

4.2 Easy cases: Descartes and Locke

Descartes is routinely presented as if his *Meditations* were meant to establish knowledge of the external world.⁴⁷ If so, Descartes takes himself to be the first man to discover that there are trees—or at the very least, the first one to discover that we know that there are trees. I find it hard to read him that way. Descartes is better understood by taking seriously his distinction between “cognition” (*cognitio*) and “science” (*scientia*).⁴⁸ What he takes himself to pioneer is a new science for metaphysics and other domains of theoretical enquiry.⁴⁹ Doing so requires *pretending* that we have no cognition of what can be doubted and overcoming these doubts in an orderly manner. Cognition, on the other hand, consists in a “clear and distinct perception” that something is so.⁵⁰ Descartes claims that clear and distinct perception entails truth.⁵¹ He evidently thinks that, if we are attentive enough, we will believe that we have a clear and distinct perception just if we have one. So clear and distinct perception is a discernible mark of truth. And that is all that cognition—as

by drastically restricting their content puts a heavy load on “preconceptions” or inferences from sense-impressions. In Augustine’s view these were supplied by God. Divine illumination theories dominated the early Middle Ages from Augustine through al-Ghazālī (1058–1111 CE, Kukkonen, 2010) up to Henry of Ghent (c. 1217–1293 CE). A recurrent idea is that without divine illumination we would not know much. I submit that divine illumination was taken to be necessary for there to be discernible marks of truth. (3) *The late medieval debate over scepticism*. Henry of Ghent’s discussion of Academics sparked an intense debate that lasted until the arrival of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth. The debate was fueled by a wider conception of the possible, as most philosophers agreed that God’s omnipotence was not constrained by regularities of nature. Nevertheless a first wave of philosophers defended what appears to be Classical Infallibilist answers on which, roughly, intellect is in principle always in position to correct the senses: see e.g. Perler, 2010, 387 and Grellard (2004, 132–3) on John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) and Karger (2004) on William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347; but see Pannaccio and Piché, 2010 for a fallibilist reading). However a second wave put forward answers that seem to reject Classical Infallibilism. We return to the two most prominent examples below (sec. 4.7).

⁴⁷See e.g. Williams (2005, 15, 19–20), for whom Descartes aims at showing how knowledge is possible and at devising a method for acquiring it.

⁴⁸In the *Second Replies*: “However, I do not deny that an atheist could know [*cognoscere*] clearly that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; I am simply affirming that his knowledge [*cognitionem*] is not true scientific knowledge [*scientiam*], since no knowledge [*cognitio*] that can be rendered doubtful seems to deserve to be called scientific knowledge [*scientia*].” (AT VII:141, trans. Ariew and Cress in Descartes, 2006, 83). Cottingham (Descartes, 1984, 101) translates *cognitio* as “awareness” and *scientia* as “knowledge”. DeRose (1992b), Sosa (1997) and Carriero (2007) argue that the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia* is crucial to Descartes’s avoidance of circularity in the *Meditations*.

⁴⁹See Frankfurt (1970, chap. 2), Wolterstorff (1996, 180–218), Pasnau (2013, 1000–1). The stated goal of Descartes’s meditator is “to establish [something] in the sciences” (*First Meditation*, AT VII:17). Descartes writes to Mersenne: “These six Meditations contain all the foundations of my physics.” (January 28, 1641, AT III:298). Some texts (notably the *Regulae*) suggest that Descartes thought that the scientific ideal was achieved in mathematics. But the passage of the *Second Replies* quoted above suggests that even mathematics fall short.

⁵⁰“In this first item of knowledge [*cognitionem*] there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting” (*Third Meditation*, AT VII:35, Descartes, 1984, 24). Carriero (2007, 306–7) takes this passage to state what cognition involves in general.

⁵¹“So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very dearly and distinctly is true” (AT VII:35, Descartes, 1984, 24).