universal*, and it is *radical*.

Moreover, the methodological characteristic makes it a simple instrument for founding the certainty of knowledge, that is, the dogmatism of science. This results in a fourth characteristic: Cartesian doubt is *provisional*.

3. The First Stage of Methodological Doubt in *Meditation I*

Meditation I applies this doubt.

After having defined the aim: “certain and indubitable” knowledge, it indicates the means: hyperbolic doubt, which completely rejects everything

not assured, whatever the degree of doubt. The preparation for this doubt consists, not in the censure of various opinions, but in the critique of their principle, a principle that will involve them all in its ruin, and this principle is that knowledge comes from the senses.⁴ From this point on, an exhaustive process begins, which extends doubt far beyond the sphere of sensible objects.

This process, which goes from the complex to the simple, is accomplished in accordance with the order. The senses deceive us. Sensible perceptions are perhaps only dreams. But dreams are imaginary only because they arbitrarily combine simpler and more general elements: eyes, hands, heads, bodies, etc. These elements can only appear as real since, not being composite, they escape the possible arbitrariness of composition. However, these constitutive elements are themselves composite; they can therefore be arbitrarily composite, and consequently, imaginary, and therefore dubious. From this stems the necessity to rise to the level of the elements of these elements: shape, number, quantity, magnitude, space, time, etc. We then end up with absolutely "simple and general" natures, that, not being composite, escape, by definition, any possible arbitrariness of composition, and consequently, any doubt. We rejoin here the plane of the *Rules*, according to which mathematics is an absolutely certain science because it deals with simple and general objects.⁵

We ought to note that analysis also allows sensible quality (color, for example)⁶ as one of the unbreakable constituents of our representations. Sensible quality cannot be fictitious, and its simplicity also renders it indubitable for us. Analysis gives the same status to sensation, the simple, primitive notion that will be the foundation of the psychology of *man* properly speaking. Descartes therefore implicitly divides ideas into two categories: composite (adventitious or artificial) ideas and simple ideas—the latter being sensible or intellectual (innate). All composite ideas are suspect, for they can all be artificial (*factitiae* or *fictae*). All ideas that are unbreakable, or simple natures, whether they are intellectual or sensible, are necessarily indubitable, because they cannot be artificial. They are the first notions, or immediate givens, that will later be revealed as innate.⁷ For now, only the simple intellectual natures are retained—sensation will not be introduced into the chain of reasons until *Meditation VI*. That is because, although sensation is a simple nature, as is the idea of the understanding, sensation is less absolute than it, for the understanding can be without sensation, but sensation cannot be without the understanding. The order indicates therefore that the idea of the understanding must be first considered alone. Moreover, the indubitable character of each sensation taken apart in no way compromises the conclusion relative to the deceptive character of sensible knowledge, since this knowledge is only constituted by the combination of sensations. And this combination can always be considered as fictitious.

4. The Second Stage of Methodological Doubt in *Meditation I*

As one might have already noticed, the question of truth has changed along the way. At first it consisted in knowing whether an external reality corresponded to our ideas; now it consists in the truth of things considered in their own reality, “without having to take great care to ascertain whether they are in nature or not.”⁸ But the order of analysis legitimates this passage, which is so surprising at first. By breaking up the images into the simple and general elements rendering them possible, one rises from fact to rule, meaning from given representations to necessary, universal conditions of all possible representations, which are therefore valid for all representations, imaginary as well as real. In this way we pass from the sphere of existence to the sphere of the possible, including all *conceivable* existence. It is true that a square has four sides, even if it does not exist in nature, for, whether the square exists or not, it remains no less true that it could not have more or fewer than four sides. Thus the result of the first phase of the analysis is to cast doubt on the particular content of representations and to subtract from this doubt the necessary conditions of all possible representations. Nevertheless, in this case these conditions are in no way formal conditions. They are certain conditions only insofar as they are ultimate constituents, therefore necessary constituents—in brief, to the extent of their simplicity. It is precisely their simplicity that excludes them from natural doubt, even though it is their function as condition of all possible representations that allows the affirmation of their intrinsic truth, setting aside their relation to an external existence.

Working out the principle of breaking up the complex into the simple, we are not allowed to rise to a level of elements simpler than these unbreakable elements, which, insofar as they are fundamental mathematical notions, constitute the content of our understanding. And the impossibility of doubting, which stems from the impossibility of pushing farther the breaking up of elements, is confirmed by the natural certainty that we attribute to them, that allows them to escape all the *natural reasons for doubt*—what sensible objects cannot do. On the one hand, “*the nature of my mind* is such that I cannot help believing them true while I am conceiving them clearly and distinctly”;⁹ on the other hand, it is because “they treat only of these very simple and general things,” that “arithmetic, geometry, and other sciences of the same nature [. . .] contain something certain and indubitable,” in contrast with “physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other sciences, which are very doubtful and uncertain, given that they depend upon the consideration of composite things.”¹⁰

Since certainty naturally clings to these notions and since the method of breaking up of elements confirms the legitimacy of this natural certainty—if it were needed to do so—the *Meditations*, proceeding strictly according to

the order, must neglect or avoid the supposed natural reasons for doubt that the more popular works (*Discourse, Principles*) invoke against mathematics. Thus, it also neglects the argument drawn from the paralogisms that are sometimes committed by mathematicians: these false reasonings can make me doubt my ability to reach these certain notions, but not the notions themselves, since by nature they cannot be doubtful, and since it is confirmed that in this case we have substituted some obscure and confused notions for them.¹¹ Moreover, they avoid the doubt drawn from the illusion of dreams, which are capable of deceiving us about existences, but not about mathematical notions, for whether I am awake or asleep, two and three add up to five, and the square can never have more than four sides.¹²

We therefore cannot see how the philosopher could obtain something simpler and more indubitable than these mathematical notions, if reflection cannot rise from the natural plane to the metaphysical plane, attacking the validity that our mind attributes to them necessarily "by nature." This reflection arises out of the confrontation of certainty with an old metaphysical opinion "received through hearsay," which is enough to shake it up, without our being able to draw from the content of these notions anything that could guarantee their claim to certainty. This opinion concerns the vague idea of an infinitely powerful God who would thus possess the power to deceive us in everything. Our will, drawing inspiration from this small doubt, then rejects entirely from certainty everything that intelligence naturally proposes as certain.¹³

The act of voluntarily rejecting as false everything of which generally I am not certain testifies to the intervention of my free will,¹⁴ which not only suspends the affirmative judgment, but transforms it into a negative judgment, in order to keep myself from a positive judgment. This passage, from the plane of the nature of my mind to the metaphysical plane transcending it and putting it into question, allows the appearance of a discontinuity in the process of exhaustive doubt that renders extremely manifest the intervention of my free will. If we can rise above the sphere of our finite understanding, in order to strike down as a block the validity of the notions it presents as necessary and certain, it is because we can make use of a superior power, which is infinite relative to our understanding and capable of making an attempt against nature. This is an attempt against nature, because it ends up radically excluding from knowledge and certainty what "by the nature of my mind" completely repulses such an exclusion. This superior power is that of my will.¹⁵

Thus, infinity in its double aspect: divine, as the infinity of divine omnipotence, and human, as the infinity of my will, renders possible the passage from hyperbolic doubt based on natural reasons to hyperbolic doubt based on a metaphysical reason. By passing from universal doubt based on natural reasons to universal metaphysical doubt, the

understanding is compelled to justify, if it can, the natural certainty it has of its ideas. The following problem arises out of this: Is what constitutes, for my understanding, the condition of the possibility of all representations, meaning of everything conceivable for me, ipso facto the condition of possibility of everything real in itself? Is the possible for my intelligence a true possible, an essence? That is what *naturally* I am necessarily brought to think, but what *metaphysically* is as yet by no means established.

By combining itself with the notion of a deceiving God who is infinitely powerful and the principle of possible doubt with respect to clear and distinct ideas, the action of the infinite will gives rise to the fiction of the evil genius that establishes a method of research allowing one to reject from knowledge what can be doubted with as small a degree of doubt as possible, that is to say, permitting me to reject outside my mind, as I would the false, what could have remained within it under the heading of simply doubtful. The voluntary and methodological character of this fiction is highlighted by its dual quality as problem-solving device and as psychological tool: in making possible an operation of the will that must be carried out against the habits and temptations of the probable, it is a psychological tool;¹⁶ as giving shape to the principle that ordains the treatment of the doubtful as false, it is the analogue of these fictive constructions of geometry or astronomy that allow one to accomplish calculations and demonstrations, and to exclude doubtful notions for the benefit of certain notions.¹⁷ But above all, this voluntary fiction, installing falsity provisionally, but peremptorily, even at the core of divine infinity, gives to doubt an absolutely universal scope. It reduces to one the set of various reasons for doubting our faculties of knowledge. Deriving support from it, the will can, through its indivisible act of freedom, radically reject outside of me everything I cannot but accept as knowledge. This radical doubt, which is the suspension of all judgment on everything, announces a categorical attitude of the philosophizing subject by its unitary and total character. It is radical because it requires a radical doubt in order to have a complete certainty. Descartes wishes to pose the problem of certainty in its fullest extent. On this point he resembles Kant, who would judge it necessary, in order to reform reason, to institute a critique that involves the whole faculty of knowledge, instead of censuring some particular doctrines.¹⁸ But he differs from Kant in that, for him, a metaphysical hypothesis allows him to pose the problem, and metaphysical knowledge allows him to resolve it; he also differs from Kant in that the foundation of the validity of my knowledge cannot be discovered within my mind, but outside it.

The first absolute certainty immediately emerges from this total and radical doubt. There is, in fact, something that even metaphysical doubt cannot reach: the internal condition of the act of doubting, a condition inherent in it, that is, the existence of my thought—"I doubt, I think, therefore I am."¹⁹ Thus metaphysical doubt is exorcised by reference to the

conditions for doubt, as was the hyperbolic doubt based on natural doubts, but each in a very different way. For if I cannot naturally doubt mathematical notions, it is because the condition that renders doubt possible—namely, composition—is absent from them. The impossibility of doubting is here based on the nature of the object offered to thought, and certainty accrues to this object. On the other hand, if I cannot metaphysically doubt my thought, it is because its existence must always be affirmed in doubt as a necessary condition for this mental operation, such that it suffices for one to doubt in order not to be able to doubt the thought that doubts.²⁰ The impossibility of doubting is based here on the nature of the very act of doubting, and the necessary presence in it of its sine qua non condition: the thinking subject. Certainty therefore accrues uniquely to the subject. In this way one knows that the problem of the certainty of objects remains whole.

5. Various Kinds of Hyperbolic Doubts

The passage to the first absolute certainty was rendered possible by: 1) working up various kinds of doubts; 2) using the hypothesis or fiction of the evil genius; and 3) calling on the principle of breaking up the objects of natural doubt and having recourse to the internal condition that renders possible the very act of doubting for the subject.

1) Methodological and systematic doubt, which is fictive and proceeds not from things but from the resolution to doubt, differs from true doubt which results from the nature of things and can engender skepticism.²¹ It is because of its systematic and generalized character that it deserves the name *hyperbolic*, in accordance with its etymology: from *hyperbole*, excess; in rhetoric it designates a figure by which one gives the object in consideration a higher degree of something, whether positive or negative, it does not possess in actuality. Similarly, there is a twofold principle of this doubt: treat as *absolutely false* what is merely *doubtful*, reject *universally*, as *always* deceptive what could have deceived me *sometimes*; this responds perfectly to the meaning of the word hyperbolic, by accomplishing the hyperbolic leap in two different senses. There are therefore as many degrees of hyperbolic doubt as there are degrees of generalization of doubt, and as there are categories of objects, which are in themselves less and less naturally doubtful and yet are excluded.

The universal doubt extended to sensible knowledge—by virtue of the errors of the senses—is less hyperbolic than the one extended to mathematical knowledge, under the pretext of the paralogisms to which one can fall prey (according to the argument of the *Discourse*); these two doubts are less hyperbolic than the one that, being based on the illusion of dreams, dares to strike at sensible ideas and mathematical ideas with one blow. The most hyperbolic doubt of all is the one based on the hypothesis of the evil

genius, because, being absolutely universal, it attacks what the dream argument could not have attacked, namely, the intrinsic objective validity of clear and distinct ideas. In fact, considered independently of this hypothesis, whether I am dreaming or awake, mathematical properties keep their own truth. They do not keep it, on the other hand, if God willingly deceives me with respect to them: then, whether I am awake or dreaming, they have the same falsity. Descartes, in fact, grants to all doubts having a methodological character a hyperbolic quality;²² but he distinguishes among them those he considers more universal: doubts based on the illusion of dream and doubts based on the hypothesis of the evil genius.²³

2) The doubt based on the evil genius occupies a place by itself, insofar as it alone rests on a *metaphysical* opinion, and not on natural reasons for doubt, that is, on doubts raised by errors or illusions that are produced naturally (errors of the senses, deliriums of madmen, illusion of dreams). From this it derives its name, *metaphysical* doubt. Not only is it not suggested by nature (either by our mind alone, or by our composite substance), but it is contrary to the "*nature of our mind*," which spontaneously considers clear and distinct ideas as indubitable.

3) When one wishes to exorcise hyperbolic doubts based on natural reasons for doubt,²⁴ the method consists in seeking what escapes the *material condition for doubt*, namely the simple, given that doubt can only be directed at a fiction and that all fiction is composite. One therefore infers the certain from the simple. When one wishes to exorcise metaphysical doubt, the method consists in seeking the *formal condition* for doubt in general, a condition that, being necessarily posited as real by doubt itself, necessarily escapes it. Since indubitability is the necessary character of the simple, absolute indubitability entails absolute simplicity; we then infer from the certain to the simple, simplicity no less evidently arising from the generative process, in any case.

6. The Problem of the Evil Genius

The hypothesis of the great deceiver, or the fiction of the evil genius, which constitutes the instrument of metaphysical doubt, poses a problem—that of its origin or of its foundation. Is it based, at least in part, on the nature of things, having its roots in some truths of Cartesian philosophy? Or is it, on the contrary, an artifice entirely alien to these truths, such that once these truths are discovered they radically abolish the pretext in whose name it was invoked?

In the first case one conceives²⁵ that the hypothesis is based on the true nature of divine omnipotence, and one relates it, along with the doctrine of eternal truths, to the consequences implied by this omnipotence taken in itself. The idea of a universal deception, of which God would be the author, would then not be a fiction entirely excluded by the nature of God, but one

of the possibilities originally open to his omnipotence. However, God, who is good, would have freely chosen to limit his omnipotence by his goodness, and since deception is an evil, he would have chosen to be veracious. The refutation of the hypothesis of God's deception would not therefore be rightly accomplished by the proof of his omnipotence, but only by recourse to his goodness. The opposition between the evil genius and the veracious God then appears as the reflection of a kind of conflict between his power and his goodness, between his power and his will: God being capable of deceiving us, but not wanting to. From this stems the identification of the roots of this hypothesis with the theory of eternal truths: God was as free to deceive us as he was free to create truths other than those we recognize, to the extent that it could have been true that the sum of the angles of a triangle were not equal to two right angles, and *two plus three* not equal to *five*. God's power would thus conceal in its foundation something irrational and anarchical. The conflict between omnipotence and goodness would exhibit a certain tragic character, well designed to seduce the imagination. One draws from this the ideas of a certain pessimism and a certain anxiety tied to the mystery of our origin, etc.²⁶

In the second case one conceives that the hypothesis could not be based on the true nature of divine omnipotence, for divine omnipotence necessarily suppresses the hypothesis. One can hold goodness as the sole argument capable of establishing divine veracity only by misunderstanding the nature of this omnipotence. Consequently, God's goodness could not limit his omnipotence. Moreover, since God's omnipotence is by nature capable of freely instituting truths other than those that have been created, while it is incapable to deceive by its nature, there is no common ground between the theory of eternal truths and the hypothesis of the evil genius; the former is based on the true nature of things, while the latter is a pure and simple fiction that renders possible the real or fictional misunderstanding of that nature.

Descartes' texts, when consulted as a whole, affirm that the second interpretation is the only possible interpretation.²⁷

Certainly, the positing of the problem of the validity of the ideas of our understanding involves the possibility of defining the limits of this understanding (*limites ingenii definire*, as in the title of the *Rules*), at the same time that it involves putting into doubt the natural certainties that refer, by means of the hypothesis of the evil genius, to the vague notion of divine infinity, in opposition with the finiteness of our being; and in this way, one can be tempted to establish a link between this hypothesis and the theory of eternal truths.

But, in the first place, if this hypothesis had the same foundation as the theory, it would rest on true knowledge of God's omnipotence, as the other does. It would therefore be irrefutable metaphysically by the true concept of this omnipotence; it could only be avoided morally, by an appeal to God's

goodness limiting its own power. And Descartes expressly excludes this possibility. Goodness, no doubt, excludes deception, but omnipotence excludes it no less: "We can see that it is impossible for God to be a deceiver, as long as we consider that the form or essence of deception is a nonbeing toward which the Supreme Being can never incline."²⁸ Goodness, rather than limiting omnipotence, agrees with it, for deception is fashioned from powerlessness as well as from malice: "Wanting to deceive, far from being a mark of potency (*potentia*), is a mark not only of malice, but of weakness (*imbecilitas*)." ²⁹ Omnipotence itself excludes malice.³⁰ The refutation, already acquired on the ontological plane, would be simply confirmed on the moral plane, on the supposition that God's goodness was on a moral plane in God, instead of on an ontological plane, or even simply distinct from it—a distinction that Descartes rejects.

Consequently, the hypothesis of a deceiving God is not based on the "mystery of our origins" but on the misconception that we have of our author and of his omnipotence.³¹ Once I understand this omnipotence clearly and distinctly, I conceive by one and the same reason that it has created me freely along with the eternal truths, for it is the necessary author of all being, and that it could not have deceived me, nor have wanted to deceive me, for it cannot be the author of nonbeing.

The principle that establishes the doctrine of the eternal truths is that "nothing can exist in any way not dependent on God." This principle includes the negation of the inverse principle: "It is evident that it is no less repugnant to assume that falsity or imperfection as such is derived from God, as that truth or perfection is derived from nothingness."³² And it is on this latter principle that the hypothesis of a deceiving God rests. Therefore, if the theory of eternal truths is true, the hypothesis of a deceiving God is false. Since the principle of the former is the negation of the principle of the latter, we must conclude that the doctrine of eternal truths entails in a mathematical fashion the refutation of the hypothesis of the evil genius.

Thus the doctrine of the eternal truths rests on the knowledge of the true God and true omnipotence, while the fiction of the evil genius is based on the conception of a false God and is permitted only insofar as the true God is only "known confusedly."³³ It is not based on the knowledge of his idea, but only on an *opinion* with respect to his nature: "I have long held in my soul an opinion that there is a God who has created everything,"³⁴ an opinion that has come to me "through hearsay."³⁵ This opinion is precisely that of the theologians of *Objections II* and *VI*, who attempt to establish from the Scriptures—by means of an equivocation, in any case—that God, who is omnipotent, "the Supreme Lord of everything, can dispose of anything as he sees fit," and consequently, "He can be a great deceiver."³⁶ And Descartes specifies that these "opinions," which are the antithesis of knowledge, precisely misunderstand the true nature of omnipotence. By their substitution of the word *f* for the object, the finite for the infinite, they

lead insidiously toward atheism.³⁷ In fact, what is atheism, but the extreme limiting of the reality and omnipotence of God? And to attribute to God the power to deceive us, under the pretext that he is omnipotent, is to limit in fact his real omnipotence, on account of the *word*, thinking that omnipotence is capable of inclining toward nothingness. From this follows the conclusion that the atheist, more than anyone else, will think that God is a deceiver, for “the less powerful he will conceive the author of his being, the greater will be his occasions for doubting whether he may not be of such an imperfect nature as to be deceived in matters that appear most evident to him.”³⁸

Therefore, when setting aside opinion for true knowledge, the word for the thing, when truly carrying to infinity the incomprehensible omnipotence of God, as we must, we ought to conclude at the same time that he is not free to deceive us and that he is the free creator of eternal truths. That is why, once the true nature of God’s omnipotence is discovered, the difficulty will be reversed; the problem will no longer be to demonstrate that God cannot always deceive me (*Meditation III*), but to demonstrate how it is possible that I am sometimes deceived (*Meditation IV*). And this more so, since the fact that I am sometimes deceived can be used to justify the hypothesis that he always deceives me.³⁹

It is argued that the hypothesis of the evil genius can only come to the mind of a philosopher who, like Descartes, does not constrain God to the necessity of eternal truths. Is not the first condition for admitting that God has the freedom to deceive us the positing in him the primacy of free will with respect to what we call truth? If God himself sustains the true, is it not impossible ever to conceive that he could produce the false? In truth, this reasoning assumes what is in question, namely, that the hypothesis of a deceiving God is not an “opinion” but a concept based in reasons. However, this topic concerns an opinion that we do not hold by natural light, but that we have received “through hearsay”; it can therefore accommodate all these absurdities. And the facts prove that it can accommodate them, for we could have rejected the theory of eternal truths and have accepted the hypothesis of the deceiving God. Such is the case with the theologians of *Objections VI*. No doubt this is an absurdity, since it professes at the same time that God necessarily sustains the true and that he is free to create the false. But it is just as absurd to base the freedom to deceive on the freedom to create the true, since that is to conclude that being can engender nonbeing by the fact that it can produce only being and that it is free to produce any kind of being it wishes.

Since omnipotence renders deception impossible, it is evident that goodness, which itself excludes it, in no way limits omnipotence. Therefore God’s omnipotence could not give refuge to a radical irrationality, nor could it exhibit a tragic foundation. Of the two reasons that exclude deception, the only decisive one is the metaphysical reason, which is based on the true

nature of omnipotence. Goodness gives to it alone a precarious certainty in this regard. In fact, is not what I call “good or bad” so by virtue of the notions that God has freely imposed on my limited understanding? Could not God have instituted by decree another “good” that would justify the very essence of deception?⁴⁰ The argument based on the metaphysical reality of the true escapes this relativity. Certainly God could have freely created truths other than the ones that are given to me as such, for he could have created other beings, but he could not have created deception, which is neither another truth nor another being, but the absence of truth and the absence of being, and is therefore excluded from creation by the Supreme Being. Thus, although nothing proves that deception cannot be another good, one different from the one I understand,⁴¹ it is evident that it cannot be another truth, since it is destructive of any possible truth. In addition, the vicious circle traditionally brought up against reasoning that goes from evidence to divine veracity and then justifies evidence from veracity could not be resolved by distinguishing the moral plane (God’s goodness) from the intellectual plane (evidence).⁴² For, although the truth of a reason and the goodness of a volition are situated on two different planes, that does not prevent the truth of this reason from being intrinsically illusory, and therefore radically worthless for the philosopher—on pain of circularity—if God’s malice wished to render rational evidence deceptive.

However, although the true nature of God’s omnipotence is the deep basis for the necessary divine veracity, goodness is not, in this case, a less useful and even less indispensable foundation.⁴³ First, we have to appeal to it, at least provisionally, as long as we have not reached a clear and distinct knowledge of omnipotence. In addition, it must remain linked to the argument about omnipotence after we are able to give the latter the place it deserves. In fact, by revealing the impossibility for God to incline toward nothingness, the clear and distinct concept of omnipotence guarantees the reality of everything that exists in creation, and consequently, the truth of everything real in our ideas. But the work of God is not only reality, it is also “assemblages” and “dispositions” of realities; and the necessity for God to create only the necessarily true real does not, in addition, guarantee that the disposition of real things cannot lead us into error. Thus falsity can exist for creatures, even though God, who creates only being, has never directed himself toward nothingness. From this arises the necessity to find a supplementary guarantee in God, one that allows us to affirm that his veracity extends equally to the *disposition* of realities. This guarantee is given to us only through the goodness of God who, refusing to deceive us, disposes the realities consequently. This foundation of veracity with respect to finality is a principle without which Cartesianism could not establish the fundamental truth, within the limits that are circumscribed by the sphere of our “nature,” of sensible quality, of our instincts, and of our passions.⁴⁴

However, this appeal to divine goodness, required in this case by the

nature of the question, since it no longer concerns the guarantee of a *truth*, properly speaking, in the created work, but concerns a *utility*, does not place us at a different plane from God, other than at the plane of his omnipotence. Goodness, in fact, is reduced to omnipotence in the end. The good is reciprocal with being, by virtue of the identity of the transcendental predicates, evil with defect, nonbeing with impotency.⁴⁵ Thus it is not by virtue of the *created* true and the good that universal deception can be excluded, but in virtue of God's infinity itself—meaning with respect to the plenitude of his *uncreated* being—that reveals the idea of the perfect present in me.

The double function assumed by divine omnipotence—to refute the hypothesis of the great deceiver and to establish the doctrine of eternal truths—is related to the extremely original Cartesian theory of possibility⁴⁶ and to one of its fundamental distinctions, of the impossible and possible in itself (for the omnipotent God) on the one hand, and of the impossible and possible for our understanding, on the other hand. This distinction, which is of extreme importance, since it conditions the conception of the substantial union, is subverted by the confusion of considering as a single doctrine the theory of eternal truths and the hypothesis of the evil genius, both conceived as equally based on the nature of divine omnipotence. In fact, with respect to this omnipotence, the former is a truth and the latter an absurdity.