

## Descartes's sceptical theism

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**Abstract:** In the first part of the article I show how Descartes employs the sceptical theist strategy as part of his response to the problem of evil in *Meditation Four*. However, Descartes's use of this strategy seems to raise a serious challenge to his whole project: if Descartes is ignorant of God's purposes, then how can he be sure that God doesn't have some morally sufficient reason for creating him with unreliable clear and distinct perceptions? Drawing on related objections from Mersenne and Hobbes, I show in the second half of the article how Descartes can sidestep this objection.

### Introduction

In contemporary philosophical discussion the term 'sceptical theist' refers to the theist who, recognizing that the cognitive capacities of God far outstrip our own, concludes that humans cannot expect to understand why God acts (or refrains from acting) as he does.<sup>1</sup> Although the sceptical theist's epistemic modesty may be attractive in its own right, one of the chief virtues of this view is that it yields a clear strategy for undermining powerful and influential forms of the problem of evil. For example, according to a prominent version of the evidential problem of evil, since there are evils for which we can see no morally sufficient reason (MSR), it is likely that there really are evils for which there is no MSR. Given that such gratuitous evils are inconsistent with God's perfection, it follows that the theistic God's existence is unlikely. The sceptical theist's strategy for responding to this argument is to raise doubt about the inference from our inability to see an MSR for some evil, to the conclusion that there is (probably) *no* MSR. The sceptical theist holds that we simply are not in the kind of epistemic position to draw this conclusion.

The sceptical theist's strategy is, in many respects, an intuitive one, and it would not be surprising to find that sceptical theism is as old as the problem

of evil itself, although I will not investigate this possibility here. Rather I will focus on Descartes's use of this strategy in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. That Descartes employs this strategy, and to what end, has gone largely unrecognized, and I start by showing how this strategy figures into his overall answer to the problem of evil in *Meditation Four*. The sceptical theist's strategy, however, is often thought to have unacceptable epistemic costs. The problem is that the sceptical theist's scepticism is thought to undercut her own claims to knowledge. In recent literature William Rowe, for example, has suggested that the Christian theist who adopts this response to the problem of evil cannot claim to know that there is life after death, since there may be some good 'which precludes God's granting eternal life to the faithful'.<sup>2</sup> That is, for all the sceptical theist knows (given her scepticism) God has some MSR for not granting life after death. This is a particular instance of what I will call the *Undercutting Objection*, and this kind of objection would seem to be especially problematic for Descartes given his project in the *Meditations*: if Descartes isn't in an epistemic position to conclude that there is gratuitous evil, it would seem that he isn't in a position to be sure that God does not have some MSR for creating him with unreliable clear and distinct perceptions. In general, replying to the Undercutting Objection calls on the sceptical theist to establish that her knowledge lies outside the scope of her scepticism. By looking at Descartes's response to related objections from Mersenne and Hobbes, I close by showing how Descartes establishes the reliability of his clear and distinct perceptions without appealing to knowledge of God's reasons for acting, and how, as a consequence Descartes's sceptical theism sidesteps this particular application of the Undercutting Objection.

### **Sceptical theism in the *Meditations***

Descartes opens *Meditation Three* by affirming the so-called truth-rule: that 'whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true' (CSM I, 24; AT VII, 35).<sup>3</sup> He recognizes, however, that it is at least in principle possible that this rule is false, since he may have been created with an epistemically unreliable nature. In order to remove this 'slight' and 'metaphysical' reason for doubting the truth-rule, Descartes sees his task in the meditation as the consideration of whether God exists, and if so, whether He is a deceiver. By the end of the meditation Descartes has proved to his satisfaction that he is the creation of a perfect being, and given that it is impossible for a perfect being to deceive, God cannot have created him with an epistemically unreliable nature; the truth-rule is thereby validated.

There is more work to be done on behalf of the truth-rule, however. Descartes explains in the Synopsis that 'it is not possible to prove this [the truth-rule] before the Fourth Meditation' (CSM II, 9; AT VII, 13). The problem is that the justification

for the truth-rule – that Descartes is the creation of a perfect being – would seem to justify overall epistemic perfection. Descartes writes:

There would be no further doubt on this issue were it not that what I have just said appears to imply that I am incapable of ever going wrong. For if everything that is in me comes from God, and he did not endow me with a faculty for making mistakes, it appears that I can never go wrong. (CSM II, 38; AT VII, 54)

But of course, this is false – Descartes admits that he is ‘prone to countless errors’. It would seem, then, that Descartes has proved too much. The same premises which validate the truth-rule seem to entail a falsehood, and this throws God’s existence, and consequently the truth-rule, back into question. Thus, in order to ground the truth-rule Descartes needs to establish that the epistemic imperfections he finds in himself are consistent with God’s existence.

Discussions of *Meditation Four* often claim that Descartes responds to this problem by formulating a version of the traditional free-will theodicy. While this is certainly correct, it is only a partial account of Descartes’s response. Descartes formulates the free-will theodicy to account for one epistemic imperfection in particular – that he actually makes mistakes. Indeed, Descartes sometimes writes as if this is the only epistemic imperfection of consequence. Nevertheless, Descartes is subject to a number of other such imperfections, each of which is – on its face – inconsistent with God’s existence and perfection. In *Meditation Four* Descartes explicitly observes that it is an imperfection both that he has a capacity for error in the first place (e.g. CSM II, 38; AT VII, 54) and that his intellect is as limited as it is (e.g. CSM II, 39; AT VII, 56). In addition, Descartes worries not only that he is subject to a variety of epistemic imperfections, but also that the extent of his overall imperfection is gratuitous. As a consequence, Descartes’s task in *Meditation Four* is not merely to account for the fact that he makes mistakes, but to account for the existence and extent of the epistemic imperfections he finds within himself.

Descartes begins his response by appealing to a philosophically and theologically traditional model of creation according to which God creates different kinds of beings by granting different degrees of reality or perfection. Each kind of created being, as created, falls short of God’s infinite perfection in one way or another. According to the tradition such defects in kind, or negations, are not evil. Suarez, for example, explains that ‘a thing is not evil in that it does not have a more excellent perfection if it ought not have it; otherwise every creature would be evil in that it does not have the perfection of the Creator’.<sup>4</sup> A stone, for example, lacks the perfection of sight. This absence is not an evil, however, since this limitation or defect is a consequence of being a member of its kind. In general, limitation, in one way or another, is the price of creation, and consequently such natural defects are not evil. Descartes summarizes:

I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being: my nature is such that in so far as I was created

by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead me astray; but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder I make mistakes. I understand, then, that error as such is not something real which depends on God, but merely a defect. Hence my going wrong does not require me to have a faculty specially bestowed on me by God; it simply happens as a result of the fact that the faculty of true judgement which I have from God is in my case not infinite.<sup>5</sup> (CSM II, 38; AT VII, 54)

Descartes thus opens his response to the problem of evil by claiming that his epistemic imperfections are negations or defects in kind, and as a result are not inconsistent with God's existence and perfection.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, elsewhere Descartes explicitly accounts for his capacity for error and for the limitation of his intellect in just this way. In reply to Gassendi, he writes: 'our being liable to error is . . . simply (especially with respect to God) the negation of greater perfection among created things' (CSM II, 258; AT VII, 376). Of the intellect he writes later in *Meditation Four*: 'it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things, and it is the nature of a created intellect to be finite' (CSM II, 42; AT VII, 60).

While it might appear that the problem has been solved, Descartes admits in the next paragraph that this defence 'is not entirely satisfactory' (CSM II, 38; AT VII, 55). His suggestion is that although this defence is effective with respect to some of his epistemic imperfections, there are some for which it cannot account. Descartes points to two recalcitrant imperfections in particular. First, according to Descartes the fact that he makes mistakes (as opposed to, say, his capacity for mistakes) cannot be a negation. He writes: 'error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me' (*ibid.*). A privative absence (or privation) differs from a negation in being an absence of something to which the subject is by nature disposed. As Descartes writes in the French edition of the *Meditations*, a privation is the absence of something 'to which its nature entitles it' (CSM II, 39; AT IX, 45). For example, sight is naturally appropriate to dogs, but not stones; thus, the absence of sight in a dog is a privation, while its absence in a stone is merely a negation or defect in kind. In general, a being that suffers from a privative absence is one that falls short of what its nature intends for it, and as a result is an imperfect instance of its nature or kind.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, in claiming that error is a privation, Descartes is claiming that human persons are by nature apt or disposed to avoid error. When a human person makes a mistake they fall short of that to which their nature entitles them. Given that this imperfection is not a negation, it follows that Descartes will have to find an alternative way to account for the fact that he makes mistakes.

Second, even if creatures' imperfections in kind are consistent with God's existence, it does not thereby follow that God's existence is consistent with the amount or degree of imperfection in creation. For all Descartes knows at this point in the *Meditations*, he is God's only creation; and Descartes is confident that this

creation is less perfect than it might have been. God, he says, 'could have given me a nature such that I was never mistaken' (CSM II, 38; AT VII, 55). Descartes explains (later in the meditation) that God could have done so with only minor changes to his nature. Without taking away his freedom, and without granting him infinite knowledge, God could have prevented him from making errors of judgement either by giving him an intellect capable of clearly and distinctly perceiving everything he might need to know (but nothing more), or by impressing it into his memory never to affirm or deny that which he does not perceive clearly and distinctly (CSM II, 42; AT VII, 61). On this basis, Descartes concludes that 'Had God made me this way, then I can easily understand that, considered as a totality, I would have been more perfect than I am now' (*ibid.*). It would seem that Descartes does not literally mean that *he* could have been more perfect, since presumably Descartes is essentially a human person, and so could not have a different nature. Rather, Descartes is apparently claiming that God could have created a relevantly similar, but more perfect, meditator. Creation, then, looks to be unnecessarily or gratuitously imperfect – something a perfect being could not tolerate.

Descartes takes up both of these complications, but the bulk of *Meditation Four* is devoted to developing an explanation for the fact that he actually makes mistakes. This is Descartes's well-known, and oft-discussed, free-will theodicy. For the purposes of this article I will put this aside, and take up instead Descartes's strategy for accounting for the apparent fact that creation is gratuitously imperfect, for this is where we can find Descartes's sceptical theism.<sup>8</sup>

Descartes's strategy is to deny the legitimacy of the inference from the fact that he might have been more perfect to the conclusion that he is gratuitously as such. He writes: 'I cannot therefore deny that there may in some way be more perfection in the universe as a whole because some of its parts are not immune from error . . . than there would be if all the parts are exactly alike' (CSM II, 42–43; AT VII, 61). The fact that he might have been more perfect doesn't license the conclusion that he is gratuitously imperfect, since it may be that, for example, the universe as a whole is better off as a result.<sup>9</sup> Early in the meditation Descartes outlines this strategy. He writes:

[T]here is no call to doubt his existence if I happen to find that there are other instances where I do not grasp why or how certain things were made by him. For since I now know that my nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite . . . there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the [impenetrable] purposes of God.<sup>10</sup> (CSM II, 38–39; AT VII, 55)

As a finite being, Descartes cannot expect to understand all of God's reasons for acting. It follows that he cannot conclude that creation's degree of imperfection is inconsistent with God's perfection, according to Descartes, because he is not in an epistemic position to do so.<sup>11</sup>

From this we can see that Descartes offers a hybrid response to the problem of evil in *Meditation Four*. Descartes uses different approaches to account for the various epistemic imperfections he finds within himself. He accounts for his basic capacity for error and for the fact that his intellect is finite by claiming that these are negations or defects in kind. That he is subject to such imperfections is the price of creation. This approach, however, will not account for the fact that he actually makes mistakes, since this imperfection is not an imperfection in kind. Nevertheless, this imperfection is consistent with God's existence because it arises as the result of a misuse of his own free will. Even so, creation – in the form of the meditator – seems gratuitously imperfect. God could have created a being like the meditator in having a finite intellect and free will who would not be similarly subject to error. In response, Descartes appeals to the sceptical theist's strategy, and argues that we are not in an epistemic position to conclude that the extent of our imperfection is gratuitous.

### **The Undercutting Objection to sceptical theism**

According to the Undercutting Objection the sceptical theist's admission of ignorance unleashes a pernicious scepticism that undercuts her own claims to knowledge. The general structure of this kind of objection can be represented as follows. Let  $p$  stand for a proposition of some import which the sceptical theist affirms. The Undercutting Objection charges that the sceptical theist is committed to (what I will call) an Undercutting Conditional (UC) which connects her scepticism about God's purposes to scepticism about  $p$ . Thus, the Undercutting Objection sets up a trilemma for the sceptical theist: either (i) give up her sceptical theism, (ii) deny the UC, or (iii) admit to scepticism about  $p$ .

There are many ways one might fill in this argument schema, and it not difficult to see how the objection might have particular force when formulated with regard to Descartes's project in the *Meditations*. Recall that Descartes's goal in *Meditation Three* is to vouchsafe the truth-rule by removing even 'slight' and 'metaphysical' reasons for doubting it. However, by appealing to the 'impenetrable purposes of God' in *Meditation Four* Descartes has, apparently, introduced new grounds for doubting the truth-rule by committing himself to a UC. After all, given his admittedly humble epistemic position, how can he be sure that God has no end the achievement of which *requires* his nature to be epistemically unreliable? To use Descartes's example, how do we know that the unreliability of his clear and distinct perceptions wouldn't allow for 'more perfection in the universe as a whole'? In short, the objection is that Descartes is committed to the following UC:

(DUC): If Descartes's epistemic limitations prevent him from concluding that his degree of imperfection is gratuitous, then they also prevent him from concluding that his clear and distinct perceptions are reliable (and that the truth-rule is correct).

Faced with this challenge Descartes will surely want to challenge DUC (either to give up his sceptical theism or to admit scepticism about the truth-rule would undermine the whole project of the *Meditations*). In order to deny DUC, given the structure of the *Meditations*, Descartes needs to be able to establish that God's perfection guarantees the truth-rule without appealing to God's purposes to do so. However, it is not obvious that Descartes has the necessary resources. Lex Newman, for example, writes in his thorough and illuminating study of *Meditation Four*: 'Never contested, in the *Meditations*, is the *assumption* that there would be no MSR for a world with creatures who systematically err' (my italics).<sup>12</sup> Despite this, I think Descartes does have grounds for denying DUC, although we will have to look beyond the *Meditations* to find them.

### Descartes and the Undercutting Conditional

The concern that God might have an MSR for deceiving the meditator (with respect to clear and distinct perceptions or otherwise) did not go unappreciated by Descartes's contemporaries, and indeed this issue was raised by both Mersenne and Hobbes in the *Objections* appended to the *Meditations*.<sup>13</sup> Hobbes writes:

The standard view is that doctors are not at fault if they deceive their patients for their health's sake, and that fathers are not at fault if they deceive their children for their own good. For the crime of deception consists not in the falsity of what is said but in the harm done by the deceiver. M. Descartes should thus consider the proposition 'God can in no case deceive us' and see whether it is universally true. (CSM II, 136; AT VII, 195)

In this same vein Mersenne asks:

Cannot God treat men as a doctor treats the sick, or a father his children? In both these cases there is frequent deception though it is always employed beneficially and with wisdom. (CSM II, 90; AT VII, 126)

We would not be surprised, perhaps, if Descartes were to respond by taking the hard-line stance that deception is always wrong, and that God can have no MSR for it. After all, it would not be out of place for Descartes (given his Augustinian sympathies) to appeal to the theological tradition according to which all lies are sins.<sup>14</sup> Surprisingly, however, Descartes responds by capitulating. He writes in response to Hobbes:

My conclusion does not require that we can in no case be deceived . . . All that I require is that we are not deceived in cases where our going wrong would suggest an intention to deceive on the part of God. (CSM II, 136; AT VII, 195)

To Mersenne he offers a similar but somewhat more informative reply:

[M]y remarks in the *Meditations* were concerned not with the verbal expression of lies, but only with malice in the formal sense, the internal malice which is involved in

deception . . . I would not want to criticize those who allow that through the mouths of the prophets God can produce verbal untruths which, like the lies of doctors who deceive their patients in order to cure them, are free of any malicious intent to deceive. (CSM II, 102; AT VII, 143)

According to Descartes, Mersenne and Hobbes are right; there *are* cases of morally acceptable deception. When, in the *Meditations*, Descartes says that it is impossible for God to deceive, we should not understand him as maintaining that God cannot deceive *simpliciter*. Rather, he should be understood as claiming only that God cannot deceive maliciously – that is, without an MSR for doing so.<sup>15</sup> To this point, then, Descartes's response has been to clarify his understanding of deception. Of course, this clarification does not go towards solving the general problem; in fact, it only makes the objection all that more pressing.

Although Descartes begins his response to both Hobbes and Mersenne in the same fashion, he ultimately gives two different replies. Let us start with his response to Hobbes. After noting that 'All that I require is that we are not deceived in cases where our going wrong would suggest an intention to deceive on the part of God' Descartes *concludes* his response to the objection by adding 'for it is self-contradictory that God should have such an intention'. Descartes apparently takes this observation to be sufficient for blocking the obvious charge that God might have some MSR for creating us with unreliable clear and distinct perceptions. This claim, however, will be sufficient only given the assumption that God's having created us as such would be a case of intentional (or malicious) deception. The problem, of course, is that Descartes is not entitled to make this assumption. To claim that such deception would be malicious is to say that there could be no MSR for it, but given that Descartes claims to be ignorant of God's purposes, this is precisely what Descartes cannot say.<sup>16</sup>

Fortunately Descartes replies in more than one way, and to Mersenne he offers a much more lengthy response. Here Descartes's response is not that God's having created us with unreliable clear and distinct perceptions would be malicious or unjustified, but rather that it is impossible for God to create us as such. Descartes argues in what I will call *The Argument for the Impossibility of Deception* as follows:

Since God is the supreme being, he must also be supremely good and true, and it would therefore be a contradiction that anything should be created by him which positively tends towards falsehood. Now everything real which is in us must have been bestowed on us by God (this was proved when his existence was proved); moreover, we have a real faculty for recognizing the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood, as is clear merely from the fact that we have within us ideas of truth and falsehood. Hence this faculty must tend towards the truth, at least when we use it correctly (that is, by assenting only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive, for no other correct method of employing this faculty can be imagined). (CSM II, 103; AT VII, 144)<sup>17</sup>



There is a lot going on in this argument, but for ease of discussion I will standardize the basic argument as follows:

- (1) It is impossible for God to create something which positively tends towards falsehood.
- (2) Our faculty for recognizing truth and distinguishing it from falsehood has been created by God.
- (3) So, it is impossible for our faculty for recognizing truth and distinguishing it from falsehood to tend positively towards falsehood.

The task at hand is to determine whether this argument succeeds in making the case that God cannot systematically deceive us, without appealing to God's purposes in the process of doing so. Descartes's grounds for accepting premise (2) are not difficult to isolate. In general, he reasons that since we have ideas of both truth and falsity, it follows that we must be able to distinguish the two, and insofar as we are created by God, we are created with this capacity. Descartes's reasoning for premise (1) is a bit more opaque, and indeed Newman calls this claim an 'intuition' for Descartes.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Descartes has grounds for thinking (1) is true as two clarifications about the contents of premise (1) will establish.

First, premise (1) claims that there is something a perfect being cannot create; consequently, Descartes's account of causation is relevant to this premise. Indeed, one causal principle in particular is crucial for Descartes's project in the *Mediations* as a whole. In *Meditation Three* (and elsewhere) Descartes relies on what scholars have dubbed Descartes's 'Causal Likeness Principle'.<sup>19</sup> Descartes expresses this principle (which he says is known by the natural light) in a variety of ways, but perhaps most clearly when he says: 'whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present either formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause' (CSM II, 116; AT VII, 165). This principle expresses a necessary condition of causation: a cause must be like its effect. Put otherwise, no effect has perfections not also present in that effect's cause. For Descartes, perfections can be present, or contained in, a cause in two senses: formally or eminently. A cause contains its effect formally when it resembles its effect. Thus, fire can cause the effect of heat, because it formally contains heat – that is, it is itself hot. In contrast, a cause that contains its effect eminently does not resemble its effect, but rather contains a property the 'greatness' of which allows it to 'fill the role' of a formally contained property.<sup>20</sup> For example, although God himself is not corporeal, he contains corporeality eminently insofar as He has a property (or set of properties) of sufficient greatness to produce matter. In sum, given the Causal Likeness Principle it follows that if God creates x, then God is like x – either insofar as God resembles x or insofar as God has a property which is a sufficiently great counterpart of x.

Second, in claiming that it is impossible for God to create something which positively tends towards falsehood we need to recognize that the qualification

'positively' is doing some important work. Recall that, for Descartes, God creates by granting degrees of reality or perfection. Such creations are real positive beings, and so Descartes's claim in premise (1) is that it is impossible for God to create something that tends towards falsehood where this 'something' is understood as a real positive being or perfection.

Given these two clarifications we can now understand Descartes's grounds for thinking that a perfect being cannot create something positive which tends towards falsehood. If God could create something which tended toward falsehood where this is understood as a perfection, then (given the Causal Likeness Principle) he would have to contain this 'perfection' formally or eminently. But this is impossible: God is 'supremely good and true', and neither tends towards falsehood himself, nor contains any property that can fill the role of tending towards falsehood. Unlike Descartes's response to Hobbes, his response to Mersenne is not circular: our grounds for guaranteeing the truth-rule lie in our knowledge of God's perfection and of the Causal Likeness Principle – not in our knowledge of God's purposes. Put otherwise, we can be sure that God cannot have an MSR for creating us with unreliable clear and distinct ideas, not because we know that there is no good which would justify it, but because it is impossible for God to create such a situation.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

I have argued that in *Meditation Four* Descartes employs a hybrid response to the problem of evil. As part of his overall response Descartes adopts the sceptical theist strategy to cope with the apparently unnecessary degree of imperfection he finds within himself. Not only does this fill a largely unrecognized gap in our understanding of Descartes's argument in *Meditation Four*, but it also reminds us that the sceptical theist's strategy is nothing new. Furthermore, I have shown how Descartes's project in the *Meditations* would seem to be particularly susceptible to the Undercutting Objection. Ultimately, however, Descartes sidesteps this objection because he is able to establish the reliability of his clear and distinct ideas without appealing to any knowledge of God's ends or purposes; Descartes can consistently claim to be ignorant about the latter without thereby being ignorant about the former. In closing, I want to be clear about the scope of this final conclusion. First, in concluding that Descartes sidesteps the objection, I am claiming only that his systematic commitments allow him to deny the DUC; I am not endorsing those commitments. Second, I have argued that Descartes sidesteps one formulation of the Undercutting Objection in particular (albeit a particularly pernicious formulation given Descartes's project). The Undercutting Objection is a general objection kind, and there may well be other Undercutting Conditionals which Descartes cannot avoid. Nevertheless, that Descartes can avoid this formulation of the problem is notable, and serves, I think, as a valuable

illustration of how the sceptical theist can respond to the Undercutting Objection more generally.

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## Notes

- Perhaps the most influential recent proponent of sceptical theism is Michael Bergmann. See Bergmann (2001) and (2009).
- Rowe (2006), 90–91. This is a common kind of objection to sceptical theism. Perhaps the most prominent version of this objection in recent literature comes from Almeida & Oppy (2003), who argue that sceptical theism entails an unacceptable scepticism about morality, and in particular implies scepticism about our duty to prevent suffering when doing so is of little to no cost to us. As another example of this objection, Wielenberg (2010) has recently argued that the sceptical theist strategy entails scepticism about claims that have what he calls 'word-of-God justification only' and consequently that this strategy is inconsistent with any religious tradition according to which there are such claims.
- References to Descartes will cite both CSM and AT by volume and page.
- Suarez (1989), 164 (Disputation XI.1.3). See also Aquinas (1948), 250 (*Summa Theologica* I.48.3).
- Elsewhere in *Meditation Four* Descartes makes this point using the analogy of a craftsman and his creations. He writes: 'no matter how skilled I understand a craftsman to be, this does not make me think he ought to have put into every one of his works all the perfections which he is able to put into some of them' (CSM II, 39; AT VII, 56). Similarly, in the French edition of the *Principles* he explains that God 'did not bestow on us everything which he was able to bestow, but which equally we can see he was not obliged to give us' (CSM I, 204; AT IX, 39).
- It is sometimes suggested that this paragraph is a false start and ultimately irrelevant to Descartes's response to the problem of evil. Tierno (1997), 30–31. See also Wee (2006), 115. The justification for this reading is that in this paragraph Descartes suggests that error is 'merely a defect' and so is not evil, but in the paragraph immediately following Descartes takes it back, saying that 'error is not a pure negation, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me'

- (CSM II, 38; AT VII, 55). The problem with this reading is that it assumes that Descartes is only concerned to account for the fact that he actually errs.
7. For a thorough discussion of Descartes's appeal to both privation and negation in *Meditation Four*, and their connection to the distinction between imperfections in kind and imperfect instances of a kind see Newman (1999), 559–591.
  8. Cf. Ragland (2007). Ragland also reads Descartes as appealing to the sceptical theist's strategy in *Meditation Four*, although he sees this strategy as employed towards different ends. Ragland sees Descartes's sceptical theism as establishing the (epistemic) possibility of God's coexistence with error, and thereby undermining what Ragland calls the 'general argument from error'. I see Descartes's sceptical theism as employed in a more limited way, namely to account for the apparently unnecessary level of imperfection in creation.
  9. Descartes makes the same claim earlier in the mediation, albeit less overtly. In the context of the objection that God could have created a more perfect meditator, and immediately following his admission of ignorance of God's will, Descartes adds that when thinking about the perfection of creation we should think about the universe as a whole: 'For what would perhaps rightly appear very imperfect if it existed on its own is quite perfect when its function as a part of the universe is considered' (CSM II, 39; AT VII, 55–56). He continues: 'after considering the immense power of God, I cannot deny that . . . I may have a place in the universal scheme of things' (CSM II, 39; AT VII 56). Thus, Descartes seems to be claiming here that for all he knows he is part of a larger whole and that the whole is greater in virtue of his apparent imperfection.
  10. On the inscrutability of the divine will see also Descartes's comments to Gassendi at CSM II, 258; AT VII, 376.
  11. This, however, does not stop Descartes from claiming in *Meditation Six* that 'For the proper purpose of the sensory perceptions given me by nature is simply to inform the mind of what is beneficial or harmful for the composite of which the mind is a part; and to this extent they are sufficiently clear and distinct' (CSM II, 57; AT VII, 83).
  12. Newman (1999), 562.
  13. Although both Mersenne and Hobbes raised this objection it should be noted that in neither case was it raised as the result of an explicit attribution of (what I have called) an undercutting conditional to Descartes. In the case of Mersenne it is raised as part of a general discussion of whether God can deceive. Hobbes raises the issue as one of his objections to Descartes's argument in *Meditation Six* that God's veracity proves that there is an external world of corporeal bodies.
  14. Augustine (1974), 169 (*Enchiridion* Sec. XXII); see also Aquinas (1948), 1660 (*Summa Theologica* 2.2.110.3).
  15. Two notes: first, Gombay (2007), 73, considers Descartes's claim that in the *Meditations* his only concern is with malicious deception, but concludes that Descartes cannot really mean what he says. He reasons that if malicious deception is all Descartes is worried about in the *Meditations*, then the possibility that he might be systematically – but beneficially – deceived is something Descartes would have accepted. Gombay thinks this is a dubious consequence: 'this would make his doubt considerably less searing – less "hyperbolic" – than we have been given to believe.' On the contrary, I think we should take Descartes's comments at face value for two reasons: (i) this is not an isolated comment in his correspondence. Rather Descartes makes this claim at least twice in the Replies (to Mersenne and to Hobbes) which were appended to the *Meditations*. (ii) I will argue that for Descartes God cannot create the meditator with unreliable clear and distinct perceptions (regardless of whether it would be beneficial), and so the possibility Gombay envisions cannot arise. Second, Newman (1999), 580–584, accepts this distinction and proceeds by detailing what kinds of deception would be incompatible with God's perfection, for Descartes. He concludes that, for Descartes, a being's having been created with a natural and uncorrectable inclination towards error would be incompatible with God's perfection. The natural follow-up question is why God's having created beings in this way would be incompatible with his perfection, and this is the question I am taking up in this section.
  16. Ragland (2007), 138–139, briefly takes up the question of why Descartes thinks that creating the meditator with an uncorrectable tendency for error would have to be a malicious act. He suggests an argument on Descartes's behalf which I represent as follows: (1) a state of affairs can justify God's having created the meditator with an uncorrectable tendency to error only if God lacked the power to bring about this state of affairs in any other way. (2) Given God's omnipotence, 'it is hard to imagine'

that God might lack the power to bring about this state of affairs (whatever it may be) in another way. It would then follow that (3) no state of affairs can justify God's having created the meditator with an uncorrectable tendency to error, and that God's having done so would be malicious. See also Newman (1999), 581. Unfortunately, I don't think that Descartes can endorse premise (2) of this argument given his sceptical theism. It is difficult to see what grounds Descartes might have for claiming that for any such state of affairs, God could bring it about without deception, since this would seem to require knowledge of God's power that far outstrips what Descartes could reasonably claim to know given his limited epistemic position.

17. For a parallel text see Descartes's comments as recorded by Frans Burman at CSM III, 334; AT V, 147–148.
18. Newman (1999), 563.
19. Clatterbaugh (1980).
20. Descartes defines these terms at CSM II, 114; AT VII, 161.
21. It might be objected that although Descartes has argued that God cannot positively create something that tends toward falsehood, he leaves open the possibility that God might *negatively* do so. That is, we might ask: how can we be sure that God hasn't given us a faculty that is incomplete or is lacking in some respect? To my knowledge Descartes never takes this up explicitly, but I think an answer can be given on his behalf. According to Descartes, 'the term "faculty" denotes nothing but a potentiality' (CSM I, 305; AT 8b, 361). Descartes might argue, consequently, that faculties are in some sense simple perfections – either one has the relevant potentiality or one does not – and that therefore it doesn't make sense to suggest that God might have granted a partial or incomplete faculty.