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The Genealogy of Demonology

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Charles Alexander Leitz

Dissertation Committee:
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DEDICATION

To

Lorraine and Peter

without whom I would not exist

and Stella

without whom my existence would be worse

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Professor Penelope Maddy, Chair

The subject matter of epistemology is knowledge. The epistemologist ought therefore to be concerned with questions such as: Do people know things? What kinds of things do we know about? Are there things that people mistakenly believe they know? Epistemologies that give pessimistic answers to these and similar questions are generally called 'skeptical'. This dissertation examines the history of the 'demon argument' for philosophical skepticism. I first examine the historical backdrop of ancient skepticism and it's medieval reception, before demonstrating that the demon argument itself arose out of a complex synthesis of medieval theories of divine power, demonic deception, and the legacy of ancient skepticism. This synthesis was originally carried out for nonskeptical, methodological purposes, but was appropriated by a resurgent skepticism in the Early Modern Period.

Chapter Zero: Of Demons

I. Introduction

The subject matter of epistemology is knowledge. The epistemologist ought therefore to be concerned with questions such as: *Do people know things? What kinds of things do we know about? Are there things that people mistakenly believe they know?* Epistemologies that give pessimistic answers to these and similar questions are generally called 'skeptical', after a family of ancient Greek philosophies that not only gave pessimistic answers, but also thought that appreciating those answers was key to living a fulfilled and moral life.[1] The core claim of philosophical skepticism is thus that there are things which most everyone believes to be known - that the earth is old, that the sun rises daily, that there are many humans, that humans have hands, and so on - but which, philosophical reflection shows, we cannot in fact know.

Because this position is a very ancient one, it has been defended with an awesome profusion of arguments. For much of the history of philosophy, for example, the favoured weapon of the skeptic was the 'argument from illusion.' Consider the familiar case of a stick (or a straw, or an oar) dipped through the surface of the water - though of course it remains straight and solid, the image breaks up and appears bent. Or think, as Sextus Empiricus does, of how objects appear to be different sizes and shapes from different distances and angles. Or the mirage of an oasis in the midst of Sahara. Such illusions being prevalent, how can we trust our senses ever to get at the reality of things - why should we think that we can cull from the senses any firm sense of what external objects are or what properties they possess?[2]

[1] Chapter One discusses ancient skepticism in more detail

[2] Maddy (2017) has an approachable examination of at the versions of this argument used by Berkeley and Hume

The fashion of much contemporary epistemology, though, is to fret instead about a different skeptical argument. The 'demon argument' uses the possibility of hypotheticals with certain features (discussed below) to argue that our knowledge of the world is very much less than we would otherwise think. This argument, though popular today, is a relative newcomer to epistemology. The goal of this dissertation is to trace its history - to show the demon argument's origins in medieval philosophy, and its eventual adoption by post-Cartesian skeptics. Before embarking on that task proper, though, it is important to lay out some terminological distinctions which will inform later chapters.

II. Demon Scenarios

Demon arguments depend crucially on the hypothesis of a certain kind of scenario. A demon scenario, as I am using the phrase, has two key features. First, there must be some broad or important class of things which are (presumably) factual in our world, but which are false in the demon scenario. Second, there must be no evidence which distinguishes the real world from the demon scenario.[3]

Let us suppose that, a hundred years into the future, an interdisciplinary research team of psychologists, neuroscientists and philosophers manages to sneak an experiment past ethics review. In order to study minds under more controlled conditions than tend to be available to psychologists, they take volunteer undergraduates, sedate them, lobotomize them, and hook their brains up to terrifying assemblages of electrodes and an entire artificial endocrine system of hormone baths and tangled IVs, all controlled by ludicrously sophisticated AI. By complicated patterns of electrochemical stimulation of the cortex, this AI is able reliably to induce said brains to have particular experiences. Stimulation of

[3] Bondy (2021, 2) says that "the common thread running through [demon scenarios] is that they are imagined as very powerful, undetectable by their victims, and epistemically malicious, in that they aim to set up conditions whereby most or all of their victims' beliefs fail to have some important epistemic status, including especially the statuses of knowledge and justification." I find it more convenient to disassociate the epistemic implications of demon scenarios from the scenarios themselves, and so Bondy's third condition has no exact equivalent in my definition.

the sensory cortex is used to induce sensory/perceptual type experiences, stimulation of the amygdala produces emotional experiences, and so forth. Thus, when the research team wants to investigate the psychology of 2020s dissertation writing in philosophers, they can simply *induce* all the experiences of being a 21st century PhD candidate in their envatted 22nd century undergraduate brains. The malignant researchers overlook nothing that can be allowed to compromise the illusion - the envatted brains are entrusted with counterfeit impressions as of bodies, false memories as of 21st century life, mistaken beliefs that (for example) their sensory faculties are functioning properly, and so on.

It will immediately be apparent that many things true of *actual* 21st century graduate students will be false in this scenario: (most) actual 21st century grad students have hands, for example, while no envatted brains have hands (though of course they mistakenly take themselves to). It should also be apparent that, if the malignant research team has done its job properly, there is no conceivable way for the envatted brains to determine that they are envatted. But by the same token, there is no conceivable way for an actual 21st century grad student to determine that they are *not* envatted. Both attempts run into the insuperable problem that, for every possible piece of evidence e, the probability of observing e is the same given the proposition p: "I am a brain in a vat" as it is given $\neg p$: "I am not a brain in a vat." The likelihood ratio $\frac{P(e|p)}{P(e|\neg p)}$ is thus 1, and so e neither confirms nor disconfirms p.[4]

A 'demon hypothesis,' then, is the postulation that a particular demon scenario so-defined is *possible*. Some demon hypotheses may be formulated in such a way as to be inconsistent, incoherent, or otherwise defective so that they can be ruled out as possibilities *a priori*. Someone might reasonably think, for example, that supernatural deception demons that depend on the intervention of an *omnipotent* entity [eg, God] are impossible, because the notion of omnipotence itself is incoherent.

[4] This is just a Bayesian way of precisifying the simple idea that, since the evidence available to a brain in a vat and a normal observer is the same, the evidence does not go in favour of either theory.

Other demon hypotheses are harder to generate *a priori* arguments against: it's hard to imagine, for example, what the *a priori* argument against the possibility of envatted brains might be. We can already induce quite vivid hallucinations in the lab.[5] In a hundred years full envatment might be not just a possibility but an *actuality* [ethical scruples notwithstanding]!

1. Some Famous Demons

It is worth canvassing a few demon scenarios that have appeared in the philosophical literature, to give a sense of the demonological landscape, and to illuminate by example what is special and epistemologically significant about such scenarios.

The Brain in a Vat

The scenario sketched above is a version of the demon most likely to be compelling to a contemporary audience, the 'brain in a vat.' The modern prominence of this version stems from Putnam (1981), though the idea predated him.[6] A similar scenario is to be found in the recent 'simulation hypothesis,' defended by Nick Bostrom (2003) and many non-philosopher fans of *the Matrix*. Here the idea is that computers of the future, with vast power, are very likely to be used to run extremely high-fidelity, fine-grained simulations of reality, of human history, and maybe even of individual lives. Depending a little bit on theories of mind and consciousness, we might suppose that sufficiently high-fidelity simulations of reality would involve artificial consciousnesses. Said consciousnesses would necessarily be unable to discern that they were artificial and living in a simulated universe, and they would come to many false beliefs (eg, 'I have hands'). Bostrom famously argues not just that the simulation scenario is possible,

[5] Mégevand et al. (2014) recount an experiment in which electrical "stimulation of [...] the medial fusiform gyrus [...] caused the patient to experience a complex, topographic visual hallucination: he reported seeing a train station in the neighbourhood where he lives."

[6] Putnam used it to advocate a kind of content externalism, rather than a skeptical or even especially epistemological thesis.

but that, on plausible assumptions, it is probably true! One needn't go quite so far, however, in order to appreciate simulation's force as a source of demon scenarios.

Brains in vats and simulations are perhaps especially compelling demon scenarios because they draw their plausibility from (extrapolating) contemporary science. Computer simulations and artificially induced hallucinations are natural phenomena that are pretty much universally recognized to exist. There is even some reason to think that, in principle, and with advanced enough technology, they could be 'beefed up' to the level of all-encompassing demon scenarios.

Extraordinary Dreaming

Many skeptics, even in antiquity, gave arguments from dreams and madness. Sextus Empiricus, in the *Outlines* (Veber, 2018, looks at this argument in some detail), points out that we have experiences of two kinds - waking ones and dreaming ones. He then poses the reasonable and surprisingly difficult question of how we know which one to trust. Descartes, for his part, briefly entertains the question of how we know at any particular moment that we are not, at that moment, asleep and dreaming. The key observation to make about these scenarios is that they are not demons: the kinds of dreams we ordinarily experience each night are not invulnerable to disconfirmatory evidence at all. There are a number of markers by which a dream can be distinguished from a waking experience. Maddy (2017, 22ff; and see also Leite, 2011), after cataloguing a number of scientific papers detailing dream markers, mentions her own experiences of lucid dreaming:

> Let me add that many human subjects (including me) report a phenomenon called 'lucid dreaming'. [...] In such a dream, the question arises 'am I dreaming?', and the dreamer is able to perform tests to determine the answer: for example, it's often possible to put one's hand through an apparently solid object or to jump much higher than normal, as if in low-gravity conditions; it's impossible to read or to gain stable information from looking at a clock or to

turn the lights on and off; sometimes the dreamer can even control the subsequent events in the dream.

So ordinary dreams are (thank goodness) not demon scenarios. But, as Maddy goes on to describe, there is an easy move to contemplate here: why can't we just 'beef up' dreams a little bit. Imagine a state of consciousness that is *like* a dream, but much more complete and thoroughgoing, in which clocks *are* stable moment-to-moment, in which gravity is 9.8 m/s^2, and so on. This is the move Maddy locates covertly in, for example, Stroud's reading of Descartes (in his seminal 1984)[7]. It is also the move made by the great Persian philosopher and theologian Al-Ghazali, who in his early *Deliverance From Error* (1980, paragraphs 13-14) imagines that the whole waking world might turn out to be a dream from which, upon death, we will awaken and realise to be merely chimerical.[8]

The intuitive plausibility of these extraordinary dreaming (/madness) scenarios is probably parasitic on the everyday phenomenon of ordinary dreaming, but of course there is really nothing about ordinary dreams that should lead us to conclude that extraordinary dreams happen or are even possible. Rather, ordinary dreams at best serve as a kind of intuition pump, informing our imagination of what an extraordinary dream might be like, rather than a satisfying argument for their possibility.

Supernatural Deception

The final category of demon scenario is the one that will occupy most of this dissertation. Our philosophical forebears did not have neuroscience or computer simulations. They knew of dreams and hallucinations, but they generally seem not to have made the 'extraordinary dream' move. What they

[7] As Chapter 4 will show, it is not a fair reading of Descartes' own dream scenario.

[8] We could also imagine similarly extraordinary versions of ordinary hallucinations and madness, where one hallucinates an entire stable and comprehensive (but wholly fictive) universe.

did generally have, though, was an ontology that included conscious, volitional agents with vast and often nebulously-defined powers: angels and demons; God and the devil.

A capricious god, or a malicious demon, might want to mislead us for the fun or evil of it. Even an angel or good god might want to mislead us for our own good. And, being very powerful, such a being could satisfy this desire in a variety of ways. In myth they certainly do so: Zeus deceives Ixion with a cloud fashioned into the likeness of Hera. Christ hides his divinity from even the apostles. Athena sends a divine madness on Ajax which deceives him into the murder of innocents. These deceptions are fairly localised, but it is not too much of a stretch to imagine a sufficiently powerful being - perhaps the Devil, perhaps almighty God Himself, creating a complete, all-encompassing deception.

The name 'demon scenario' descends from the most famous of all such supernatural deceivers, the *malin génie* of Descartes' First Meditation. The central project of this dissertation will be an examination of the history and significance of the Cartesian demon. I will show that it arose out of a pre-existing medieval tradition of divine deception scenarios, where just such totalizing deception perpetrated by God Himself was earnestly considered. These divine deceiver scenarios were originally formulated quite independently of skeptical or even epistemological considerations, and were only later (after Descartes himself, in fact!) appropriated by a reborn skeptical philosophy.

Supernatural deception scenarios are probably the most context-dependent of all. In these days of secularism and science, we might be tempted to question whether an omnipotent deceiver is even *possible*. In Christian Europe in 1280, the existence of God and the Devil was, with very few exceptions, unquestioned, but there was fierce debate over how the Devil could act in the world, and how much deception might be compatible with God's goodness. In Ancient Greece, the powers of the gods were much more limited, but they might well decide to trick someone just for the sport of it.

Supernatural deception scenarios formulated in different contexts are apt to vary quite dramatically not just in rhetoric, but in scope and plausibility.

III. The Demon Argument

Demon scenarios are philosophically significant because their mere possibility seems to have nontrivial epistemic consequences. There are in fact a number of epistemological arguments that use a demon hypothesis in their premises - for example, the "New Evil Demon Problem" of Cohen and Lehrer (originally 1983, but discussion continues in, for example, Madison 2021, Mikkel 2018) uses the demon to constrain possible theories of epistemic justification. The NEDP attempts to show that our intuitions about the demon scenario are incompatible with externalism about justification. For my purposes, though, the most fascinating and troubling demon argument is the one that advocates outright skepticism.

1. Structure of the Argument

The skeptical demon argument can be formulated in a few different ways. At its root, though, the argument is just a natural response to a simple paradox. The paradox is that, given a particular demon scenario, **demon**, in which some **ordinary beliefs** are false, the following set of propositions is inconsistent.[9]

1. I cannot know that ¬**demon**
2. If I know that **p**, and I believe **q** on the basis that I recognize **p** entails **q**, then I know **q**
3. I know **ordinary beliefs**

The skeptic solves the paradox by rejecting 3. Other epistemological stances reject 1. or 2. (more on this in a moment). First it is worth saying a couple of things about the appeal of each proposition - I do

[9] There is no particular reason why "knows" needs to be the target epistemic operator. So long as we pick an operator that is constrained by the evidence-invulnerability of the demon, and which is closed under recognized logical entailment, it will be possible to generate an undermining demon argument. For example, we could have a skeptical demon argument against warranted ordinary beliefs, justified ordinary beliefs, and so on.

not mean the following to be conclusive arguments, just to demonstrate that there is a genuine problem here that is worth taking seriously.

Proposition 1 is an epistemic version of the demon hypothesis. It is justified by the *a priori* possibility of the demon scenario, together with its invulnerability to any disconfirmatory evidence. In order to know that the demon scenario does not obtain, it seems like we would need some good epistemic reason, some justification or warrant, for thinking that it does not. But we can have no such reason, by the very design of the demon scenario!

Proposition 2's role in the paradox is that, since **demon** entails **¬ordinary beliefs** by definition, if you know any ordinary beliefs (that is, if proposition 3. is true) you could, by proposition 2., know that **¬demon**, contradicting proposition 1. It represents a version of a 'closure principle' for knowledge. There is an extensive literature on such closure principles, both for and against (see, for example, Neta 2014; Pritchard 2016; Brueckner 1994). The literature proposes a number of variations on the same theme,[10] but the underlying idea is that people can extend their knowledge/rationally held beliefs by competent logical deduction. Closure principles, formulated as they are in somewhat technical language, have perhaps less direct intuitive appeal than the other premises in the paradox, but they are arguably implicit in our everyday epistemic practice all the same. The thinking is this: in our daily lives, we come to believe in all sorts of entailments and connections between propositions. We believe, for

[10] For example, by permuting the epistemic operator involved and fiddling a bit with the 'recognized entailment' closing operation, we could generate closure-adjacent principles such as the below:
Closure$_{JR}$: if an agent has a justified belief that p and recognizes that p entails q, then that agent would be justified in believing q

Closure$_{RR}$: if an agent rationally believes that p and recognizes that p entails q, then that agent's belief that q would be rational

Closure$_{RKC}$: "If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p, then S is in a position to acquire rationally grounded knowledge that q." (Pritchard, 2016, Ch. 4 p. 5)

example, that if Stan is at the party, he can't have gone to India as he was planning to. If we then learn that Stan was at the party, we infer that he is not in India. This is a perfectly natural and commonplace thing to do. Moreover, it seems that, if our source for the fact that Stan was at the party was a good one, we now know that Stan is not in India.

A second source of motivation for 2. comes by way of logic. Epistemic closure is closure under (recognized) logical entailment. The dominant analysis of logical entailment (since Tarski) is that **q** follows from **p** just in case, in every structure where **p** has semantic value TRUE, so does **q**.[11] But if this is what we mean by entailment, then recognizing the entailment from **ordinary beliefs** to **¬demon** just means recognizing that, if ordinary beliefs are right, the demon hypothesis is necessarily false. It is hard to see how one could know the ordinary beliefs to be true and still fail to know that you are not in a demon scenario: what more than *logical necessity* do you want?![12]

Finally, proposition 3. is supposed to be obvious. Different demon arguments will target different values of **ordinary beliefs**. The most radical will target *literally all* beliefs, including, for example, mathematics and logic itself. Less extreme (though still quite radical) arguments aim simply to undermine our perceptual beliefs, or our beliefs about things external to our minds. The 'canonical' examples of **ordinary belief** are thus simple claims about the external world: 'I have two hands', 'the Earth has existed for a very long time', and so forth.

[11] Sher (2001, 2008) has an excellent presentation of the history and significance of this analysis.

[12] Formal models of knowledge generally end up 'baking in' closure in their basic machinery. For example, knowledge in modal epistemic logics is represented by quantification over possible worlds. This just enshrines the philosophy of logic argument for closure above: if an agent knows p, p is true in every world they think is possible. Since possible worlds are complete classical models, if **p** is true at W and **p** entails **q**, **q** is also true at W. So if an agent knows **p**, they also know **q**. Similar observations could be made for AGM belief revision (Gärdenfors, 1988).

2. Generality and the 'From-Scratch Challenge'

One notable feature of all such demon arguments is their generality. Demon arguments seek not to undermine a few beliefs, or a couple of evidential modalities. They cast broad swathes of our epistemic apparatus into doubt all at once. They thus pose what Maddy calls the 'from-scratch challenge' - "to successfully rule it out would be to justify our beliefs 'from scratch', without appeal to anything else we think we know" (Maddy, 2017, 37). The very nature of the demon scenario that undergirds the demon argument means that our ordinary epistemic methods are inapplicable. We cannot simply fire up our microscopes, do some factor analysis, and figure out that there are no evil demons. This means that the demon argument, insofar as it demands a response at all, seems to demand a *philosophical* response.

IV. Responses to the Demon

Just as there is considerable diversity in demon scenarios and arguments, there is diversity in philosophical responses. In general, the outright skeptical response of denying that we can know **ordinary beliefs** is rare, at least in contemporary analytic philosophy.[13] In order to avoid the skeptical conclusion, then, philosophers need to reject one of the other propositions. We can to a certain extent characterise epistemologies by which proposition they reject and how.

Reject Proposition 1: Dogmatism, Disjunctivism, etc.

The 'dogmatist' simply rejects the demon hypothesis - for whatever reason, the dogmatist feels that we can know that we are not in a demon scenario, and so **ordinary beliefs** may still amount to knowledge. There are a few varieties of dogmatism. Pryor (2000, 2004) offers a dogmatism inspired by G.E. Moore. On one (not especially historical) reading of Moore, he simply inverts the demon argument: since we *do* know **ordinary beliefs**, and since knowledge is closed under recognized entailment, we

[13] The Philpapers Survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2014) reported only about a 5% rate of skepticism, though idealist and 'other' views made up another 15%.

must know that **¬demon**. To this Pryor adds a story that certain basic perceptual beliefs enjoy a kind of noninferential evidentness: "I have hands" enjoys noninferential justification in view of the experience of having hands. This noninferential justification breaks the parity between the Moorean and Skeptical arguments in favour of **ordinary beliefs** and against the demon hypothesis. A number of 'externalist' and 'phenomenal conservative' epistemologies might make similar claims.[14] The key move made by these epistemologies is to locate a possible source of justification that might make it possible to know that **¬demon** while respecting the evidence-invulnerability of the demon scenario. The externalist says that there is a kind of justification which is not introspectively available, so while the demon scenario *seems* exactly the same as the real world, and indeed is invulnerable to *evidence*, it does not follow that we are unable to *know* that **¬demon**.[15]

One particularly interesting variation of this line of response to emerge in recent years is the 'disjunctivist' one. In brief, disjunctivism is the view that there is a qualitative difference between seeing a tree on the one hand, and hallucinating a tree or dreaming of a tree on the other. The epistemic form of disjunctivism (here I follow Pritchard, 2012, 13) draws from this a striking thesis: when we know on the basis of perception that there is a tree (or a fish, or Venus), the epistemic support for that knowledge - the seeing of the tree - is factive and introspectively accessible. Seeing a tree implies the existence of the tree, and, when you are in fact seeing, you can correctly identify yourself as seeing. The notion of 'correctly identify' at issue is somewhat sophisticated, since it is not meant to imply that one can introspectively distinguish demon-mediated hallucination in the bad case from seeing in the good case. Rather, the point is that if we are in the good case, then our confidence

[14] Huemer, 2007, defends a 'phenomenal conservatism' according to which 'seemings', such as the deliverences of the senses, enjoy *prima facie* justification. The *locus classicus* of 'reliabilism' and arguably of externalism in general is Goldman (1979).

[15] Of course, one might reasonably worry that this just replaces first-order skepticism with second-order skepticism: sure, on externalist dogmatism we know many things, but in general we are unable to know whether or not we know something!

that we are seeing will be both justified and correct. This is a fascinating approach - and, I will show in chapters 2 and (especially) 3, one that in fact has some significant historical precursors.

Reject Proposition 2: Contextualism

Another widely-taken option is to reject or weaken Closure so that propositions 1. and 3. generate no contradiction. I've elected to lump the various ways of doing that together under the rubric of 'contextualism.' Contextualist analysis starts from the observation that we attribute knowledge to people based on different criteria in different situations.[16] I claim to know right now that the herbal tea on my countertop is caffeine-free. If, however, you were to preface the question by saying "I have a deadly caffeine allergy. Do you *know* that's safe for me to drink?" my willingness to claim knowledge would be much diminished. The contextualist says that I am right - the standards according to which I can rightly be said to know are *different* in the two different contexts.[17]

Contextualism implies at least some instances of Closure failure. I may well know "that tea is caffeine-free" in a low-stakes context, and I might know "tea is safe for you to drink if and only if it is caffeine-free" in a high-stakes context. When I consider the implications the high-stakes context prevails, and I do not know "therefore that tea is safe for you to drink." Something similar happens in the demon argument: on the contextualist diagnosis, the skeptical challenge raises the stakes so that, even though I know (low-stakes) **ordinary beliefs**, I do not know (high-stakes) its logical consequence, **¬demon**.

[16] Eg, here is Gail Stine (1976, 254): "It is an essential characteristic of our concept of knowledge that tighter criteria are appropriate in different contexts"

[17] There is considerable complexity here - some forms of contextualism are metalinguistic, where the thing that is context-sensitive are the conditions for legitimate assertion that 'S knows p'. Other forms of contextualism (or sometimes 'relativism') are more metaphysical, and say that knowledge itself is context-dependent. See, for example, DeRose (2009, 2017); Schiffer (1996); and MacFarlane (2014) for very different 'contextualist' or 'relativist' epistemologies.

The full contextualist analysis is quite a contemporary one: the idea of closure of knowledge under implication is not even discussed in the classical or medieval contexts, let alone specific semantic proposals for weakening it. That said, there are certain building blocks of contemporary contextualism to be found in the history. The idea that there are different 'levels' of knowledge, with varying susceptibility to demon arguments, is something we will see in the Parisian masters Autrecourt and Mirecourt (Chapter 3), and in the background in Descartes (Chapter 4).

Reinterpret Proposition 3 (and maybe also 1 and 2): Hinge Epistemology

I include this last option for completeness, since it is a contemporary view with few precursors in the time period investigated by this dissertation. The hinge epistemologist is inspired by some remarks of Wittgenstein in *On Certainty.* There Wittgenstein thinks that he has located a fatal flaw in the skeptical position. This mistake is in neglecting the framework-dependence of certain very powerful propositions. One example of such a proposition is that the external world exists, another is that the Earth has existed for a very long time. These propositions play something like a constitutive role in our mental life: the very acts of perceiving, knowing, believing, and so forth in some sense depend on taking them for granted. Thus, in Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn." The point, for Wittgenstein, is that the skeptical response to the skeptical paradox - denying that we have knowledge of the external world - is in some sense incoherent or self-defeating. In order even to construct the skeptical paradox, we need to assume that the external world exists, is knowable, is old, and so on. The skeptic's mistake lies in questioning the very propositions that make epistemological questioning possible.

Contemporary hinge epistemologies such as those of Coliva (2015) and Wright (1992, 2004) offer various analyses of these 'hinge' propositions. In general, though, these analyses attribute to them some kind of special epistemic status different from ordinary, evidence-dependent knowledge. In some

sense, then, the hinge theorist can be said to *accept* Proposition 3, while remaining non-skeptical. It is a complex and fascinating response, which will, alas, play no further role in this dissertation.

V. Structure of the Dissertation

The dissertation is laid out broadly chronologically, across four main chapters. The goal is, first and foremost, to provide a full historical understanding of the development of demon scenarios. My eventual claim is that the demon *argument* is best understood as a synthesis of demon scenarios developed in the course of nonskeptical philosophising in the medieval period, with an idiosyncratic kind of skepticism which arose in the Early Modern period in response to the Cartesian method of doubt.

1. Chapter One: the Ancients

The first chapter sets up the background of skepticism as it was conceived of and practised in classical antiquity. I give a brief overview of the well-known distinction between the 'Pyrrhonian' and 'Academic' forms of skepticism before turning to particular authors. Much of the ancient period is of limited relevance to the later developments of the demon argument, because, in the medieval and early modern contexts in which those developments happened, the writings of the ancients were largely unknown. I therefore concentrate on a few key texts which did have lasting influence.

I begin with a detailed look at Academic skepticism, particularly as it was transmitted to the Christian middle ages through Cicero and Augustine. This variety of skepticism was primarily constructed in opposition to stoic epistemology. The stoics posited that certain impressions on our minds have a particular character, called 'kataleptic', that serves as a reliable mark of their veracity. Only by assenting to these kataleptic impressions (and withholding assent from others) can we get to the truth of things. The arguments of the Academics are first and foremost designed to show that there are no such kataleptic impressions (and therefore, if the stoic epistemology is right, there is no route to the truth of

things). Cicero's summary of the Academic views is probably not entirely accurate - there are views which he attributes to Carneades and Arcesilaus which are almost certainly his own. In Cicero's presentation, though, some of the Academic arguments appear at first glance to be precursors of the demon. For example, he discusses (Ac. 47) the possibility that an oracular deity might create false revelations that cannot be discriminated from real ones. As a supernatural deception invulnerable to evidence, this includes important elements of a demon scenario. In other respects, though, the false oracle is no demon, and the use to which Cicero puts it is nothing like the demon argument of contemporary skepticism. This chapter lays out the ways in which Ciceronian skepticism can and cannot be seen as demonic, before concluding with a brief analysis of the impact of the Academica on the medieval tradition.

I then examine Sextus Empiricus, whose *Pyrrhonian Outlines* and fragments of the *Adversus Mathematicos* received 14th and 15th century translations leading to a kind of Pyrhonnian revival in early modern Paris. Sextus, as a Pyrrhonist, aimed to undermine our confidence in order to cultivate a kind of suspension of judgement in which peace of mind and moral virtue can flourish. The means of this undermining is 'equipollence' - the juxtaposition of reasons and explanations both for and against any thesis. Once we can see that any conclusion has equal reasons for and against, we are relieved of the burden of judgement.

Sextus sets up a wide variety of methods of generating these equipollent reasons - the 'five modes,' the 'ten modes,' and so forth. I go through these methods in brief, showing that none of them pose demon scenarios. The 'ten modes' are ways of generating premises for equal and opposite arguments for and against any dogma. Most of the 'five modes' are slightly obscure, but on examination they turn out to be ways of undermining different forms of reasoning (presumably weakening affirmative arguments for a conclusion allows one to more easily achieve equipollence with negative arguments).[18]

[18] Barnes's (1990) is a comprehensive treatment of Sextus's arguments, and I mostly follow its account of the five modes.

I conclude by reflecting on the question of why Sextus did not offer a demon argument, emphasising that the whole tenor of his skeptical project depends on intrinsically local skeptical argument - a global skeptical strategy such as the demon would undermine the ethical basis - in a kind of 'seeking after argument' - which he presents as the true ground of Pyrrhonism.

2. Chapter Two: Divine Power

Chapter two is concerned with medieval developments prior to the 14th century. There are three such developments that I take to be of major significance to the eventual development of demon arguments. The first such is the Augustinian rejection of academic skepticism in the *Contra Academicos*, which I take to be a major reason that no significant thinker of the middle ages is willing to call themselves a skeptic. The general antipathy towards (Academic)[19] skepticism also explains a recurring pattern of argument, where a position is attacked by arguing that it has 'absurd' skeptical consequences. I label this pattern "reductio ad academicus."

The second important development is the 'Power Distinction,' a way of discriminating between two types of divine omnipotence. I trace the history of this distinction through several hundred years of history, culminating in the Parisian Condemnation of 1277, in which (among other things) it was established that a philosopher could face serious repercussions for denying that God can (according to one sense of 'can') Himself produce any effect that a created being can cause. This doctrine allowed for the possibility that God could create perfectly convincing illusions, for example by replicating the causal powers of things to create perceptual impressions in our minds. This type of scenario was developed in the 14th century to produce genuine demon scenarios of the divine deception variety (see Chapter 3). In addition to a historical look at the development of the power distinction, this chapter

[19] The word 'skeptic' virtually fell out of use in the medieval period, with authors instead using *academicus*, until the rediscovery of Pyrrhonism in the latter part of the 15th century.

traces some 12th and 13th century flirtations with applying the power distinction and divine omnipotence to epistemology, though, as I show, none of these flirtations amount to actual applications of the demon argument.

The third and final development is a theory of demonic deception - that is, deception by literal, fallen-angel demons - in Aquinas. I show that Aquinas had a theory according to which demons were actively engaged in attempts to mislead humans (in order to create circumstances which would incline us to sin), and in which there was a definite *mechanism* of deception: demons work through the supernatural manipulation of humoral vapours. By this means they can induce hallucinations, dreamlike states, and the like. But this means of deception introduces definite limits on the demonic power that preclude full-fledged 'demon scenarios' - Thomistic fallen angels could not deceive about the truths of mathematics, nor about the existence of an external reality. The eventual significance of this observation (developed in Chapter 4) is that the Thomistic deception theory was eventually incorporated into the Cartesian demon (via meditative literature): understanding the ways in which it differs from the 'divine deceiver' demon scenario is crucial to understanding some of Descartes' more perplexing statements in the First Meditation.

3. Chapter Three: Late Medieval Skepticism and the Divine Deceiver

The third chapter covers the period from the Condemnation of 1277 through to the end of the 14th century. It investigates the parallel development of demon scenarios in Oxford and Paris, following what I term two distinct 'escalations.' The first part of the chapter looks at the Oxford of William of Ockham and his students. Here I show that, beginning from a 1277-inspired theory of divine omnipotence, Ockham and his students developed a supernatural deception demon scenario in which God destroys physical objects such as trees while Himself conserving their causal powers. I argue that the Oxford school escalated the potential skeptical threat of this scenario by making it more plausible - more of a live option. In Ockham, divine deception is a mere logical possibility, with no implications

for our strength of epistemic position (though it is not epistemologically inert!) In his student Wodeham, it is still a mere possibility, but one whose epistemic implications are vital in establishing a kind of fallibilism. And in Crathorn, divine deception is apparently *actual*, though limited in scope.

The second part of the chapter looks at concurrent developments in Paris. There, I argue, a parallel escalation of deception scenarios took place. Instead of enlivening supernatural deception as an option, this escalation *raised the stakes* of deception by expanding the scope of ordinary claims that it would undermine. In Mirecourt and (especially) the marvellously rhetorical *reductio ad academicus* of Autrecourt's correspondence with Arezzo, we see the possibility that a divine deceiver demon scenario might undermine not just the external world, but truths of logic, mathematics, and even the bare introspective fact of the *cogito*.

These escalating demon scenarios were still not being offered as demon *arguments*: neither the Ockhamists nor the Parisian masters were skeptics in the traditional sense. They employed the demon epistemologically, but purely methodologically (in Crathorn's case in much the same methodological role as in Descartes), in service of non-skeptical epistemic ends. Despite this, the combined result of their escalations was a set of plausible, powerful demon scenarios in intellectual circulation that could eventually be adopted by philosophers for more directly skeptical ends.

4. Chapter Four: the Cartesian Demon

Chapter four brings together the several narrative threads raised in the preceding chapters. I begin with a bit of 15th and 16th century background: a brief look at the meditative literature tradition which informed the literary style of Descartes' own Meditations. Following Christia Mercer (2016), I look in some detail at the *Interior Castle* of (Saint) Teresa of Ávila. I show that Teresa's conception of demonic deception is informed by the Thomistic theory discussed in Chapter Two: she imagines

definite limits on the scope and means of diabolical deception, and those limits guide her 'antiskeptical' strategy (though of course the *Interior Castle* is not primarily a work of epistemology).

The main work of chapter four then consists of a look at Descartes, particularly the *Meditations on First Philosophy.* I first take stock of the role of the *Meditations* within the Cartesian program, and its debts to meditative literature in general and Teresa of Ávila in particular. I then examine the structure of the first meditation's arguments for doubt, culminating with a detailed look at the 'deceiving God' and 'evil demon' hypotheses. Drawing on existing scholarship, I maintain that the purpose of these hypotheses is not skeptical, nor even exclusively epistemological, instead being methodological tools used in Descartes' campaign against Scholastic education. I draw some parallels between this methodological doubt and earlier scholastic ones discussed in the previous chapter. I also highlight some non-obvious differences between Descartes' two hypotheses: I claim that the deceiving God is *more powerful* than the Evil Demon, for example in undermining our knowledge of mathematics and logic, and that this difference is best understood as reflecting a synthesis of the different medieval deception scenarios discussed in earlier chapters.

The final part of chapter four finally answers the question of how, since Descartes meant his demon to be nonskeptical, it eventually became a favourite tool of skeptics. I show how, in an intellectual climate in which skepticism was increasingly seen as a viable and even respectable option (thanks in part to the newfound Latin availability of Sextus Empiricus and other ancient skeptics), emerged a generation of thinkers strongly influenced by Cartesianism but sympathetic to ancient skepticism. Some of these skeptical Cartesians, most notably Pierre-Daniel Huet, inspired by Pascal's reading of Descartes, at last adopted the Cartesian demon as a genuine *demon argument,* aimed at an avowedly skeptical conclusion.

Chapter One: The Ancients

I. Introduction and Background

1. Goal and Structure of the Chapter

The goal of this chapter is to set out the background of skepticism in Greco-Roman antiquity, particularly the two works of ancient skepticism that survived to influence medieval and early modern philosophers - Cicero's *Academica* and Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. I begin with a brief overview of ancient skepticism and its relationship to other schools of ancient philosophy. I then turn to detailed examinations of the primary texts, beginning with the *Academica*. I show that neither Cicero nor Sextus employed actual demon arguments, despite having many of the building blocks, including skeptical scenarios and supernatural deception. I explain the lack of any such arguments in terms of the characteristic aims and context of each other, and conclude by reflecting on the influence of these texts on later epistemology.

2. The Stoic School and its Epistemology

As will shortly become apparent, skepticism in the Greek context had a rather different shape than contemporary or even early modern skepticism. In part this stems from differences in the goals and arguments of the philosophers themselves, but in part it is because the epistemological background against which ancient skepticism arose was very different. The surviving ancient skeptical texts were written in the context of an epistemology largely developed by the Stoic school, and their skeptical arguments are couched in Stoic terms. Stoic epistemology was quite complex, and in any case the surviving skeptical texts apparently misinterpret or misrepresent Stoic doctrines on key points. Much of the complexity of the field is washed out by the skeptics' relatively superficial understanding of Stoic epistemology, especially in Cicero, who is most directly engaging with it. As a result, it should suffice for our purposes to give here just a brief overview of the relevant theses..

The key Stoic doctrine targeted by ancient skeptics, especially those of the Academic school, was that of 'apprehension' (κατάληψις.) In broad strokes, the doctrine is that the chief epistemic good to be desired is apprehension (as opposed to, say, mere belief (δόξα)). One has an apprehension when one assents to a 'kataleptic appearance' (φαντασία καταληπτική.)[20] An appearance is, more or less, a 'seeming' - a representation of the world as being a certain way. It is important to recognize that these need not be *sensory* representation: an imagining, or an intellectual argument, can produce appearances just as the senses can. When one assents to an appearance, one agrees that the world is as the appearance represents it to be. Some appearances are outright false, or indistinct, or bad in various ways, and the Stoics thought that such appearances should not be assented to. The good appearances, though, the kataleptic ones deserving of assent, share the following features:

1. Arises from what is
2. Is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is
3. Is of such a kind as could not arise from what is not[21]

Interpreting these features has proven somewhat difficult, and there is still substantial debate about whether the resulting theory is 'externalist' in the sense that a kataleptic appearance compels assent without necessarily being introspectively accessible *qua* kataleptic. This interpretation, first advanced in Frede (1983), has been met with serious objections (for example in Annas (1990), Sedley (2002), and Perin (2005)). I tend to agree with these objections that the externalist reading is incompatible with other Stoic commitments about cases in which kataleptic appearances are mistaken for ordinary appearances and hence not assented to, and so I hew to a reading closer to that of Nawar (2014). The dispute is beside the point for the present purpose, though, because regardless of whether the Stoics

[20] The difficulty of translating the terms φαντασία and καταληπτική has led to a wide variety of translations for the same term in the literature. The most popular rendering of καταληπτική is probably 'apprehensible', while φαντασία is often translated 'impression'. Here I instead opt for 'appearance' rendering φαντασία, 'kataleptic appearance' for καταληπτική φαντασία, and 'apprehension' for κατάληψις. In doing this I follow the example of (Nawar, 2014).

[21] (1) ἀπὸ ὑπάρχοντος; (2) κατ' αὐτὸ τὸ ὑπάρχον ἐναπομεμαγμένη καὶ ἐναπεσφραγισμένη; (3) ὁποία οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο ἀπὸ μὴ ὑπάρχοντος.

themselves intended an externalist reading, it is clear that their skeptical opponents did not read them that way. The skeptical objections to Stoic epistemology (and indeed the Stoic rejoinders) only make sense if they read a kataleptic impression as one that has to be recognized and assented to by a separate cognitive act - they may in a sense be self-evident, but they are certainly reflectively accessible.

3. The Skeptic Dissent

Ancient skeptics presented their philosophy as a response to the wide variety of mutually incompatible philosophical theses defended by the various schools of ancient philosophy. These theses they called δόγμᾰτᾰ, "dogmata", and derided as, essentially, mere speculation. Since a wise person should not assent to anything without a good reason, and since belief in these various incompatible dogmata creates inner turmoil and thereby changes one's life for the worse (so the skeptic claims)[22], they should be viewed with suspicion.[23] The characteristic claim of the ancient skeptic, then, is that a wise person, who aims to lead a good life, should refrain from believing any dogmata. Occasionally (as in Arcesilaus) they went further, saying that the wise person ought not to believe anything at all. It is often a matter of debate whether a particular ancient skeptic or skeptical text falls into the 'mitigated' or 'radical' camp.

The characteristic skeptical attitude is then a suspension of belief - the usual term, especially in the Pyrrhonian tradition, is ἐποχή (epoche)- in which neither the claim nor its negation is affirmed, assented to, believed, taken to be true. It is striking, from the perspective of a contemporary epistemologist, how little the ancient skeptics are concerned with what we today would call *knowledge.*[24] Instead, they are fundamentally interested in showing that we ought not to believe things

[22] As we will see, the relative weights of these two reasons vary. The Academics (or at least Cicero) emphasise not believing without reason, the Pyrrhonians emphasise avoiding turmoil.

[23] For an overview, see Bett's introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (2010)

[24] There are always issues retrojecting a modern philosophical term like 'knowledge.' I mean only to say that the ancient skeptics are primarily concerned with showing that we should not believe things, and that their concer ns over the 'epistemic goodness' of our beliefs are secondary to that anti-doxastic thesis.

(or anything). One of the reasons for that claim is, of course, that anything we believe will be mere opinion (that is, the ancient skeptic *would* deny the possibility of knowledge), but that is a mere ground for the essential thesis, which is that you ought not believe.

A perennial problem facing skeptics is that a position that enjoins one not to believe things - especially the 'radical' version, but skepticism about dogmata faces this problem too - has a great deal of rhetorical trouble arguing for itself - how, after all, are you going to make arguments without asserting[25] some (philosophical) premises? To get around this issue, the ancient skeptics prefer *reductio* arguments above all. The basic strategy is to begin with premises drawn from the epistemology of an interlocutor's philosophical school, and show that those premises themselves produce a skeptical conclusion. Though this argument does not establish skepticism (since the skeptic disavows the premises), it shows that the interlocutor has no reason, by their own lights, for rejecting it.

For both Cicero and Sextus Empiricus, the preeminent nonskeptical epistemology was the Stoic one sketched above, and so they naturally formulated these reduction to skepticism arguments with Stoic premises. In both authors, we will see versions of an argument that runs, essentially

1. One ought to assent only to kataleptic appearances [Stoic epistemology]
2. There are no kataleptic appearances [alleged consequence of Stoic definition of katalepsis]

Thus

3. One ought to assent to no appearances

[25] Even in antiquity, it was generally recognized that an assertion carries an implication of belief - though I've not yet located anything like an explicit discussion of Moore sentences of the form "P but I do not believe P".

Other skeptical arguments exist, and we will look at some, but the main prospect for precursors to the demon argument is in this basic strategy, and in particular in the arguments offered for the second premise.

4. Textual Loss: What Survived

There was a rich, complex ecosystem of skeptical philosophies in antiquity. Even within the 'Academic' school, there were considerable differences in the views of Arcesilaus, Carneades, Philo, and, for that matter, Cicero. By the middle ages and even into the Renaissance, however, this complexity had been reduced, effectively, to two names, those of Cicero and of Sextus Empiricus. This staggering diminishment of intellectual history was undoubtedly a great loss to European philosophy, but it does rather simplify the task of this chapter, since it means that, in order to grapple with the development of skeptical demon arguments through the Latin middle ages, we need only concern ourselves with a bare pair of texts. In this section, I briefly summarise the state of textual preservation in the Latin middle ages, drawing heavily on Luciano Floridi's chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (2010, pp. 267-287), with an eye to explaining the choice of these two texts.

The great loss occurred primarily in the fourth and fifth centuries, amidst the ruin of the western empire. Cicero, well-respected by the early church, was widely copied and quoted, and thus survived somewhat intact. The main body of Greco-Roman philosophy, on the other hand, including the vast majority of the skeptical writings, was lost, so that by the time of Augustine, the skeptical schools were effectively reduced to Cicero's version of Academic skepticism alone. Thus Augustine's *Contra Academicos* is a response to Cicero. Indeed, through the whole of the Latin middle ages the general term for a skeptic was *Academicus*, with *scepticus* only entering common usage in the mid 15th century (Floridi traces this to the Traverseri edition of Diogenes Laertius). Throughout this period, then, writings touching on skepticism almost invariably refer to Cicero's version of the Academy, or, more often, to Augustine's attack on (his interpretation of) Cicero's version of the Academy.

Some references to the Pyrrhonian school were preserved in quotation or refutation into the Latin middle ages, but gradually even these slipped from view. For example, Eusebius, in the *Praeparatio Evangelica,* wrote a chapter (XVIII) against the Pyrrhonians and the doctrine that 'nothing can be apprehended,'[26] but, thanks to Eusebius coming out on the wrong side of the early Christian doctrinal controversy over Arianism, his works were much diminished in importance by the ninth century. The result, then, was that by the high middle ages "[…] Western Europe was losing touch with the sceptical (and especially the Pyrrhonian) literature for want of linguistic skills, epistemological interests, and primary sources, and because of the increasing theologization of its philosophical investigations." (Bett 2010, 274). For this reason, the key figure of ancient skepticism, and the focus of this chapter, will be Cicero.

The Renaissance brought a rediscovery of Pyrrhonism, along with other Greek philosophical writings. Sextus was widely read in Greek as early as the late 15th century, and there is a response to Sextus' skepticism specifically about the possibility of historical knowledge in Robortello's early 16th century *De Historica Facultate Disputatio.* In 1562, the Stephanus (or 'Etienne', or sometimes even "Estienne") Latin translation of the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* was published, becoming widely-read almost immediately, and provoking in France the *crise Pyrrhonien* about which we will have more to say in Chapter Four. The final part of the present chapter looks, therefore, at Sextus and the *Outlines*.

[26] Eusebius's arguments are familiar attempts to elicit a contradiction between the skeptic's claim that "all is uncertain" and the practice of asserting things. They are not especially insightful or original.

II. Cicero's *Academica*

1. Introduction

This section examines the skeptical arguments collected in the *Academica*. I begin with an overview of the history and structure of the dialogue, in which I emphasise that the majority of the work is dedicated to a purely negative skeptical argument against the dominant Stoic epistemology of the day, while the main positive Academic argument, the argument from disagreement, is relegated to a few brief paragraphs in the middle of the dialogue. I then proceed to a detailed examination of the negative case, in which I aim to show that, while Cicero does present a number of epistemic hypotheses in service to skeptical ends, none of them amount to a demon scenario. This, I argue, is because Cicero's form of skepticism, together with the argumentative strategy identified earlier, leaves no role for a demon argument to fill. I conclude with some remarks on the medieval reception of Cicero and the possibility of his influence on the demon argument.

2. Background

Despite its significant influence on the course of medieval European epistemology, Cicero's *Academica* survives only in fragmentary condition. Originally written in two editions (conventionally called the *Academica Priora* and *Academica Posteriora*) of two and four books respectively, only the second book of the *Priora* ("Lucullus") and a portion of the first book of the *Posteriora* survive intact, with some additional fragments of the *Posteriora*. The surviving works are believed to give us an accurate picture of the overall argument of the *Academica,* with the missing "Catulus" book of the *Priora* largely consisting of a conversation between Academic and Stoic 'histories of philosophy' which is recapitulated in part in the surviving fragment of the *Posteriora*.

The *Academica,* both the fictional dialogue and the historical authorship, takes place in a Roman context. Philosophy as a discipline is largely still conducted in Greek, and, as Cicero points out at the beginning of both the *Lucullus* and of the *Posteriora*, this insulates it from the Latin population.

Many Romans, Cicero tells us, are prejudiced against Greek language and thought, and therefore shun philosophy. The intelligentsia, on the other hand, read Greek, and when they want to do philosophy they write in Greek. Cicero sees his job, then, as writing vernacular[27] philosophy, in order to open it up to the Latin audience.

The *Academica* is a dialogue, but structured as a debate in the classical Roman mode, with a long speech by Lucullus putting forward the Stoic argument, in a form which Cicero credits to Antiochus, followed by a long speech by Cicero giving the Academic rejoinder. The fact that Cicero is a character in his own dialogue presents certain difficulties - it is not *necessarily* the case that the views expressed by Cicero the character are those of Cicero the author.[28] At the same time, as we will see, there are points at which it looks as though the views of Cicero the author have been allowed to infiltrate the words of the other characters, so that they say things that no Stoic would have been likely to utter.

The structure of the *Lucullus* puts the skeptic on the defensive from the outset - Lucullus has already set the stage with an uncharitable interpretation of all the skeptical views - and so Cicero has to spend much of his speech in rebuttal - clarifying and defending views that Lucullus has already (mis)characterised and attacked. This means that Cicero's *arguments* are constrained by the framing of the dialogue: most of them are aimed specifically at the Stoic, and some of them are even aimed specifically at the character of Antiochus! Indeed, at Ac.2.147, Cicero expresses regret that he had to spend so much time on illusions, paradoxes, and similar "traps the Stoics have set for themselves" rather than on disagreements among the philosophical schools. However disappointing this is for

[27] Odd as it is to apply the term "vernacular" to Latin.

[28] The *Academica,* blessedly, seems to be rather straightforward in representing the author's position through his narrative alter ego. Other dialogues, such as the *De Natura Deorum,* are much more vexed.

Cicero the character, it is fortunate from our present vantage, because among the anti-Stoic arguments are some that may well serve as the most ancient precursors of the demon argument.

In part because of this predominantly anti-Stoic purpose, it is not always clear exactly what Cicero's Academic skepticism consists in. He is certainly a follower of the New Academy in general, and Carneades in particular, but on certain issues he distances himself from (one interpretation of) Carneades. For example, in Ac.2.59, 99, and 108, Cicero pretty explicitly says that the wise person may *approve* certain appearances as plausible, but ought never to *assent* to them. On the other hand, in Ac.2.59, 67, 78, and 112, he points out that at least some of the time, Carneades appears to have said that the wise person might indeed *assent* to persuasive appearances, though this would not, of course, amount to true apprehension. A number of commentators have been puzzled by an apparent tension between Cicero's general approach to philosophy, which closely follows the mitigated skepticism of Carneades, and his more radical 'official' view in the *Academica*. There is a real puzzle here, and, unfortunately, I think a possible explanation is that Cicero the author himself believed different things from those which he puts in the mouth of Cicero the character. I am tempted by Thorsrud's (Chapter 6 in Nicgorski, 2012) explanation that the radical view of the character Cicero in the *Academica* represents the ultimate ideal of the Academic sage, but that the mitigated skepticism of other Ciceronian writings reflects the practically achievable wisdom of a real, non-sage, Academic. In any case, Cicero the character consistently professes the more radical view, and the *Academica* was read with the radical interpretation in subsequent centuries, so for interpreting it that is what I will assume.

I thus take the skeptical position that Cicero the character is out to defend to be this: someone truly wise ought not to assent to anything. It is, however, permissible for practical conduct *(not* the dogmata of the philosophers - you should not even *approve* a dogma!) to be guided by the special nonbelief doxastic attitude of approval (Ac.2.104). The approval of certain appearances is based on their being *probabiles* (Ac.2.99) - Brittain translates this with 'persuasive', rather than the more natural

but somewhat misleading 'probable'.[29] As we will see at the end of this section, this notion of approval of persuasive impressions has negative consequences for Cicero's ability to employ true demon arguments.

3. The Structure of the *Academica*

Before turning to the putative demon cases, it is worth giving a brief, schematic look at the general strategy of the *Academica.* As intimated earlier, the argumentative strategy that Cicero himself apparently considers preeminent is an argument from philosophical disagreement (Ac.2.112-146). This argument does not depend on particular epistemological theses about, for example, kataleptic appearances, though its conclusion is still ultimately the familiar skeptical one that one should not assent to any appearances. The argument is rhetorically quite dazzling, as one might expect.[30] Cicero canvasses a great number of incompatible positions that are defended by different philosophical schools, presenting forceful arguments for each. Some of these positions concern metaphysics: Thales says everything is water, Anaximenes air, Heraclitus fire, Democritus atoms and the void, Pythagoras number. Others concern ethics: is the highest good virtue? Or honour? Or pleasure? Or 'enjoyment of the primary objects nature has recommended' (whatever that means)? And so forth. The arguments are not strong enough to settle the questions - sometimes the atomist gives an argument that seems strong, on other days the Stoic is most persuasive - and it is irresponsible - even immoral - to pick a philosophical school on any grounds less firm than an absolutely compelling argument. The continuing disagreement of philosophers just shows that we should not assent to anything in philosophy quite yet!

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[29] The difficulty arises because the Latin *probabilis* is Cicero's attempt to render the Greek πῐθᾰνός. The latter is indeed much closer to 'persuasive' or 'compelling' than it is to 'probable'. It is likely that Cicero employed *probabilis* because it is etymologically connected to the verb *probare*, one of his preferred terms for 'to approve'.

[30] Indeed the whole *Academica* is a masterpiece of argumentative prose, the beauty of which comes through even in translation.

In the context of the competing schools of philosophical antiquity, this would have been a powerful argument. This was a time in which there really was nothing like a consensus on, for example, the size of the sun (a favourite example of Cicero's), or whether vision was intro- or extromissive, let alone on those deep questions of ethics and metaphysics that remain largely unresolved today.[31] Among the various philosophical schools competing for adherents, the Academics had a compelling pitch: "the very fact that all the schools need to compete for adherents is itself an argument for ours!"

It seems clear that this general strategy of positive argument was combined with a suite of negative arguments aimed at particular philosophical schools. In the case of the *Academica*, the target school is the Stoic one, and the negative arguments are thus the familiar Academic anti-Stoic ones. Following the general scheme summarised above in I.3, Cicero's strategy is to show that the Stoic doctrine of assent to kataleptic appearances itself collapses into skepticism. He says (Ac.2.68) that the skeptical conclusion that

C. The wise person withholds all assent

follows from the Stoic doctrine that

1. The wise person holds no opinions[32]

together with the skeptical thesis

2. Nothing is a kataleptic appearance.[33]

Perin (2005, 494) fills in the missing argumentation: 2. is taken together with a Stoic doctrine,

[31] Though I know of no philosopher who any longer maintains that everything is made of water!

[32] *Sapientem nihil opinari.* 'Opinions' here must translate to the 'mere beliefs' / δόξα of classical Greek philosophy.

[33] *Omnino nihil esse quod percipi possit.* Brittain translates this as "nothing is apprehensible", which is closer to the Latin but obscures the connection with katalepsis. As usual, Cicero's Latin here elides the distinction between the apprehensible thing (ie, the object of a kataleptic appearance) with the kataleptic appearance itself.

3. If one assents to anything other than a kataleptic appearance, one holds an opinion

To yield

4. If one assents to anything, one holds an opinion

Which, together with 1. does indeed imply C. Premises 1. and 3., though far from obvious to a contemporary ear, were standard Stoic doctrines. Given that this argument is a *reductio* of the Stoic position, then, they do not need to be defended. So Cicero rightly says that "the whole controversy turns on" premise 2., that there are no kataleptic appearances. Cicero defines kataleptic appearances in the usual way, as appearances that are "from what is, stamped, impressed, and moulded just as it is" in such a way that there could not be a false impression just like it[34] [Ac.2.77]. This allows him to argue for 2. by arguing that no appearance is such that there could not be a false appearance 'just like' it - that is, by arguing for what we might call (following, eg, Perin 2005) the *indiscernibility thesis*.

This is still a somewhat daunting task, given the number and variety of appearances with which we are confronted. Cicero approaches it systematically, however, beginning with appearances derived from the senses, followed by appearances derived by reason (which is just to say *a posteriori* and *a priori* appearances respectively). He never says explicitly that these are the only types of appearances that there are, but such must be the implication. In the case of the senses, his arguments are fairly standard ancient ones, of the same sort as those we see in, for example, Sextus Empiricus (though, as we will see, one of them is very interestingly phrased from the vantage point of post-Cartesian epistemology). The arguments in the case of 'rational' appearances are more idiosyncratic, but still essentially of a piece with other ancient epistemology, being variations on semantic paradoxes developed by Stoic logicians.For our purposes, it will suffice to look at the case against the senses, since it is in that context that the proto-demon appears. Here there are two main tactics (representing a subset of the 'modes' we will see deployed in Sextus Empiricus). Both primary tactics are, of course, ways of arguing for the

[34] "Just like" is Brittain's translation for a couple of different Latin phrases, all somewhat elliptical, which themselves are presumably Cicero's attempt to capture the Greek notion of being 'indistinguishable' from false appearance.

indiscernibility thesis by way of pointing to cases where a true appearance cannot be distinguished from a false one. The exact mechanism of the argument, though, is a bit puzzling - are the skeptics pointing to *actual* cases? *Epistemically possible* ones? *Counterfactually possible* ones?

The two primary tactics are supplemented by a general attempt to cast doubt on the reliability of the senses - indeed Cicero begins his speech against the senses by pointing out that his Stoic interlocutor agrees with him (*contra,* for example, certain Epicureans) that the senses are at least sometimes misled: sometimes perceptual appearances are true, sometimes false. The question he wants then to pose to the Stoic is simple: how do we tell one of the true cases from one of the false ones? (Ac.2.80). After all, even compared to some animals our senses seem rather limited: birds can see things far off, yet we cannot (81). And, more concerningly, we are subject to illusions: sometimes an oar thrust into the water looks bent at the surface; the sun looks stationary and about a foot across, though in reality it is very large and very fast.[35] These preliminary doubts being registered, Cicero turns to the two principle arguments. As Perin (2005, 495) puts the situation: "The Academics offered two principal arguments in support of the indiscernibility thesis: an argument from twins or perceptually indiscernible objects (e.g. pomegranates, snakes, eggs) and an argument from the experiences of dreamers and those who are mad." Let us consider these in turn.

4. Identical Twins

The first case, introduced in Ac.2.84, starts with a consideration of identical twins. Cicero considers two (apparently actual) twin brothers, Publius and Quintus. The basic case is simple: if we look at Publius and have an appearance of Quintus, that appearance is of course not kataleptic because it does not arise from what is. If we look at Publius and have an appearance of Publius, it is *still* not kataleptic,

[35] Charmingly, Cicero cites unnamed 'mathematicians' who have apparently 'proved' the sun to be eighteen times the size of Earth. This is, of course, wrong by around five orders of magnitude, but perhaps this error only enhances the case for skepticism! For what it is worth, he also assumes Geocentrism.

because, though the appearance arises from what is, it is not stamped in such a way that it could not have arisen from what is not: it could just as well have been occasioned by looking at Quintus!

Cicero is actually more subtle here than is sometimes recognized. He notes first that Publius and Quintus in fact may well not be precisely identical in every respect. Nevertheless, he observes, the *appearances* occasioned by Publius and by Quintus might well be the same. He does not explicitly point out, but it is clearly implicit, that the reason for this is the very weakness and fallibility of the senses raised in the preamble: because our vision is not as sharp as an eagle's (or a god's), there may be actual differences between Publius and Quintus that we simply overlook, and which, therefore, do not give rise to a corresponding difference between the appearances of Publius and of Quintus. Cicero then asks the incisive question: given that you could be thus confused about Publius, how can you claim to recognize someone else - say, Gaius Cotta? After all, maybe unbeknownst to you, Cotta has a twin, or a doppelganger, who would look to your senses (feeble as they are) exactly as Cotta does!

As with identical twins, so with other things: a sculptor can make two statues near enough alike that nobody could tell the difference. Two strands of hair can be so much alike that nobody could tell the difference. This is a wide-ranging problem. Indeed the implication is that it is meant to be a global problem of the following sort. Call indiscriminably similar objects 'twins.' Then:

> **Twins:** for any appearance A, there is, possibly, an indistinguishable appearance A' arising from a
> twin

What Perin (2005, 499ff., and see also 2007, 57ff.) points out is that **Twins** is ambiguous as stated. The 'possibly' operator can be read in two distinct ways, both of which seem compatible with the Academic mode of argument. One might read it as an epistemic possibility operator, yielding

> **Twins$_E$:** for any appearance A, there is, *for all we can know*, an indistinguishable appearance A' arising from a twin

This is probably the most natural reading, but Perin thinks it is the wrong one. Instead, he parses the possibility operator as a counterfactual.

> **Twins$_C$:** for any appearance A, an indistinguishable appearance A' *could have arisen* from a twin

Perin's reason for interpreting it this way is that he thinks the Academic argument does not work otherwise

> On the epistemic interpretation the Academic argument from twins or perceptual indiscernibles is philosophically very disappointing. For there is no reason to think, nor for the Stoics to have thought, that the epistemic possibility the argument is supposed to introduce does hold of any and every true perceptual impression. (Perin, 2005, 500)

Perin's idea is that **Twins$_E$** is just false: for many experiences, including, for example, our experience of seeing Gaius Cotta. When Cicero asks 'how do you know that, unbeknownst to you, Gaius Cotta has a twin brother, who is actually responsible for your appearance as-of-Cotta?' Perin simply responds 'well, I know Cotta's family well, including his mother, an honest and reliable woman, and she says Cotta is an only child, so in fact I know quite well that I'm not seeing a twin here.' This is just to say that **Twins$_E$** fails because the twins argument is *local*: it leaves intact wide areas of knowledge (including sensory knowledge), and that knowledge can, in many cases, be used to re-establish / bolster / vindicate the deliverances of the senses against the postulation of twins. Since **Twins$_E$** is pretty clearly false, Perin thinks the principle of charity obliges us to consider alternative readings unless the text forces **Twins$_E$**. Since, he says, the surviving texts do not so force us, we should look for an alternative (he then goes on to defend **Twins$_C$**).

It seems to me that Perin has been misled by an omission in his translation of the key passage of the *Academica*. He renders the beginning of 2.Ac.85 as:

> Since, therefore, it is possible for P. Gemius Quintus to appear [viz. when you are in fact looking at Publius Servilius Geminus], why is it not possible for someone who is not Cotta to appear to be Cotta – since something appears to be what it is not (*quoniam aliquid videtur esse quod non est*). (Perin, 2005, 501)

But the Latin here is (in the Plasberg text)

> *Quando igitur potest tibi P. Geminus Quintus videri, quid habes explorati cur non possit tibi Cotta videri qui non sit.*

The first clause is only slightly ambiguous. Plasberg translates it as

> Therefore seeing that it is possible for Publius Geminus to appear to you to be Quintus...

While the Brittain transposes subject and predicate nominative (which is a possible reading) as

> Since Quintus Geminus can seem to you to be Publius...

The difference between these (equally viable) readings does not matter, philosophically. Perin's translation does not quite match the Latin here, but again it is a difference that makes no difference to the philosophical point. The second clause, though, is another matter. Perin's translation simply skips over the (admittedly grammatically peculiar) phrase *quid habes explorati*. That locution, though, can only be a request for evidence: its sense is something like 'what do you have by way of proof?'[36] Plasberg translates this passage as

> What reason have you for being satisfied that a person who is not Cotta cannot appear to you to be Cotta?

[36] Literally, it says "what certainty [what of a certain/established thing] do you have wherefore he who is not Cotta cannot appear to you (as) Cotta."

While Brittain opts for the more idiomatic

> What guarantee do you have to rule out the possibility that someone who isn't Cotta seems to you to be Cotta?

This is crucial, because it means that Cicero here is apparently asserting not just that the twin Cotta scenario is counterfactually possible, but that it is epistemically possible![37]

What then do we make of Cicero's argument? Is his argument transparently weak, vulnerable to Perin's reply? I don't think so, even though he seems to be using the epistemic possibility interpretation. The reasons why he is not so vulnerable are two. First, because, while $\textbf{Twins}_{\textbf{E}}$ itself might be a merely local consideration (but see below), Academic skepticism itself is global. The attempt to justify a sensory appearance by appealing to a testimonial belief that (eg) Cotta has no brother will be met by a different skeptical mode (or even a different instance of the same mode! After all, how can you be sure you really talked to Cotta's mother? Couldn't it have been *her* twin?). And second, because Cicero's argument isn't quite as narrow as Perin takes it to be. The point isn't just that Cotta might have a literal twin - it's that there might be some non-Cotta thing that is 'close enough' to Cotta to produce an indiscriminable appearance via our feeble senses. The appeal to literal twins is meant just to motivate this broader claim. *This* challenge is resistant to Perin's reply: while perhaps you have some evidence that Cotta doesn't have a brother (but see above), it's hard to imagine what kind of evidence you might have that there is nothing that looks close enough to Cotta to produce an indiscriminable appearance. People do often look much alike, after all.

[37] Plausibly. I'm not absolutely certain of my interpretation here. Cicero's wording is a bit strange on *either* interpretation, and so perhaps my argument that it is *more* strange on Perin's is weak. If Perin is right, and epistemic possibility plays no role in the *Academica*, then Cicero's arguments bear another disanalogy to the classical demon argument.

5. Dreams and Madness

Twin arguments are only half of Cicero's case against the senses. The other half comes from consideration of dreams, madness, and other such altered states of consciousness. The dreams and madness arguments must, in order to do their job, aim at establishing an indiscernibility claim. Presumably this claim must be structurally similar to **Twins**, something like

> **Dreams**: for any appearance A, there is, possibly, an indistinguishable appearance A' arising from a dream or other altered state.[38]

As Perin observes (509), in order to establish something like **Dreams,** the Academic needs it to be the case both that (1) dreams and madness can produce indiscernible appearances, and (2) that *any* appearance could in principle be the result of an altered state. And indeed the discussion in Ac.2.88ff. centres around establishing (1). Cicero is primarily concerned with the following objection: dreams, episodes of madness, and the like, are qualitatively different from waking experiences, such that everyone makes the distinction between them and can clearly identify which of their experiences are dreams and which not. His response is interesting. First, he points out that our ability to distinguish dreams from waking mostly occurs after the fact. Indeed, Cicero says, while we dream (or hallucinate) something, we are quite unable to distinguish it from reality. He goes on to give a profusion of literary examples, some quite compelling, of people vexed by madness. He talks of Euripedes' Herakles, who, under the spell of the goddess Madness, mistakes his own family for that of his enemy and kills them all, and of Ajax, who fancies he can see Odysseus before him (though Odysseus is not, of course, there). Cicero's point is not, I believe, that these plays and poems are recording real events, but rather

[38] **Dreams** also has Perin's ambiguity between epistemic and counterfactual readings of the 'possibly' operator.

that the literary achievement of their authors illuminates something about madness: that its delusions *seem real in the moment*.[39]

> As if anyone denies that when a dreamer wakes up he thinks they were dreams, or that someone in remission from a fit of madness thinks that the impressions had in his fit weren't true! But that's not the point: the question is what kind of impression they had at the time. (Ac.2.88)

But this is enough for the skeptic to make his argument.

> ...You quite miss the point when you refute the false impressions of the insane or dreamers by their own subsequent recollection. The question isn't what recollection dreamers or the insane have when they are awake or their fits subside, but what kind of impression they had at the time. (Ac.2.90)

It should be noted that the ability of a dream to produce an indiscernible alternative to any appearance should not be taken to imply that dreams are themselves indiscernible from reality. It might well be that a dream contains an appearance of a cat that is indistinguishable from a real cat, but that there are *other* appearances in the dream that, if we paid attention to them, would give the game away.

5.1.Divine Deception?

The attentive will have noticed an interesting feature of the 'madness' examples in Ac.2.89: they are conceptualised as acts of divine intervention. It is reasonable to ask at this point whether Cicero is giving a demon argument belonging to either the *Supernatural Deception* or *Extraordinary Dreaming* taxa. I think the answer to this is 'no', but it requires some exegetical work to see why the answer is 'no', and so it should not surprise us if, for example, medieval theologians and philosophers, writing

[39] Cicero does not appear to admit the possibility of people who recognize their own madness and learn to discriminate hallucinations from veridical experiences, but of course such people actually exist - John Forbes Nash being perhaps the most famous example.

from a different vantage and with the benefit of different exegesis, sometimes took Cicero to have a demon argument.

Let me begin with the question of supernatural deception. Here we need to keep in mind that in the ancient context the line between natural and supernatural is somewhat vague. It was far from unusual in the ancient world to think that the gods could influence people's dreams and emotions (Greek literature is full of exactly this), though the extent to which Roman elites would have classified this as mere superstition is somewhat open to debate.[40] In any case, these 'mundane miracles,' whether believed literally or dismissed as superstition, were hardly conceptualised as violations of the natural order. Notice that, while the madness of Herakles is divinely inflicted, it yields to treatment with ordinary (for the ancient world) medicine: hellebore. The treatability of divine madness by mundane medicine highlights another salient feature of ancient religion: the gods, in general, were not conceptualised as being omnipotent.[41] The limited power of the gods of antiquity limits the route to demon arguments: for example, it simply does not follow from the fact that Athena could drive Ajax mad that she could drive anyone to a special kind of all-encompassing madness that lasts forever and is undetectable and untreatable.[42] Thus the mere fact that Cicero's examples of dreams and madness are

[40] Cicero himself is one of our best sources, with an extended treatment of dreams in his *De Divinatione*. He makes it clear that Roman *philosophers* often rejected 'superstitious' accounts of divine inspiration of dreams (or madness, or oracles) that were otherwise widely accepted. For example, he says that "according to the Stoic doctrine, the gods are not directly responsible for every fissure in the liver or for every song of a bird; since, manifestly, that would not be seemly or proper in a god and furthermore is impossible. But, in the beginning, the universe was so created that certain results would be preceded by certain signs, which are given sometimes by entrails and by birds, sometimes by lightnings, by portents, and by stars, sometimes by dreams, and sometimes by utterances of persons in a frenzy. And these signs do not often deceive the persons who observe them properly. "(DDiv.118)

[41] The philosophers, including the Stoics, sometimes postulated timeless, all-powerful deities of the sort that eventually became popular in monotheistic religion, but these philosophical gods are not the sort that go around intervening in creation and afflicting people with madness. When we talk about divinely-inspired madness, our reference point should be the fallible and finite gods of Graeco-Roman mythology, of Homer and Vergil, which the philosophers would by and large have dismissed as superstition (Cicero discusses some of these same issues himself in *De Natura Deorum*)

[42] Indeed, the literary cases of divine madness are generally tailored to the victim. Herakles, ever apt to violence, sees his family as his enemies, and so does violence to them. Ajax contemplates violence against the innocent, and Athena inspires a madness that makes him commit violence against *a different innocent*. Ixion lusts for Hera, and Zeus deceives him into

said to be inflicted by angry gods should not be taken to show that they are epistemological *special* cases - in fact, as we will see shortly, his rhetoric more or less requires that they be ordinary ones.

What of extraordinary dreaming? I think similar considerations apply. Cicero and Lucullus segue without comment from their divinely-inflicted, literary examples to ordinary cases and back again, giving no hint that any change in topic is occurring. A sample transition at Ac.2.89:

> What should I say about the insane? Well, what about that neighbour of yours, Catulus, called Tuditanus? Does anyone who is entirely in his right mind think that what he can see is as certain as Tuditanus thought his impressions were? What about the Ajax who cried: "I can see you, I can see you! Live, Ulysses, while you may!"

I take it that Tuditanus, the mad neighbour of one of the dialogue's participants/onlookers, is as ordinary a case of madness as there can be. Ajax, on the other hand, was cursed by the goddess Athena. But Cicero shows every indication that he thinks of the two madnesses as being, at least for the purposes of skeptical argument, equivalent.

What these questions of supernaturalness or extraordinariness are really meant to capture is whether the doubt engendered is meant to be *impervious to evidence* in the way of a demon. In this context it is once again helpful to think of evidence-imperviousness in terms of being a 'global' dream/madness.[43] If a dream or hallucination is a global one - in other words if the postulated scenario is one in which our whole lives are a dream or a mad delusion - then of course it will be extremely difficult to find evidence that tells against it. I think Cicero must have only local dreams/madness in mind. In part, I think this because he is happy to concede to Lucullus that, at least once we wake up or recover, we can

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seeing an illusion *of Hera*. This sense of poetic justice - of divine punishment for *hamartia* - further restricts the scope for demon-style divine deception scenarios in the Greek context.

[43] In the language of Chapter Zero, this is to ask whether it is a 'general' scenario that poses the 'from-scratch challenge'

generally distinguish our dream from waking reality. Presumably we do this on the basis of some mark of distinction that is reflectively accessible to our waking mind, and so it cannot be that dreams are *identical* to waking experience in all their appearances. Rather, Cicero means to emphasise that, while dreaming or mad, we are just as strongly committed to particular delusive appearances as we are to particular waking ones (even if there are other delusive appearances by which, if we were paying attention, we could tell that we were in thrall to a delusion). That is, as suggested earlier dreams and madness appearances are indiscernible only when considered in isolation, and only so precisely *because* they occur in dreams and in madness, wherein our faculties are circumscribed.[44] That is, in dreams and in madness, we are unable to pay attention to those appearances (other than the indiscernible one) whose presence would allow us to recognize that we were in a dream. In part, though, I think the locality of Cicero's dreams and madness is just required by the structure of his argument. Recall that the point of the dreams and madness argument is to buttress the indiscernibility thesis. This thesis, though, is local. The skeptical argument from indiscernibility targets particular appearances. Dreams and madnesses are thus devices for generating an indiscernible appearance for any particular appearance you might name, but the argument does not at all require that every appearance you could name has an indiscernible counterpart all generated by the same dream or delusion![45] If this were the idea, then the dreams/madness argument would be qualitatively different from the twins argument, or indeed from the various modes collected in, say, Sextus. But Cicero never even hints that it is meant to be.

One other point must be raised here, which is that, as we saw earlier, in section 5.3, Cicero's official position is that the positive case for skepticism is *only* the argument from philosophical disagreement, and that the arguments relating to the indiscernibility thesis are solely defensive moves designed to

[44] Cicero does not, but Sextus does, make the point that there is no principled reason to prefer the dream appearance to the waking one, even if you could tell them apart.

[45] That is, while I disagree with Perin about the type of possibility involved in the indiscernibility thesis, I agree with him that it is not meant to be established by appeal to what he calls "skeptical scenarios".

undermine the Stoic in particular. This should be further evidence that those arguments are not intended as full-fledged demon arguments, because a full-fledged demon does not depend on features of Stoic epistemology, and could just as well be offered as a general, positive skeptical argument.[46]

So, I think the dreams and madness argument was not meant to be a demon argument in my sense. That said, it does have certain superficial similarities to one, and, in the context of a developed theory of omnipotence, it might inspire a genuine demon. This connection will finally be developed in connection with Descartes in Chapter Four.

6. The False Oracle

One final argument remains to consider, arguably the most perplexing in the *Academica*. As I have mentioned, before Cicero (the character) gives his own skeptical case proper, his interlocutor Lucullus opens the debate with a speech against the Academics. In that speech, Lucullus raises and preemptively attacks all of the skeptical arguments that Cicero will later defend in detail. The odd thing is that Lucullus also raises one additional argument that Cicero *does not* return to and defend. This is the 'false oracle' of Ac.2.47, immediately before Lucullus introduces the dreams and madness argument at 2.48.

> After all, they say, you claim that some impressions are sent by god, for instance in dreams and revelations from oracles, auspices, or entrails. (They report that these are accepted by their Stoic opponents.) Well, they ask, how is it that god can make persuasive impressions that are false, but can't make persuasive impressions that approximate the truth very closely? Or, if he

[46] This point was suggested to me by a passage in Allen's chapter of (Inwood and Mansfield, 1995, 249), which also serves as a reply to the Perin objection: "If it strains credulity that the slight possibility of error-a possibility that can be significantly reduced by the prudent use of contextual information, e.g., that P. Servilius has a twin while Cotta does not - should render everything nonevident, this is as it should be; the responsibility lies with the epistemological requirements imposed by the Stoics. It is a consequence only for those who stake everything on the existence of the cognitive impression as they do."

> can also do that, why not persuasive impressions that can only just be discriminated <from true impressions>, only with considerable difficulty? And if that, why <not false but persuasive impressions> that don't differ at all <from true impressions>?

This is a peculiar argument. It's peculiar in content and structure, and peculiar that Cicero has Lucullus bring it up only for it never to appear again. The argument begins with the premise, attributed to the Stoic opponent, that god (presumably here the Stoic creator, rather than, say, Jove or Mars) can send revelatory appearances by means of dream-visions, oracular signs, and the like. From this Lucullus slides easily to the possibility of god sending *false* but persuasive appearances. Then, by a kind of slippery slope reasoning, he gets to 'god can create false appearances indistinguishable from true ones. This last, of course, is an instance of the skeptic's indiscernibility thesis.

There is a *prima facie* trouble with the argument as presented with which I will first dispose before turning to the crucial interpretive question. The trouble is with the jump from 'god can send appearances in dreams and oracles' to 'god can send *false* appearances'. Cicero himself certainly held (as is made very clear in the *De Divinatione*) that oracles and the like could be false. There is no particular reason why the Stoic ought to accept this move, though, and, given their theology of a beneficent god,[47] some reason to think they might reject it. So it seems odd that the move is passed over without comment from Lucullus, who (one would expect) would surely point out the error. The explanation for this apparent oddity is, I believe, that the Stoics in fact granted that god sometimes sends false appearances in dreams and visions (and thus presumably the first premise that Lucullus attributes to the skeptic is supposed to read 'you claim that some *false* impressions are sent by god…'). This is made clear in Plutarch's *Skeptical Contradictions:*

[47] See Algra, 2003, for an overview of Stoic theology. One must be somewhat careful here, because the Stoic conception of god is more deistic than theistic, and indeed sometimes is used just as a synonym for the order of nature.

> Chrysippus says [...] that both god and the sage induce false mental images, wanting of us not assent or yielding but only action and impulsion towards the presentation, but that we because we are base are led by our weakness to assent to such mental images. (Plutarch, 1057)[48]

Plutarch is somewhat polemical in the surrounding passage, but we can glean that the Stoics were prepared to admit that sometimes god sends revelatory visions that are not (literally, at least) true, not in order to deceive us but in order to prompt us to action. If we were suitably attentive, we could recognize the fallacy of these visions, but, alas, we're often not. With that in mind, the argument begins to make more sense. The argument that Lucullus is invoking is one that proceeds by a kind of slippery slope reasoning (Lucullus ridicules it and says that it is analogous to the *sorites* paradox) where, since god can apparently create visions that fool some people, why couldn't he create visions that are harder to detect? Or how about ones that are impossible to detect - ie, ones which are indiscernible from the true? Here Lucullus leaves the false oracle and moves to a discussion of the dreams and madness argument, leaving the reader to fill in the conclusion of the argument: since god could create false visions indiscernible from the true, clearly there is no mark by which we can reliably distinguish false appearance from true. The false oracle thus buttresses the indiscernibility thesis.

6.1. Is the False Oracle a Demon?

We saw above that the dreams and madness arguments of Cicero the character's speech do not amount to full-blown demon arguments. But what of this 'false oracle' argument, briefly and sketchily formulated as it is? The literature tends to lump the false oracle in with the dreams and madness argument, when it is mentioned at all. Striker (in Inwood and Mansfield 1995, 270) mentions the argument, calling it "the notorious sorites-argument about the deceiver god," but does not discuss its particular features. Perin (2009) likewise lumps the false oracle with the other Ciceronian arguments.

[48] Plutarch goes on to point out, quite reasonably, that, given the Stoic god presumably knows that we humans are base and that our weakness will cause us to misinterpret these visions, sending visions he knows will be misinterpreted doesn't seem very benevolent of him.

Prima facie this is surprising, since the false oracle seems to be presented as a different argument from the dreams and madness argument. Lucullus introduces the dreams and madness argument in Ac.2.48, where he begins by saying it comes from the fact that "the mind can be moved by itself". The false oracle, meanwhile, is introduced (as we have seen) immediately prior, at Ac.2.47, where he begins by saying it comes from the fact that "the mind can be moved vacuously by what is not the case". This first impression is misleading, however. Lucullus's rejoinder at Ac.2.49-51 lumps both the false oracle and dreams and madness together as 'arguments from vacuous impressions', whether caused by nothing, the imagination, or madness. Presumably this is then the explanation for Cicero's apparent failure to return to the false oracle in his rebuttal speech: he thinks it is just the same, at least in species of premise and in argumentative aims, if not in precise form, as the dreams and madness argument, and so in vindicating the latter he makes the former moot.

Since I believe the false oracle argument is meant to run in parallel to the dreams and madness argument, it should come as no surprise that I think it also does not amount to a demon argument, and for broadly parallel reasons. The false oracle, like the dreams and madness argument, depends on particularities of the Stoic school (the theory of kataleptic appearances which is targeted by the indiscernibility thesis, and also the belief in a god that can send false prophecies). This means that it belongs to the skeptic's anti-Stoic defence, and not to the positive case for skepticism which depends on the disagreement of philosophical schools. This is all much as it was for the dreams and madness argument.

With respect to generality and to imperviousness to evidence the situation is somewhat different. The design of the false oracle genuinely does seem to involve a certain kind of imperviousness to evidence: by the end of the *sorites*, god is apparently shown to be able to create false appearances that differ in no discernable way from true ones. This is unlike a dream, where there are differences that a mind could identify, were it not for the fact that the mind is inattentive while asleep. If true, the evidence-

imperviousness of the false oracle is a notable step on the route to a demon argument. I do want to hedge this claim a bit, though, by pointing out the peculiar character of false oracles identified by Plutarch: the god does not intend them to be believed (or to 'receive assent'). Our assent to these false oracles is somehow brought about by our base human weakness, though Plutarch does not identify exactly how this happens. We should be leery of taking Plutarch at face value - he is certainly not an impartial historian of Stoicism - but if anything like this observation is right, then there must be some means by which an enlightened Stoic sage, though not a weak and base human, could identify a false oracle and thereby avoid assenting to it. Indeed, a plausible reading here is that we should *never* assent to oracles - that oracles by their very nature are hortatory rather than descriptive, and do not ever aim at conveying true appearances. If that is right, then, provided we could identify when we are having oracular experiences, we could distinguish them from veridical experiences even if they were qualitatively identical.

This leads into the other defining feature of demon scenarios, *generality*. Here I think the false oracle is at its least demonic. It is quite clear that the god sends the offending appearances via the accepted divinatory practices of the ancient world: "dreams and revelations from oracles, auspices, or entrails". There's no reason to think Cicero intends the possibility of misleading revelations to imply anything about the possibility of god creating false appearances in non-revelatory circumstances. Nor does he seem to be suggesting that a false oracle could be indistinguishable from, say, an ordinary sensory appearance of a tree. The false oracle is just indistinguishable from a *true* oracle! Again, the argument is not meant *by itself* to show that every sensory appearance has an indiscriminable counterpart, but just that, at least with respect to certain of our sensory appearances, indiscriminable counterparts are possible. If the Stoic can be brought to concede as much, then the general arguments about the unreliability of the senses, and the other local arguments from twins and madness, have a wedge to work with.

7. Explaining the Demon's Absence

I want now to reflect briefly on why Cicero did not elect for a demon argument. Essentially, there are two roles that an argument could play for Cicero, and, I will suggest, a demon would not fit well for either of them.

The first possibility is a demon argument used in the same way as the false oracle, as a *negative skeptical argument* meant to reduce the epistemology of Cicero's Stoic interlocutors to skepticism. This would require attributing to the Stoic god the ability to create perfectly convincing false appearances, not just in oracular contexts, but covering all possible sources of evidence. The problem is that it is far from clear that the Stoic would accept any such premise. Lucullus already denies that the Stoic god can 'do anything' or would act in a deceptive manner if he could (Ac.2.49)! And, as we saw earlier, the kind of divine deception routinely contemplated in Graeco-Roman literature seems to be much more limited than this demon argument would contemplate[49], so Cicero would not be able to appeal to the literary examples he so loves. In all, then, this style of demon argument does not look attractive.

The second possibility is the demon as a *general skeptical argument*, to supplement the affirmative case for Academic skepticism from the disagreement of the philosophical schools. Here we would be using something much closer to the contemporary demon, where the possibility premise "a demon scenario is epistemically possible" is not taken to be a component of a particular (ie, Stoic) epistemological theory to be refuted, but rather as a premise that an arbitrary interlocutor ought to accept. The issue is, of course, that this would make the possibility of the demon scenario into a philosophical *dogma* of

[49] Naturally, when the theological background changes in the Christian middle ages, there will much more room for powerful divine deception scenarios - these will in fact occupy much of the dissertation!

exactly the sort that the Academic skeptic disavows.[50] Moreover, in the context of Greco-Roman antiquity, the possibility of a demon scenario would not have followed naturally from any generally held 'common-sense' beliefs,[51] and so Cicero would have had to explicitly argue for it, making the dogmatism all too obvious. So the general skeptical demon is a nonstarter for the Academic: the Academic can neither assert nor defend the key premise.

The demon is also too powerful for Cicero's purposes. Cicero is a skeptic, certainly, and, per the earlier observations in II.2, in the *Academica* at least he is a radical one, but even in the *Academica* he shares at least this much with the mitigated skepticism of Carneades: while nothing is properly speaking knowable or apprehensible, nevertheless some things are more epistemically persuasive (*probabilis*) than others, and this persuasiveness earns the wise person's *approval* (though not their *assent*). The demon argument, though it is habitually formulated in terms of knowledge, is actually sufficient to undermine any epistemic good closed under logical implication, including *probabilitas*. If an ordinary appearance - say, 'that's a tree!' - is persuasive and deserves approval, then, supposing persuasiveness and approval to be closed under entailment[52], 'I am not in a demon scenario' must also be persuasive and deserve approval. But the evidence-imperviousness of the demon means that 'I am not in a demon scenario' can never be epistemically persuasive (since no piece of evidence raises its probability as against that of the demon scenario itself). Now, there are sophisticated ways in which one might develop a notion of 'persuasive' which is compatible with the demon, but there's no reason to think Cicero ever pursued something like this, and indeed it would again seem to involve the kind of dogmatic philosophical theorising he opposes.

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[50] Or, more likely, the possibility of the demon scenario would itself rest on some substantive philosophical *dogmata* concerning, for example, the power of god, or the nature of epistemic justification.

[51] This is important because the situation is very different in the Christian middle ages, where, as we will see, plausibly orthodox propositions about the nature of God's omnipotence could be used to justify a demon scenario.

[52] This seems to me to be a very plausible assumption. Certainly 'persuasive' in the sense of enjoying *high subjective probability* is closed under implication, since the probability of any proposition P must be at least as great as that of any proposition that entails P.

8. Medieval Reception

Finally, I want to conclude my discussion of Cicero with a couple of observations about the Ciceronian legacy into the middle ages. Because Augustine's refutation of Cicero, the *Contra Academicos*, was so influential, medieval writers generally do not discuss Cicero's skeptical writings in much detail, and never approvingly. That said, it is clear that many medieval philosophers had at least a secondhand acquaintance with Cicero. In his monumental *Cicero Scepticus* (1972 and still the standard text on the reception of Cicero), Schmitt says that while "direct knowledge of the Academica was relatively rare before the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" (24), interested scholars had indirect knowledge through Lactantius and Augustine. The enduring significance of Augustine's *Contra Academicos* earns it a detailed study at the beginning of the next chapter. Lactantius[53] (fl. ca. 300CE) was less influential, but merits a brief description. Lactantius was an early Christian apologist concerned, especially in the third book of his *Institutiones Divinae,* to argue against the 'pagan philosophers' (as patristic Christian writers often were). His argument, essentially, is that philosophy has no knowledge or truth in it, but only opinion, and is therefore inferior to the revealed truth of Christianity. In order to establish the epistemic impotence of philosophy, Lactantius relies heavily on Cicero's reportage in the *Academica,* which he takes to be a summary of the position of Arcesilaus and the Academy: "Arcesilaus, who teaches that there is no knowledge, when he was detracting from Zeno, the chief of the Stoics, that he might altogether overthrow philosophy on the authority of Socrates, undertook this opinion to affirm that nothing could be known. And thus he disproved the judgement of the philosophers" (III.6). Lactantius does not reproduce Cicero's actual arguments, so he was not an important source for medievals wishing to actually grapple with skepticism. That said, he did represent a significant point of contact with the ancient skeptics. His appropriation of skepticism in the service of a Christian anti-philosophical program was in fact fairly typical, and in Chapter Four we

[53] It is perhaps worth noting that Augustine and Lactantius were both, along with Arnobius, another preserver of ancient skepticism, north Africans of Berber descent - as is frequently the case, what is often thought of as 'European' intellectual history owes a foundational debt to non-European scholars.

will see one of the most significant figures in the demon's development, Pierre-Daniel Huet, using a similar stratagem. Thus the situation at the beginning of the middle ages is this: Ciceronian Academic skepticism is regarded as either a pernicious and false philosophy (following Augustine), or as a useful anti-intellectual tool (following Lactantius). That state of affairs persists through nine centuries of Latin Christendom, so that none of the major figures involved in the medieval problem of skepticism (to be discussed in the coming chapters) - Aquinas, Scotus, Ockham - appear to have had direct acquaintance with the *Academica.* It is only (as Schmitt documents) with Henry of Ghent that we find evidence of direct acquaintance with Cicero's text.[54]

So the influence of the *Academica* was indirect and often garbled. Cicero's actual position was largely forgotten or outright distorted to suit the prevailing antiskeptical scholasticism. What remained was just the spectre of the ancient Academics, who were said to have doubted everything with sophistical arguments about disagreement and twins. Not good company in which to find yourself. It is this residuum of the *Academica* that will form the backdrop for the medieval 'divine deception' arguments of Chapters Two and Three.

III. Sextus Empiricus

1. Background

Other than Cicero, the main surviving source on ancient skepticism into the middle ages and Renaissance was Sextus Empiricus, whose rediscovery at the beginning of the Renaissance is said to have precipitated a Pyrrhonian revival, or even Pyrrhonian 'crisis'. In their classic *Modes of Scepticism*, Annas and Barnes go so far as to trace the beginning of the dominance of epistemology in philosophy

[54] Henry uses Augustine's reports of skepticism more than he does Cicero directly, but he references some passages of the *Academica* that do not appear in the *Contra Academicos* and so must have had at least some access to the former. Even in Henry, though, there are clear interpretive problems - Henry appears to think Cicero was an *opponent* of the Academic philosophy! - that may result from a corrupt or fragmentary text. Scotus, who responded to Henry's treatment of skepticism at length, shows no comparable awareness of Cicero.

to the 1562 ('Etienne') translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1985, 5)[55]. Though epistemological and even skeptical concerns long predated the Pyrrhonian revival (as will become evident in the next chapter), there is nevertheless some truth to Annas' and Barnes' thesis: as we will see, it did become fashionable in the Early Modern period for philosophers to take a stance for or against 'Pyrrhonism', as opposed to the dominance of the language of 'Academic' skepticism in the Medieval period, and the Cartesian form of skepticism that informs contemporary epistemology was explicitly framed against this background. For the purposes of this dissertation, then, it is vital to understand what Sextus accomplished, especially in the *Outlines*.

Voluminous scholarly ink has been spilled to distinguish the 'Pyrrhonian' form of skepticism, which Sextus espoused, from the 'Academic' form of Arcesilaus, Cicero, et al. In the main, the difference between the schools is that the Pyrrhonists had a distinctively nonepistemic aim: for the Pyrrhonist, but not for the Academic, skepticism ought to be pursued because it will lead to happiness and tranquillity in life. The arguments, or modes, of skepticism are thus exercises in tranquillity - ways of suppressing our unfortunate tendency to believe things, and of cultivating the proper skeptical attitude of *ataraxia*.

Sextus himself does not even count the Academics among his skeptics. Instead, he divides philosophy in three: there are the 'dogmatists' (such as the Stoics, Epicureans, and Peripatetics), who claim to know the truth of things; the 'Academics' (such as Cicero) who deny the possibility of such knowledge; and the 'skeptics,' who are still seeking (I.4). In this way, Sextus delimits adherence to the skeptical school not by acceptance of a particular doctrine, but rather by a kind of methodological

[55] This was not the first Latin edition of the *Outlines* - there was a 14th century edition of the *Outlines* and a fragment of the *Adversus Mathematicos*, possibly translated by Niccolò da Reggio, but the early editions do not appear to have had any significant philosophical impact.

marker: the skeptic is one who is perpetually seeking the truth (and deriving tranquillity from the search, rather than from the answers, which of course remain elusive).

A consequence of his method is that Sextus' skepticism is necessarily *local*. Sextus gets local skeptical consequences because he employs a local method: the method of, essentially, nitpicking particular dogmatic theses. He uses this method because he wants to avoid the 'negative dogmatism' of asserting outright that nothing is knowable. This is vital, because the *benefit* of Pyrrhonian skepticism is supposed to be realised only through an unceasing 'search'. The modes of skepticism, then, should be thought of as schemata - as genuine *modes* of argument, rather than as general skeptical arguments in themselves. They are devices for taking a particular domain of inquiry and coming to realise that it remains unresolved, and thereby that further inquiry is always warranted. They are not, and cannot be, devices for *ending* inquiry.

The other salient feature of Sextus' Pyrrhonism is his 'adherence to the appearances.' Sextus, even very early in the *Outlines*, juxtaposes 'appearances' with 'judgments'[56]. The Skeptic, he says, is prepared to give assent to appearances, or at least to those appearances which are the necessary results of sense-perception (I.13): the skeptic is happy to say "I feel cold". But at the level of judgement - of any 'object of the search for knowledge' - the Skeptic declines to assent. So:

> "For example, honey appears to us to be sweet (and this we grant, for we perceive sweetness through the senses), but whether it is also sweet in its essence is for us a matter of doubt, since this is not an appearance but a judgement regarding the appearance. (I.20)

[56] The Greek words are φαινομένων and νοουμένων, 'phenomenon' and 'noumenon', the latter in the sense of 'nous' - being products of the intelligent mind.

As he puts it, then, "the point in dispute" among philosophers is not whether things appear to be in such and such a way, but rather "is whether the object is in reality such as it appears to be" (I.22). About this question, the Skeptic steadfastly refuses to answer.

The reason for this stubborn refusal to assent to judgments about anything going beyond the mere deliverances of the senses is, according to Sextus, value-laden and almost ethical: dogmatists, alas, are greatly vexed by their beliefs. The dogmatist believes, for instance, that pain is evil and pleasure good. Unfortunately, she sometimes experiences pain. This to her inflicts a double injury: one injury because the pain is unpleasant, but also a second injury as she resents the injustice of suffering an evil rather than receiving a good. The skeptic, on the other hand, suffers but once: having no view on whether pain is *truly* an evil, she does not feel the sting of injustice. Be a skeptic, then, and your life will go better!

2. Argumentative Structure of the *Outlines*

In order to have the better life promised by skeptical suspension of judgement, one has to find ways of suspending judgement. Sextus helpfully gives an outline (I.xiii) of the general strategy the skeptic uses to convince the mind to suspend judgement, which it is worth quoting in full

> "Speaking generally, one may say that it is the result of setting things in opposition. We oppose either appearances to appearances or objects of thought to objects of thought[57] or *alternando*. For instance, we oppose appearances to appearances when we say 'The same tower appears round from a distance, but square from close at hand'; and thoughts to thoughts, when in answer to him who argues the existence of Providence from the order of the heavenly bodies we oppose the fact that often the good fare ill and the bad fare well, and draw from this the inference that Providence does not exist. And thoughts we oppose to appearances, as when

[57] This is the same 'appearance' vs 'judgement' distinction from before.

> Anaxagoras countered the notion that snow is white with the argument, 'Snow is frozen water, and water is black; therefore snow also is black.' With a different idea we oppose things present sometimes to things present, as in the foregoing examples, and sometimes to things past or future, as, for instance, when someone propounds to us a theory which we are unable to refute, we say to him in reply, 'Just as, before the birth of the founder of the School to which you belong, the theory it holds was not as yet apparent as a sound theory, although it was really in existence, so likewise it is possible that the opposite theory to that which you now propound is already really existent, though not yet apparent to us, so that we ought not as yet to yield assent to this theory which at the moment seems to be valid.'" (I.32ff)

The skeptical modes (at least those of the 'ten modes'), then, are ways of generating these 'oppositions' of appearances and judgements. The 'ten modes' with which Sextus begins his story all seem to use different axes of perceptual relativity to generate such oppositions. For example, the first of the ten modes generates oppositions by looking at the relativity of perception to differences in the perceptual organs between different animals:

> Since, then, some animals also have eyes which are yellow, others bloodshot, others albino, others of other colours, they probably, I suppose, have different perceptions of colour. Moreover, if we bend down over a book after having gazed long and fixedly at the sun, the letters seem to us to be golden in colour and circling round. Since, then, some animals possess also a natural brilliance in their eyes, and emit from them a fine and mobile stream of light, so that they can even see by night, we seem bound to suppose that they are differently affected from us by external objects. (I.45).

Or how about:

> ...in respect of touch, how could one maintain that creatures covered with shells, with flesh, with prickles, with feathers, with scales, are all similarly affected? (I.50)

The fourth of the ten modes instead uses relativity to circumstance:

> Sleeping and waking, too, give rise to different impressions, since we do not imagine when awake what we imagine in sleep, nor when asleep what we imagine when awake; so that the existence or nonexistence of our impressions is not absolute but relative, being in relation to our sleeping or waking condition. Probably, then, in dreams we see things which to our waking state are unreal, although not wholly unreal; for they exist in our dreams, just as waking realities exist although non-existent in dreams. (I.104)

Or

> Another cause [sic] why the real objects appear different lies in motion and rest. For those objects which, when we are standing still, we see to be motionless, we imagine to be in motion when we are sailing past them (I.107)

The actual way in which the generated oppositions can be used to create suspension of belief is less than clear - Sextus seems to presume that the path from 'opposing ideas / appearances' to 'suspension of belief' is so straightforward that it does not require explanation. But in fact there are several possibilities for how it could work, some of which seem to create philosophical problems for the Pyrrhonian skeptic. Annas and Barnes (1985, 25), for example[58], propose that the modes function according to the following scheme:

(1) x appears F in S
(2) x appears F* in S*
(3) we cannot prefer S to S* or vice versa;
(4) Thus we can neither affirm nor deny that x is really F (or really F*)

[58] Reflecting what was then (and perhaps remains) the orthodox view of the literature: see Striker (1983), Hankinson (1995).

There are serious difficulties in taking this to be Sextus' strategy. Premises (1) and (2) are things the Pyrrhonian could licitly adhere to, since they just concern appearances,[59] but premise (3) is surely the kind of thing about which the proper Pyrrhonian ought to be suspending judgement. The Pyrrhonian ought be agnostic on whether there are any rational grounds for preferring appearance F to F* or vice versa, since any rational principle would have to be held as a *dogma* going beyond mere appearances.

Morison, in the influential (2011), takes Sextus to be pursuing a different strategy. In his reading, the Pyrrhonian uses the opposed appearances or judgments generated by a skeptical mode themselves to generate opposed *arguments*. So from two opposed appearances, we generate the following arguments:

1. x appears F (in S), therefore x is F
2. x appears F (in S*), therefore x is F*

These two arguments are equipollent: both make use of the same appearance-reality inference, from a true premise (in a particular circumstance). They therefore give equal but opposite epistemic reasons. By holding both in mind, then, the Pyrrhonian achieves the desired *epoche*, perfectly balanced between opposing reasons. The ability to construct these opposing arguments for any *dogma* that one encounters is then Morison's candidate for the characteristic 'skill' of the skeptic.

Despite what Morison implies (272), Sextus does not *explicitly* assert anything about the opposition of arguments. Nonetheless, something like it is indeed implicit in how he describes the skeptical response to the postulation of providence, in the passage quoted above: "in answer to him who argues the existence of Providence from the order of the heavenly bodies we oppose the fact that often the good fare ill and the bad fare well, and draw from this the inference that Providence does not exist…"

[59] Though of course Annas and Barnes have conveniently selected an opposition of appearances. As Sextus said, one can also oppose *judgments.* The judgmental analogues of premises 1) and 2) may not be assented to by the Pyrrhonian - this depends on a long-standing and thorny issue of Sextus interpretation (see Morison, 2011).

Notice here that what seems to be opposed is, on the one hand, the *argument* for providence from the order of the heavens, and, on the other hand, the *argument* for the absence of providence from the lack of natural justice.

I think Morison's reading is attractive for broader interpretive reasons, as well. It coheres very nicely with the *locality* of the Pyrrhonian program as I have reconstructed it, and nicely avoids the problem of having to assert a dogmatic equipollence proposition. It also neatly captures the sense in which the Pyrrhonian is 'seeking' - they are seekers after arguments, having indeed their own special skill in constructing arguments. In the following sections, I argue that, given a Morison-style reading of Sextus' strategy, we *also* can give a very plausible explanation for the lack of anything resembling a demon argument.

3. Unnatural States

The key argument of Sextus', from the perspective of the development of the demon, is the argument from unnatural states. We have already seen a version of this argument in Cicero, and much of Sextus' presentation is similar. It is raised as a form of the fourth of the ten modes - the argument from circumstances. Sextus subdivides this mode between natural states (discussed above), and unnatural ones. He says that

> "Objects impress us as dissimilar depending on our being in a natural or an unnatural state, since people who are delirious or divinely possessed think that they hear spirits, while we do not: and similarly they often say that they grasp an exhalation of storax or frankincense or the like, and many other things, while we do not perceive them" (I.101)

This is, of course, the familiar appeal to oppositions - here the opposition is between how things appear in two different states, and again it seems that there is some kind of implicit challenge to find a rational basis to prefer one to the other. Sextus even considers one possible way of trying to establish

such a preference - the observation that people in these unnatural states exhibit a 'mixing of humours' of the sort that characteristically gives rise to "inappropriate appearances" (I.102). This argument is that, since we can distinguish unnatural states from natural ones by a mixture of humours, and since the mixing of humours is known to cause nonveridical appearances, we have a reason to prefer the natural states. Sextus is not impressed. His defensive move is to point out that (according to the medical wisdom of the day) the humours of people in ordinary states are also mixed. So, he asks, why should we imagine that only the humoural mixtures in the delirious produce nonveridical appearances? Isn't this just question-begging? After all, unnatural states are the 'natural' condition of the mad!

It seems clear that the argument from unnatural states, though it has certain superficial similarities with the demon argument, is a very different thing. For one thing, though 'divine possession' is mentioned, the supernatural provenance of Sextus' unnatural states plays no significant epistemic role - as with the version of the argument we saw in Cicero, it is simply that divine action was thought to be a common cause of disease and madness. In fact, as Annas and Barnes (1985, 83) point out, it rather looks like 'natural vs unnatural state' is synonymous with 'healthy vs unhealthy state' in practice. These states are thus not necessarily immune to evidence, and immunity to evidence plays no epistemological role in the argument.

This is because Sextus's argument is not constructed like a demon argument. In fact it is not really *an* argument at all. Sextus is not claiming that there is no way to distinguish between a natural state and an unnatural one, and that therefore we have no way of knowing whether some state-dependent appearance is veridical. Rather, he is claiming that an inference from a state-dependent appearance to a claim about the world can be counterbalanced by a structurally identical inference to a contrary claim. His defensive move is just aimed at eliminating a putative asymmetry between the two resultant inferences.

4. Explaining the Demon's Absence

There is no demon argument in Sextus Empiricus. As it did with Cicero, then, the question naturally arises why Sextus did not develop one. One possible answer that is readily found in the literature is that Sextus was not an external world skeptic. Here is Miles Burnyeat:

> Ask Sextus what he means when he claims to suspend judgement about everything, and he will typically reply, 'Well, take honey: it appears sweet to me but bitter to people with jaundice, and there is no criterion for deciding which it really is. Likewise the tower appears round from a distance and square from close by. And so on. That's how it is with everything.' It is one and the same external thing, honey or the tower, which appears thus and so, and which has a real nature that the skeptic is unable to determine. (1982, 29)

That is, Sextus, like other ancient skeptics, took for granted the existence of an external world, and merely disputed the knowability of its features and properties. This was (as we will see in the coming chapter) the way that ancient skepticism was remembered in the Latin middle ages[60]. It seems to me that this explanation goes much too far. While Sextus certainly is not preoccupied with the problem of the external world, the idea that he uncritically accepted the existence of an external world is dubious. Gail Fine (2021, Chapter 14) argues persuasively that he disavowed all beliefs concerning the external world, and that his official stance was an external world skepticism similar to that of many modern skeptics[61] So I do not think it very plausible that Sextus refrained from demonology out of the fear that it would undermine beliefs he wanted to preserve.

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[60] So, as we will see, when a medieval writer wishes to attribute something like external world skepticism to an opponent, they will accuse the opponent of 'a skepticism more pernicious than even that of the ancients' (or language to that effect).

[61] Much of Fine's argument deals with the question of whether Sextus goes beyond denial of knowledge concerning the external world to deny *all* knowledge, including of appearances. This is because she is working with a definition of external world skepticism according to which the external world skeptic endorses an asymmetry between the knowability of mental and external things. There is a possible reading of Sextus where he is not an external world skeptic, in this sense, because he is equally skeptical of non-external knowledge. Whether Sextus thought the mind was knowable or not, though an interesting question in itself, is, it should be clear, quite immaterial to his reasons for not employing a demon argument.

If not that, then why? I think the answer is best found in the ethical ground of Pyrrhonism. Recall that the real motivation of the Pyrrhonian is not an epistemic good, but rather a moral one: tranquillity. The whole Pyrrhonian ideal of suspension of assent is really in the service of tranquillity (though of course the Pyrrhonian does not assert positively that suspension of assent *causes* tranquillity!). Pellegrin (in Bett, 2010, Chapter VI) has a nice summary:

> [Sextus says that] "when they [ie, the first skeptics] had suspended assent, tranquillity followed fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body" (1.29). This last image, which according to Diogenes Laertius (9.107) comes from Timon and Aenesidemus, and this word "fortuitously" are designed to stress that one cannot assert a rule; to assert a rule of the form "one who suspends assent finds tranquillity" would amount once again to maintaining an opinion.

The Pyrrhonian's tranquillity is then the hard-earned fruit of a continual process of seeking the truth, but finding only equipoised arguments. By its very nature, this process can never be closed off: the Pyrrhonian can never, on pain of losing the core virtue and end of their philosophy[62], stop seeking. Sextus is *extremely* insistent on this, repeatedly reminding his readers that even the claim that every argument has an equal and opposing alternative is just a provisional appearance, not itself a dogma:

> So when I say 'to every argument an equal argument is opposed,' I am implicitly saying this: 'to every argument I have investigated that establishes something dogmatically, it seems to me that another argument establishing something dogmatically is opposed to it, equal to the first in terms of conviction and lack of conviction' – so that the utterance of this discourse is not dogmatic. (I.203)

The demon argument, by its nature, is an inquiry-stopper. It is, by design, both perfectly general and perfectly immune to further evidence. If one accepts its premises, then there can be no point in further

[62] And in the process himself becoming what Sextus thinks the Academics had become: a kind of 'negative dogmatist'.

seeking, since one has already a deductively valid proof that seeking is vain. So in fact it would be extremely odd for Sextus to have offered anything like a demon argument!

IV. Conclusions

In this chapter I have attempted to set up the context for the history of the demon argument that occupies the following chapters. I have been guided by two goals: first, to explain the content of the limited skeptical inheritance which was communicated to the Latin middle ages; second, to demonstrate that, for good reasons flowing from both the historical context of ancient skepticism and its peculiar ethical dimension, the ancients made no use of demon arguments in my sense. In the process, I hope I have shown that many of the building blocks of the demon were present already in the ancient world, and it was really metaphysical beliefs about the limits of the gods' powers, along with the aforementioned moral beliefs about the purpose and value of skepticism, that deterred a demon argument. Following chapters will show how, given different underlying metaphysical suppositions and different philosophical aims, skepticism could eventually avail itself of demon arguments.

Chapter Two: Divine Power

I. Introduction and Background

This chapter examines a number of medieval thinkers who played important roles in the development of demon arguments. Most of these authors are relatively well-known, at least among medievalists and historians of philosophy. Their views are not necessarily widely appreciated in philosophy more broadly, and it will be part of my eventual thesis that their significance to the development of 'Cartesian' skepticism has been overlooked. This chapter aims to establish some background: the Augustinian approach to ancient academic skepticism; the 'power distinction' in the understanding of God's omnipotence; the Thomistic view of demonic deception; and the 'reductio ad academicus' mode of argumentation. This chapter shows that, by the time of the famous condemnations of 1277, there was a conception of divine power in widespread use which was sufficient to produce powerful demon scenarios. This background conditioned the eventual development, in the fourteenth century, discussed in the next chapter, of robust epistemological uses of demonic deception, of the sort that eventually appeared in Descartes and his skeptical heirs.

II. *Against the Academics* and the Bequest of Antiquity

1. Introduction

Much has been said about the fragmentary textual record that survived ancient philosophy and entered the Western European middle ages. Pyrrhonism survived only in a few isolated translations of Sextus Empiricus[63] and in limited quotation. Academic skepticism fared somewhat better for two principal reasons. The first was the reverence held for Cicero as a rhetorician and paradigm of Latin erudition - the standard rhetorical textbook for centuries was his *De Inventione*. Cicero's works,

[63] A 14th century edition of the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* and a fragment of the *Adversus Mathematicos*, probably translated by Niccolò da Reggio; a15th century Latin translation, by Giovanni Lorenzi, of the first four books of the *Adversus Mathematicos*; and that is all. (Machuca and Reed, 202; see Chapter One for my discussion.)

including references to his skepticism and the *Academica,* was thus preserved[64] where other works discussing the skeptical traditions were lost. And the second reason, of course, was Augustine's *Contra Academicos*.

2. Augustine's Antiskepticism

Augustine was, as he reports in the *Confessions* and *On the Happy Life*, tempted by the skeptical philosophers in his youth, before his embrace of Christian neoplatonism. Later in life, he came to reject their teachings, but he maintained a respect for them as a philosophical school and a legitimate (though mistaken) intellectual possibility - Augustine took skepticism seriously. The dialogue against the academics was his first philosophical writing after withdrawal from public life and embrace of Christian neoplatonism, and it is part philosophical tract, part apology for / explanation of Augustine's new direction in life. It is an odd little volume, a mixture of interesting argument and weak argument, historical insight and autobiography. It is in the *Contra Academicos*, for example, that we find Augustine's bizarre (though not completely implausible) claim that the ancient Academics were secret Platonists, using skepticism only as an exoteric doctrine and a test for would-be initiates.

In fact, there is a fascinating dimension to that claim that will recur in the medieval history of skepticism. What Augustine actually says is that

> Zeno became enamoured of a certain theory of his own regarding the world and especially the soul (on behalf of which true philosophy is ever vigilant), saying that the soul is mortal, that there is nothing beyond this sensible world, and that nothing transpires in the world except by

[64] I do not mean that there were explicit efforts to preserve Cicero and destroy other texts (though this did occasionally happen), but rather just that the larger number of copies of Cicero in circulation made his survival proportionally more probable.

> means of a body — for he thought that God Himself was fire — since this evil was spreading far and wide, Arcesilaus, it seems to me, prudently and with great advantage completely concealed the view of the Academy. He buried it as a golden treasure to be found someday by posterity. Since most people are rather prone to rush into false opinions and, through their familiarity with bodies, are easily but injuriously led to believe that all things are bodies, Arcesilaus — the most clever and humane of men — decided, therefore, to disabuse those he found to have been wrongly taught rather than to bear the burden of teaching those he didn't consider teachable. All the teachings attributed to the New Academy arose from these circumstances, since their predecessors had no need for them. (CA 3.17.38; Augustine p. 89)

Blake Dutton, in his mighty *Augustine and Academic Skepticism* (2016), explains that Zeno of Citium, after leaving the Academy, taught a form of materialist empiricism that was seen almost as a blasphemy by the platonists. As a result "Arcesilaus took the extraordinary step of banning all public expression of Plato's teachings and permitted them to be revealed only to those who were fully prepared by training and discipline to receive them. In addition, he redirected the public work of the Academy to the negative task of undermining not only the teachings of Zeno, but those of anyone else of a similar cast of mind as well." (Dutton, 25). That is, Academic skepticism was developed as a methodological tool for undermining empiricism and materialism. Now, there is some reason to doubt that Augustine has the right of things, historically speaking (certainly this view does not appear in Cicero), but it was Augustine who, by and large, was the dominant source for Academic skepticism in the medieval period, and thus this motif of skepticism as a methodological tool should be kept in mind.

The philosophical argumentation of the *Contra Academicos* is not always compelling. Its rhetoric, though, often is. Much of the dialogue, in fact, is not so much a response to the arguments of the skeptics as it is a response to their methods of inquiry and way of life. Augustine wants to explain why someone would reject the skeptical system - he thinks that it is impotent, full of despair, incompatible

with Christian hope, and so on, and well-expresses these concerns. The primary *argumentative* portion of the dialogue, though, really only begins in Book II, where Augustine delivers a long monologue in his own voice against the thesis that there can be no knowledge in philosophy.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the primary point of contention between the Stoics and the Academics was whether or not the 'indistinguishability thesis' - that for every impression that arises from something that is, there is a qualitatively indistinguishable impression that arises from something that is not - is true. If true, then the master argument of the Academy against the Stoics is sound. If false, then it is unsound. The Stoic doctrine, expressed in Zeno's definition, is that we can have genuine knowledge in cases of kataleptic impression, where an impression is said to be kataleptic just in case it can only be occasioned by a real thing. Augustine makes a nontrivial modification to the ancient debate before joining in - in some places (though not all) he extends the question beyond kataleptic impressions into 'truths' in general - at 2.5.11 he gives Zeno's definition as "the *truth* that can be apprehended is impressed on the mind by what it comes from in such a way that it couldn't be from something other than what it does come from" (Augustine, 1995, 36, emphasis mine - the Latin is *verum* rather than *visum*). Augustine mostly argues this point - that there are *truths* that can be distinguished from any falsehoods,[65] or, equivalently (as he also says), that there are certain marks whereby truth may infallibly be distinguished from error.

Much of Augustine's argument seems to me to trade on equivocation or mere argument by definition (he defines wisdom as a kind of knowledge, for example, which lets him easily argue that the Academics were wrong to say that a wise man knows nothing). It is worth giving a flavour of these arguments before moving on to the question of the demon argument, because they form the backdrop

[65] It would therefore be fair to say that his argument does not really engage with the substance of the ancient skeptical dispute.

of antiskepticism against which the whole of medieval epistemology must be viewed. Here then is an example of Augustine's argumentation:

> I think nothing can be said in reply to the simple person who tells you, Arcesilaus, to use your remarkable acumen to refute Zeno's definition and show that it too can be false. If you're unable to do so, you then have something you perceive, whereas if you refute it you have no grounds that prevent you from perceiving. (Ibid. 70)

Or

> Zeno's definition is either true or false. If it's true, I am correct to grasp it. If it's false, something can be perceived though it has signs in common with what is false. 'How can that be?' Arcesilaus asks. Well, then, Zeno's definition is entirely true, and anyone who has even agreed with him on this score isn't in error. (Augustine, 1995, 70)

These arguments attempt to find a kind of paradox or contradiction within the skeptical framework. The idea underlying both is that the Academic is doing something fishy by using Zeno's definition - that is, by treating the definition as though they knew it - while at the same time denying all knowledge. Depending on the precise beliefs of the skeptic in question[66], these arguments will range from quite effective to wholly impotent. If you confront the sort of academic who uses Zeno's thesis only negatively, as part of a *reductio* of Stoic epistemology, then of course they will disavow any claim to believe it. They may well deny the *possibility* of grasping the definition, even if it is true. A contemporary skeptic would probably further deny that definitions such as Zeno's are even the kind

[66] I have often thought that Augustine must have recognized the inherent unfairness of the dialogue format, in which you are arguing with someone whose positions and arguments you yourself get to choose. We see a hint of this at (1995, 72): "What am I foolishly afraid of? If I remember correctly, you are dead, Carneades. Alypius is no longer fighting righteously before your tomb. God will readily give me assistance against your ghost!" Indeed, it is much easier to argue with a ghost than with the living skeptic!

of thing that can be either true or false. So these dilemmas will not be especially troubling to at least some species of skeptic.

The other half of the Augustinian strategy is generally more compelling. In it, he catalogues claims that are very compelling indeed, about which the skeptic is going to look very silly when they inevitably disclaim knowledge.

> However, although I'm still far from being anywhere close to a wise man, I do know some things in physics. I'm certain that the world is either one [in number] or not — and, if there isn't just one world, the number of worlds is either finite or infinite. Let Carneades teach that this view is 'like' something false! Similarly, I know that this world of ours has been arranged as it is either by the nature of bodies or by some providence; that it always was and will be, or began to be and is never going to end, or did not have a beginning in time but is going to have an end, or it began to exist in time and is not going to exist forever. (Augustine, 1995, 73)

These are meant to be more or less just truths of logic - exhaustive disjunctions - though Augustine thinks he can call them truths of physics because they are formulated in the language of ancient physical debates about, eg, the plurality of worlds. Instead of pressing on this issue, though, Augustine has his Academic opponent ask a fascinating question: "'How do you know that the world exists,' replies the Academician, 'if the senses are deceptive?'" (1995, 74; *CA* 3.11.24).

The idea of this response, as Dutton identifies, is that the skeptic takes Augustine's disjunctions as all implying the existence of the world - whether there's one world or many, there's still a world. The skeptic can try, therefore, to cast doubt on all of Augustine's trivial truths at once by attacking them at a common presupposition. The problem, of course, that Augustine pounces on immediately, is that none of the Academic arguments are powerful enough to cast the existence of the external world itself into doubt. Thus, Augustine responds "your arguments have never been able to undermine the power

of the senses to such a degree as to establish that nothing appears to us" (Dutton, 180)[67]. That is, the Academic illusion arguments can show that sometimes sticks appear bent or deserts appear as oases, but they can't possibly show and don't purport to show that *the existence of the world* is an illusion (what would that even mean?). Likewise, the dream and madness arguments you see in, for example, Pyrrho, are impotent:

> "You'll ask me: 'Is what you see the world even if you're asleep?' It has already been said that I call 'world' whatever seems to me to be such. If it pleases the Academician to call 'world' only what seems so to those who are awake, or even better to those who are sane, then maintain this if you can: that those who are asleep or insane aren't asleep and insane in the world!" (Augustine, 1995, 74)

Even in a dream, there is still an external reality of sorts, and moreover in order to dream in the first place there must be a non-dream world in which the dreamer exists. Finally, lingering on the question of dreams a bit, Augustine notes that, even in a dream world, the truths of logic and mathematics are firm: "I think it's now sufficiently clear what falsehoods seem to be so through sleep and madness, namely, those that pertain to the bodily senses. For that three times three is nine and the square of rational numbers must be true, even if the human race be snoring away!" (Augustine, 1995, 75).

This, then, is the Augustinian inheritance to the middle ages: a view of the Academic skeptic as misguided, possibly even incoherent. Augustine's Academic wants to deny the possibility of knowledge, but cannot, because they must accept definitions, logical truths, the existence of the external world, and so forth. They have no demon argument, and they have a version of the dream argument that does not touch logic and maths, and which is further limited to what Maddy calls 'ordinary dreaming'. Augustine's refutation of this view was taken to be complete and

[67] I've used Dutton's own translation, which is more readable than it is literal, for this passage alone.

incontrovertible, and so a legitimate way of refuting an epistemic doctrine was simply to show that it tended towards the kind of skepticism Augustine attributes to the ancient Academy.

III. Early Debates About Divine Omnipotence

1. Introduction

By the late thirteenth century, there was on the one hand a somewhat fragmentary but accessible version of Academic skepticism descending from Augustine and Cicero, and on the other a living debate about the nature of God's omnipotent power. The medieval history is one largely concerned with *avoiding* the kind of radical skepticism that Augustine was supposed to have refuted, while at the same time employing epistemologically-laden arguments in the service of investigating theological or metaphysical questions about the extent of God's omnipotence, the nature of absolute possibility, and the status of faith. As the character of these investigations became more epistemological, it became correspondingly more apparent that the power of God was connected with skepticism, and could in fact be used in a devastating way to undermine knowledge claims - the deception or 'demon' argument. Thus, when conditions made a revival of ancient skepticism possible, the demon argument was essentially ripe for the picking by a new generation of skeptics.

Questions about God's power arise naturally enough from reflection on scripture - in the first Genesis creation account, God takes a week to create the world. Why? Couldn't he have made it more quickly? If he could have made it more quickly, why didn't he? Or, why did God not prevent the sin of Adam, or so order the world that sin and evil did not arise? Could he not? If he could have done, why didn't he? And so on.

The question is ancient. For our purposes, it will suffice to consider a single example of the question, which comes from consideration of St Jerome, and which was treated explicitly in medieval theological

writings. In his 1st letter to Saint Eustochium, he writes "I will say it boldly; though God can do all things, he cannot raise a virgin up after she has fallen." (Jerome, 383/4, paragraph 22)[68]. This was surely intended as some hyperbole in the course of his rather extravagant praise of virginity, but later commentators took it as a theological pronouncement: God could not undo the past, as he would have to do in order to give back someone's virginity. But, of course, this raises a question about God's power - God is said to be omnipotent, so why is it that he cannot change the past?[69]

This kind of question is familiar. Modern audiences will also be familiar with a particular strategy for responding. In brief, the strategy is this: distinguish between what God *could* do and what God *would* do. God *could* have created a sinless world of automata, but he never *would*. I do not mean to say that this is or is not a successful theodicy. It is, however, a natural way to proceed. Thus it should not surprise us that, when questions about God's power arose in the middle ages, early Scholastic philosophers and theologians embraced variations on the same strategy. They distinguished between two ways in which God can be said to be able to do something - two different kinds of divine power. The history of this manoeuvre, which has come to be called the 'power distinction,'[70] is rather a long one. I've opted to begin the tale with Abelard and the Lombard's response to him, since the Lombard's stature in the high middle ages was such that most of our later authors can safely be said to be aware of his *Sentences* (indeed a number of the works discussed in this chapter were commentaries on the Sentences).

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[68] Jerome and his successors meant this to be a physical miracle rather than a salvific one.

[69] Pierre Damian (c. 1007 - 1072) devoted a significant essay, *De Divina Omnipotentia* (1972), to these questions. Here he argues that 1) God could restore virginity, by 'mending the flesh' and restoring virtue but 2) God cannot undo the past (though he thinks it impious to say so explicitly). This is no challenge to his Omnipotence, though, because omnipotence consists in the efficacy of the Divine *will,* and God's will would never change. So the reason God cannot change the past is that he cannot *will* to change the past. This argument is reminiscent of the *Potentia Absoluta* distinction discussed at length below.

[70] At least since Moonan (1994).

2. Abelard

In the course of his voluminous *Opera Theologica* (1987 vol. III), Abelard considers the question of whether or not God could do otherwise than he does. He provides an argument for the negative answer: God is both good and rational. He has a reason to do anything that is good, and a reason not to do anything that is not good. Since nothing is both good and not good, He never has reasons both to do and not to do anything.[71] Since he is ideally rational, he must act according to reasons. So God can only do what He in fact does do.

Abelard concedes that his view is the minority position. The majority holds that God must be able to do otherwise than He in fact does. Abelard canvasses a few arguments for this position. One such argument is that, if God could not do otherwise, no sense could be made of thanking Him for His grace and mercy, those being the result of blind necessity rather than praiseworthy volition (Bosley and Tweedale, 19). Much the more important argument for our purposes, though, Abelard attributes to Augustine: according to Abelard's reading of Augustine, God's omnipotence consists in His ability to do whatever He wills, no power being able to oppose or constrain him. This being the case, the freedom of God's will implies the possibility of His doing otherwise. As the Augustinian maxim has it, originally regarding the possibility of God's doing evil: *potuit, sed noluit*.

Abelard rejects all these arguments. The problem, he says, is that

> By this reasoning of theirs we could say that under some sort of state of his will he could even sin or do something shameful, since it is in fact certain that nothing could stop his doing this if he willed to do that which he ought not. Besides, when they say here that he is called

[71] Abelard apparently just takes it for granted that there can be no morally neutral acts - for every action, either there is a morally sufficient reason for God to do it, or there's a morally sufficient reason for him not to do it. This assumption is dubious, to say the least.

> omnipotent because he can do whatever he wills, obviously they so associate his power and will that where his will is lacking his power is lacking too. (translated in Bosley and Tweedale, 20)

That is, Abelard thinks his opponents have a mistaken notion of the relationship between divine will and divine power. The first objection arises because Abelard wants it to be the case that what prevents God from doing what is sinful is not just that He doesn't *will* sin, but that his nature makes him *incapable* of sin. The second objection is slightly harder to parse. I think he is arguing in the alternative: Even were we to accept the Augustinian doctrine that Divine Omnipotence just means the irresistibility of His Will, God still could not do otherwise. This is because, on the Augustinian doctrine, God only wills what he in fact does, and so, if His Will and His Power are coextensive, he *can* only do what he in fact does![72]

Abelard's view was unpopular even during his lifetime, and after the Council of Soissons it fell under the same condemnation as the rest of his philosophy. This did not mean, of course, that it was forgotten - it simply meant that commentators (with the exception of the aforementioned Roland, whose reputation for doctrinal orthodoxy was apparently sufficient to permit him a refutation of "Master Peter" by name) had to refer to Abelard somewhat elliptically.

3. The Lombard Responds

One such elliptical commentary is in the great *Four Books of Sentences* of Peter the Lombard (2007, 230ff). In Book I, Distinction 42, Lombard asks whether God's omnipotence comes from his ability to do *anything*, or from his ability to do anything that he wills.[73] The former doctrine faces obvious problems, given that there are a number of things that we embodied humans can do - walking around, falling over, and so forth - that God cannot do because He does not have a body (the Incarnation

[72] This is the argument made in the *Sententiae* Rolandi, which Boh (1985) connects to Abelard.

[73] *An quia omnia possit, an tantum, quia ea possit quae vult*

notwithstanding). Lombard isn't greatly troubled by these examples, for, he observes, God brings about the walkings and fallings of bodily things, as Author. As Abelard argued, God also cannot sin, die, or be defeated, but the Lombard says that this is no defect of power, because those imperfections are themselves weaknesses. The ability to be defeated is not a power, but rather a debit. On this, the Lombard cites the authority of Augustine (among others). His eventual account of omnipotence turns out similarly Augustinian: God is omnipotent insofar as no power can prevent Him from actualizing His will.

In Distinction 43, he tries to bring this conception of omnipotence to bear against the Abelardian opinion that God can only do what He in fact does. The Lombard's argumentation here is sometimes difficult to follow, involving many subtle distinctions and parsings. Marcia Colish summarizes the strategy:

> His emphasis on God's freedom is reflected by his placement of this topic under the heading of God's omnipotence, and by his reimporting into the discussion an Augustinian distinction which Abelard had dismissed, the distinction between God's power and God's will, employed as well by recent thinkers such as Anselm of Canterbury. From this perspective, God's power is His ability to do whatever He wills. In actual practice, according to Peter, what God does is good and just. But, he argues, this fact imposes no constraints upon the choices God might have made and it does not limit His capacity to have done what He has chosen not to do. In making His just and good choices, God remains free. (Colish 1992, 125)

That is, the Lombard tacitly invokes a distinction between what God can do, limited by His will and goodness, as against what he is able to do full stop. The various Abelardian arguments are all met with variations on this same strategy - if Abelard says that God's acts are required by justice, the Lombard will reply (as he does at Lombard, 234) that the sense of 'requires' is ambiguous. Of course it is true

that God's justice compels him to act justly, but it is not true that God thereby fails to have the power to, say, kill someone for no reason.

Now, the Lombard was by no means the first person to invoke a distinction between will and power, but his insistence that this distinction was the key to refuting Abelardian concerns, placed as it was in so powerfully influential a volume as the *Book of Sentences,*[74] guaranteed that subsequent theologians and philosophers would have to consider omnipotence questions according to his terms.

IV. The Power Distinction: *Potentia Absoluta* and *Potentia Ordinata*

1. Introduction

Around the beginning of the 13th century, authors found a linguistic net in which to catch the Lombard's meaning. Authors came to write of a distinction between 'Absolute Power', on the one hand, and 'Ordained Power' on the other. This section summarises the development of that distinction from its first appearances in the Lombard's immediate successors, to its gradual adoption by jurists and theologians across medieval Europe.

2. Genesis of the Power Distinction

The very oldest use of the Power Distinction may appear in an anonymous scholium to the Epistle to the Romans, which considers the question of God's power to choose means of salvation other than Jesus's sacrifice on the cross in the following terms:

> "It is asked whether God was able to perform a more appropriate [*convenientiorem*] method of redemption? If it is said that he was not able to, it seems that the power of God [*potentia Dei*] has an limit [*terminum*], and is not immeasurable; if it is said that he was able to, in what

[74] A commentary on the Sentences was required as part of the examination process for the Magister of Theology at most European universities, and many of the primary sources discussed in this chapter are Sentences commentaries. For a fascinating history of Lombard commentaries, see Roseman (2007).

> way was it 'most appropriate?' The solution: it is permitted that it [ie, the power of God] have this limit [*terminum*], however it is not simply [*simpliciter*] to be granted that it has this limit. Or, it is certainly permissible for the method to be most appropriate to our wretched condition, but it nonetheless not necessary, because it is not most appropriate absolutely [*absolute*]." (Quoted in Moonan, 1994, 62)

The passage is somewhat obscure. Its meaning is, I believe, this: one might be tempted to pose the following dilemma: either God could not have actualized a means of redemption better than His death on the cross, in which case there would be a limitation on His power, *or* He did not actualize the best possible means of redemption, in which case He is malicious. But, the author of the scholium avers, this dilemma is a false one, because it fails to consider an important distinction. Given the kind of fallen beings that we in fact are, subject to the sorts of sin to which we are in fact subject, the crucifixion was indeed the best possible means of redemption. But, had God actualized different beings, subject to different sins, then there would be other most appropriate means of redemption. So Christ's death is not "absolutely" most appropriate. When we ask whether it was in God's power to do otherwise, then, we likewise need to distinguish two senses of power. In the first sense, the question is whether God could have actualized a better means of salvation given his choice to create us as the kind of beings we are. To this the answer is no, so in a sense there *is* a limit on the divine power. It is, however, a 'permissible' limit because it is not a limit *simpliciter*. This raises the second sense of divine power, in which we simply ask whether God could have brought about a different world where redemption was by different means. The answer to this latter question is *yes*. The scholium does not give names to these two senses of Divine power, but the latter is certainly connected with the notion of *convenientissimus absolute,* and so it is natural to think of it as being Divine power considered 'absolutely'.

Moonan's *Divine Power* denies that this passage contains the real power distinction as it later enjoyed use. I think that his apparent disagreement with Courtenay (who expresses more or less the same

interpretation that I've stated above in his 1985, 247) is largely just that. Moonan points out that, while the anonymous author certainly invokes a distinction between God's power considered absolutely and God's power considered according to a certain restriction, they make no more effort than they have to in order to specify this restriction. They do not, therefore, invoke the restriction crucial to the later power distinction (more on this below), that God's power is restricted specifically by His decrees. This seems correct, and for the purposes of determining exactly when the full power distinction appeared it is salient, but it does not pose any problems for the story I want to tell here. *Part* of the language of the power distinction certainly does appear in the scholium, even if not the full distinction. Indeed, I think the situation is even better than that, for, though it is not explicit, the scholium does imply that the kind of restriction on divine power it contemplates is one that depends on details of the created world and of our fallen state - it's a consideration of what means of salvation are appropriate to us as we are created. Since the order of the created world is fixed by God's manifest will, it is at the very least implicit that the restricted sense of power in the scholium is dependent on the previously-expressed divine will, even without explicit 'decree' language.

3. Gaufrid de Poitiers and the Explicit Power Distinction

In any event, the kind of language that appears in the scholium was further refined by Gaufrid de Poitiers [also Geoffrey, Galfridus, or Godfrey], in his *Summa Theologiae* (no relation), who made explicit the idea of divine power in the "absolute" sense. As Courtenay (246-7) puts it, "[Gaufrid] states that there are things that God has the capacity to do, *de potentia absoluta*, that he does not do and, indeed, cannot do, *de potentia conditionali."* In the relevant passage, Gaufrid actually uses the language of *potestate absolute* (rather than *potentia*), though it's clear in context that he means the same thing by *potestas* and *potentia* (and later authors use the same language). Gaufrid says that some things are possible from God's absolute power, that are not possible from God's conditional power. He then glosses this latter notion as following from God's decrees (*decretis*), 'which he himself has already established'. In the particular case Gaufrid discusses, the question is whether God could give Jesus the power of salvation and damnation. *De potestate absoluta* the answer is surely yes, for who

would deny the immensity of God's power in this way? *De ordinata*, though, the answer is no, says, Gaufrid, because to give Christ, a man, the power of salvation would be to repose trust in man, in contravention of the Scriptures: "cursed be the man that trusteth in man" [Jer. 17:5]. Dubious biblical exegesis notwithstanding, Gaufrid is clearly using the fact that God's hypothetical action would violate Scripture as evidence that he cannot do that action *de ordinata*. The sense must thus be similar to that in the anonymous Romans scholium - in the scholium, we saw that there was a sense of divine power in which He cannot adopt a better means of salvation, because *he has already created* beings (us) with certain soteriological needs. In Gaufrid, this acquires the explicit language of condition: God's 'conditional' power is what he can do, consistent with his already-expressed will. The linguistic explicitness about this is what leads Moonan to call Gaufrid the first true exemplar of the power distinction.

4. The Distinction Enters General Use

From Gaufrid, the distinction spread throughout Christendom. In the process, it acquired its final formulation, as a distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata.* The eventual, standardised form of the distinction contains all of the elements present in Gaufrid:

> God's potentia ordinata was his (unique) divine power as exercised within the limits, chosen by God, of the present economy or disposition of things (oikonomia, ordinatio). God's potentia absoluta was that same divine power considered in abstraction from the limitations of the present disposition of things (Moonan 1974, 557)

Moonan catalogues the complicated history of transmission of the distinction and its penetration into all the various monastic orders, into theology, philosophy, and politics. The principal vehicle of this transmission was the faculty of Theology at Paris, where figures such as Roland of Cremona and Hugh of St Cher used the distinction in discussion of prophecy and, as was to happen again, in discussion of whether God could have saved Judas whilst damning Peter. So omnipresent was the doctrine by the mid-13th century that the great canonist Hostiensis made it a cornerstone of the

developing doctrine of Papal authority. As Oakley points out, the '*plenitudo potestatis'* of the papacy was explicitly linked with God's *potentia absoluta* - Hostiensis "ascribed to the pope in virtue of that absolute power the ability to act, for reason and in extraordinary situations, outside his normal jurisdictional competence or above the law to which, of his ordinary or ordained power (he appears to use the adjectives interchangeably) he has bound himself." (Oakley 1998a, 442)

Inevitably with so widely-employed a notion, the distinction took on a variety of different roles, and eventually probably no two scholars had exactly the same understanding of what was meant by *potentia absoluta* or *potentia ordinata*. Contemporary writers often like to distinguish "outrageous" and "classical" interpretations of the distinction in various authors. Roughly speaking, the difference is this: on the outrageous interpretation, *potentia dei absoluta* is an active, ongoing capacity. God can, at any time, step in and overthrow the order of the world created *ex potentia ordinata.* This understanding of the power distinction was likely influenced by its canon law application to Popes and Monarchs, whose *plenitudo potestas* was explicitly linked to the ability to alter the existing order of law. As we will see below, versions of the outrageous view tended to lead to more skeptical epistemologies in the 14th century. The classical interpretation, found in Aquinas, Alexander Hales, Albertus Magnus, and most theologians of the 13th and 14th centuries (though not most of the ones discussed in this chapter!), was rather different. Less philosophical and more theological, one might almost say. As Oakley summarises it, the classical interpretation of the distinction is meant to bring out two features of the Divine nature: on the one hand, God is free, totally free to create worlds radically different from our own. Because of this freedom, we can truly revere His *choice* to have created a world that operates by grace and salvation. On the other hand, God is stable, reliable, a God of self-commitment and covenant (ibid. 445). God's absolute power to upend the order of things can only be appreciated in concert with His firm commitment not to. Oakley further points out that the classical reading *also* dovetails with the political and moral use to which the distinction was put - the Pope, or an absolute king, might have the power to behave capriciously, but a just king would be bound by his covenants. On this understanding, then, *potentia absoluta* is not an active power of intervention, but

rather a representation of the unconstrained possibilities available to God *ab initio* - things God could have brought about but chose not to.

V. The Rise of Medieval Skepticism and the Power Distinction

1. Introduction

With the power distinction now in place, I want to turn my attention to the other half of the unlikely synthesis that brought about the demon argument. For all that Augustine was taken to have buried skepticism, the very power of his refutation meant that skepticism was remembered. In this section, I show how an attempt by John Duns Scotus to refute the epistemology of Henry of Ghent by reducing it to academic skepticism in fact laid the groundwork for new kinds of skepticism not practised by the ancients.

Henry of Ghent enters our tale for two reasons. The first is that developed the power distinction in an interesting direction, applying the 'outrageous' power distinction in the political sphere in an argument about the conduct of the papacy. The second is that his illumination epistemology attracted a famous rebuttal from John Duns Scotus in which explicitly appears a precursor of the skeptical demon argument.

2. Henry of Ghent and Illumination

Henry of Ghent, grand old man of the University of Paris and Scotus's antagonist in this tale, was one of those who employed the *potentia* distinction in the political sphere. Henry waded into a controversy about the proper interpretation of the ability of the mendicant clergy to hear sacramental confession conferred by Martin IV's bull *Ad fructus uberes*. The details of this controversy are fascinating (see Porro, 2003, 388ff), but, in essence, there was a concern that one interpretation of this bull undermined (and in fact gave to the undeserving mendicant friars) ecclesiastical powers that were

traditionally held by secular clergy - such secular clergy as, for example, distinguished masters of the theology faculty of the University of Paris. Henry wrote a tractatus to attempt to persuade the new Pope to reverse *Ad fructus uberes*. In this tractatus, he made use of the *potentia* distinction in the following way: it was, he said, entirely within the scope of Pope Martin IV's *potentia absoluta* to promulgate *Ad fructus uberes*. But, crucially, he ought not to have - instead, a Pope should act according to his *potentia ordinata* - that is, according to the tradition and precedent of prior ecclesiastical and papal decree.

> *Videat ergo dominus papa an possit de potentia ordinata secundum regulam iustitiae talem exemptionem populo concedere super confessione ab ipso facienda fratribus.*

Henry's position, *contra* the mendicant friars, is that the Pope's absolute power is irrelevant for these debates, because the Pope ought only to act according to ordained power.

In fact, Henry appears to have applied this conception of absolute power to God Himself, both in the aforementioned tractatus and in the *Quodlibeta*. In both, he says that it is impossible to distinguish what is possible for God *de absoluta* from what is possible *de ordinata*, for God cannot sin, and always does exactly what he should.[75] In both works, he illustrates this point by an appeal to the possibility of God saving Judas whilst damning Peter.[76] God's justice, which is fundamental to his nature, means that he cannot ever do such a thing.[77] As Porro puts it, on Henry's view, neither the Pope nor God ought ever to act except according to ordained power - it's just that God's essential nature is good, and so it is *impossible* for him to act against his ordinations. Thus God's absolute and ordained powers are coextensive, while the Pope can (but shouldn't) exercise absolute power *against* his ordained power. In

[75] *Licet enim circa Deum non contingat distinguere inter potentiam absolutam et ordinatam - Deus enim eo quod peccare non potest, nihil potest de potentia absoluta, nisi illud possit de potentia ordinata. Omnis enim potentia sua, quocumque modo vadit in actum, ordinata est* (quoted in Porro, 397).

[76] Recall that this was an issue in earlier exposition of the power distinction, too.

[77] *Si potest Deus Petrum damnare et Iudam salvare de potentia absoluta, hoc non est nisi quia deceret eum facere hoc secundum ordinem aliquem iustitiae, si faceret, nec aliter posset illud facere.*

Henry, then, we see a version of the "outrageous" *potentia* distinction, where absolute power is construed as an active capacity to overthrow the ordained order of things, albeit attributed only to the Pope and not to God. As we will see shortly, it is this kind of interpretation that undergirds the eventual development of skeptical demon arguments.

There is no evidence, though, that Henry's interpretation of the Power Distinction played a role in the other, better-known, way in which he is significant to the history of skepticism. Instead, it was his epistemology, as espoused in the 'antiskeptical' first article of the *Summae*, that drew Scotus's critical attention, and, in the process, provided the first hints of what would eventually become the demon / deceiving God argument.

The question of the first article is whether and how we can know. Henry's approach to this question is sophisticated and subtle. He first distinguishes two species of knowledge - ordinary knowledge, *scire,* on the one hand, and certain or proper knowledge, *proprie scire,* on the other. Knowledge of the first sort can be obtained by rational reflection on the deliverances of the senses, solely according to natural principles and with no role for God to play. Knowledge of the proper sort, though - knowledge of real essences, of the truth itself - requires something more. Henry says that this 'more' consists in 'apprehending the conformity of a thing to its exemplar,' *intentio enim veritatis in re apprehendi non potest nisi apprehendendo conformitatem eius ad suum*. What makes this apprehension possible is illumination with Divine light. As with other Divine Illumination theories, the inspiration for this doctrine is Augustinian. In the *Soliloquies* (2000), Augustine distinguishes between mere truths - 'principles,' 'sciences,' and the like that can be said to be true, and Truth itself, the archetype or exemplar according to which "everything which is in any way true is discriminated and named". Augustine says that this latter is imperishable. His argument is this: suppose for a contraction that Truth itself were perishable. Then it could be the case that Truth itself perished. But that is just to say that it could be *true* that "Truth itself has perished". But, "nothing can be true without Truth," so this

is a contradiction. The key move here requires that Truth itself be the only possible ground of the truth of propositions. This definition, as 'that which allows truths to be called true', is precisely Henry's definition of the truth *qua* target of proper knowledge. What Henry does, then, is to apply an (Augustinian) illumination theory to exactly the knowledge of (Augustinian) Truth itself, while leaving mere knowledge of mere lowercase truths to unilluminated sense-perception.[78] The relation to an exemplar, then, enters the picture as a gloss on what makes things true - something is true because it bears a certain relation to its exemplar.[79]

The picture is somewhat complicated, though, by Henry's insistence that there are *two* ways in which humans apprehend the truth, corresponding to *two* different kinds of exemplar. There is actually a good reason for him to say this: Henry thought that his exemplars were Platonic forms (Marrone, 21), but he inherited two distinct interpretations of Plato - one through Aristotle, and one through Augustine. Henry decided that both were right: there are both Aristotelian and Augustinian exemplars. One species of exemplar, that descending from Aristotle, is the universal species of a thing, a cognitive entity that is actually caused by the thing. Henry calls this the "created" exemplar. On the other hand, "uncreated" exemplars are so called because they exist only in the mind of God, the prototype ideas according to which he created the universe. The result, of course, is a doctrine of two truths (Henry literally calls it *duplex veritas*). If we consult the relation between an object and its created exemplar - that is, the 'goodness of fit' between an object and our Aristotelian conception of it - we get the kind of knowledge that Aristotle sought in the sciences. This knowledge is proper knowledge, *proprie scire*, indeed, but it is of less elevated a station as knowledge from the uncreated exemplar. It is, indeed, somewhat uncertain and fallible. The arguments for its weaker status are two: first, because the created exemplar is literally caused by its object, it inherits the mutability and

[78] Though he does of course allow that God, as the Author of Nature, plays a role even in unilluminated sense-perception.

[79] This, and the following discussion, owes much to Steven Marrone's mighty work of Ghent epistemological scholarship, *Truth and Scientific Knowledge in the Thought of Henry of Ghent* (1985).

imperfection of its object - the created exemplar of a stone can be no more immutable than the stone itself. Second, because the created exemplar is in our mind, it inherits the mutability and imperfection of finite minds - the created exemplar of a stone can be no more immutable than our mind. In both cases, obviously, the key premise is that a mutable exemplar cannot possibly provide a basis for *truly* certain knowledge. Henry briefly gives a third argument which does not depend on mutability, namely that the created exemplar alone does not suffice to distinguish dream from reality, since both dream and reality bear the same similarity to created exemplar (this argument is more plausible given the Aristotelian interpretation of created exemplar above).

To obtain the highest possible sort of knowledge, then, one must consult the uncreated exemplar in the mind of God. Only the uncreated exemplar, being caused by an immutable, perfect, cause, is itself immutable. Consultation of the exemplar in the mind of God requires His intervention through divine illumination. As Marrone says, the mechanism of this divine illumination was a significant subject of Henry's investigation, but, perhaps as a result, it is often difficult to discern what his view actually is. One possible means of acquiring the highest kind of knowledge seems to have been through direct revelation and a special act of divine grace - Moses on the mountaintop, or Paul on the Damascene road. The other means, more ordinarily available than true grace, was nonetheless a function of God's action through a 'teaching light', an intellectual light that somehow 'sharpens' the mind so that it can perceive relations with the uncreated exemplars. The light also acts as a 'seal' that certifies a representation in the mind as coinciding with, bearing the correct relation to, the uncreated exemplar.

3. *Reductio ad Academicus*: Scotus on Henry

Scotus is, along with Ockham (to whom we will turn in the next chapter), one of the key figures of the scholastic high middle ages, overshadowed only by Aquinas himself. Despite his towering stature, though, his epistemological writings are now somewhat obscure (though not to the same extent as

those of, say, Mirecourt).[80] This is unfortunate, because they are quite idiosyncratic and interesting, and they include some novel skeptical argumentation (though Scotus is, of course, no skeptic himself). This section examines Scotus's reply to Henry - I show how

Scotus poses the following question: "Can any certain and unadulterated truth be known naturally by the intellect of a person in this life without the special illumination of the Uncreated Light?" (1987, 96). Scotus gives his usual 'Pro et Contra' summary of relevant authority, before embarking on a long and detailed refutation of the view of Henry of Ghent just discussed above. In the Pro, he appeals entirely to Augustine, who was, as we have seen, Henry's preferred authority. For the contrary case, he cites a rather peculiar reading of the Epistle to the Romans, where it is written that "since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes are clearly seen… being understood through the things that are made…" (98). Scotus says that, since the divine illumination numbers among the 'invisible attributes of God', which are known only *from* (and hence *after*) our knowledge of created things, we must be able to acquire knowledge of created things absent a knowledge of divine illumination.

Scotus has a suite of areas for which he gives short philosophical arguments that we can know things (105-117): the principle of noncontradiction, cause-effect relationships, the contents of our own minds, sensible facts about external objects. His argumentative strategy is to charge Henry with undermining the possibility of knowledge, making the illumination theory look skeptical and therefore ridiculous.

To understand why Scotus might think this a plausible tack, it is worth looking at his summary of the Henry's exemplar theory detailed earlier. As we saw, according to this theory there are two exemplars,

[80] That is, among many contemporary philosophers and epistemologists. Historians have not forgotten Scotus to nearly the same extent!

one created and one uncreated. There are two types of truth about things, corresponding to the relationships between a thing and each of its exemplars. From the relationship to the created exemplar, though, we can glean no 'infallible and completely certain knowledge', because: 1) created exemplars are mutable, but we can only be certain in virtue of some immutable reason, 2) the soul itself is mutable and subject to error, and nothing more mutable than the soul itself could correct this error, so the created exemplar cannot prevent the soul from error, and 3) in order to have certain knowledge we must be able to "distinguish the truth from what has only the appearance of truth", which cannot happen with created exemplars. This is mostly a fair summary of Henry's own arguments, but Scotus takes their force very differently. Recall that Henry used these arguments to distinguish only between two kinds of "proper knowledge," with the created exemplar capable of giving the fallible type of proper knowledge. Scotus, on the other hand, takes them as showing that the created exemplar does not give *certa scientia*, certain knowledge, at all. This is because Scotus does not acknowledge a concept of 'proper knowledge' beyond certain knowledge, and so he interprets all of Henry's taxa of knowledge below the very highest sort as not really knowledge at all. On this understanding, Henry does ultimately come out looking quite skeptical. It is unsurprising, then, that Scotus begins his response by tasking Henry's views with skeptical consequences, and therefore being "false, and not in accord with the mind of Saint Augustine." This is, of course, a particularly devastating tactic against the illumination account, which very much wants to be Augustinian!

Scotus has several arguments for this charge. The first centres on mutability: Scotus begins by saying not just that knowledge of mutable things is worse than knowledge of immutable ones, but that it is *impossible* 'by any kind of light' (103). The reason for this is that knowledge by definition concerns what something *is*, its essence, and there is no fixed thing that something mutable is. That is, not even divine illumination will salvage our knowledge from (mutable) created exemplars, because the best that even divine illumination can do is render our cognition immutable, and an immutable cognition of mutable things does not amount to certain knowledge either. In the same vein, no knowledge can be found in the relation a mutable thing bears to an immutable one [ie, the uncreated exemplar],

because the *relation* will of necessity itself be mutable. As Scotus puts it, 'just as we can infer only a contingent proposition from a necessary and a contingent proposition combined, so also a concurrence of what is certain and what is uncertain does not produce certain knowledge." (104) The idea must be that, just as the conjunction "2+2=4 and I had soup for lunch" is contingent, any relation of concurrence between mutable things and immutable uncreated exemplars must itself be mutable. Scotus also worries about the mind - recall that, according to Henry, our minds (absent illumination) are mutable, too. According to Scotus, this means that even our knowledge from the uncreated exemplar must be suspect, because the immutable uncreated exemplar must be filtered through the lens of our mutable understanding. And finally, and perhaps most familiarly to a contemporary epistemologist, he worries that knowledge requires the ability to distinguish truth from 'the appearance of truth', and that cases such as dreams show that this is not always possible. Taking these arguments together, Scotus concludes that neither special illumination nor uncreated exemplar rescues us from uncertainty. In the end, then, Henry's 'antiskeptical' strategy, because it accepts too much mutability - Scotus actually seems to think that Henry believed the Heraclitean flux doctrine - simply leads to the view of the academics.

Having, he thinks, established three grounds of skepticism in Henry, Scotus gives three replies on behalf of his own epistemology, to show that it by contrast has no skeptical leanings. The first deals with external mutability. Scotus claims that, *contra* Henry, sensible things are not in constant flux, as Heraclitus said, but rather hold their forms 'for some time' (115). In any case, though, he thinks that mutability does not present a challenge to knowledge, because knowledge depends only on the *nature* of the thing, and this can be immutable even if the thing itself is in flux. The second response deals with the mutability of the soul/mind. Here Scotus simply denies the premise - while he agrees that the soul is mutable in the restricted sense that it is capable of going from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge, he denies that, at least in some cases, the soul is capable of change "from one contrary [...] to another, such as from being right to being deceived or vice versa." (117). In particular, in the case of analytic truths - what Scotus calls 'propositions that are evident from their terms', once we grasp the

meanings of the terms involved, our knowledge of the proposition cannot be unseated by any kind of deception - it becomes a kind of fixed point.

The final response is the most interesting. He addresses a kind of dream argument. Here Scotus defuses the worry by an appeal to the scholastic 'intelligible species'.[81] One interesting thing, though, from our present perspective, is that he more or less concedes the argument's force *if one denies intelligible species*. What he says is that, "the species which is able to represent the sensible in dreams as though it were an object would be the sense image or phantasm and not the intelligible species" (118). Therefore, Scotus says, judgments based solely on sense-images rather than on intelligible species could never discriminate truth from appearance of truth, and thus never amount to knowledge (and hence on a theory that denies the existence of intelligible species, *no* judgments could amount to knowledge - a strike against any such theory). Indeed, it appears that this is Scotus's own account of how the cognition of dreamers and madmen in fact functions: whilst dreaming (or mad), the intellect is constrained by a 'lack of imagination' and cannot make use of intelligible species. But, while awake and unconstrained, we have full unfettered cognition, and hence can know things. In this way, Scotus has tried to identify a cognitive difference between knowledge-prone and knowledgeless states of consciousness.

Scotus then considers a series of increasingly-serious skeptical challenges. The first problem he considers is whether the intellect, while awake, might suffer the same kind of error that happens while asleep or mad:

> You may object that if the sense image can represent itself as object, then it follows that the intellect could err by reason of this error in the faculty of the imagination, or at least, as is the

[81] There is a significant and voluminous debate between Henry and Scotus over this issue, too, but for the present it suffices to think of 'intelligible species' just as a particular theory of mental content.

> case in dreams or with madmen, the intellect could be so bound that it could not operate. (118)

Scotus's first response is not especially compelling. He points out that "it can be said in reply that if the intellect is bound when there is such an error due to the imaginative faculty, then the intellect does not err for the simple reason that it does not act." (ibid.) That is, it is not strictly speaking *the intellect* that is at fault in this kind of case, because the species-less cognition bypasses the intellect entirely. But of course this just passes the buck. Scotus's real response is that it is "self-evident to the intellect that when it knows, it is awake, and that, consequently, the imagination is not bound in a waking state as it is in sleep." (ibid.). We can distinguish by means of self-evidence between the dream state and the waking state, and, at least while we're awake, this means we can rule out the possibility of dreaming. I say 'at least while awake' because the means of discrimination Scotus propose relies on the use of the intellect, and, as we just saw, dreamers and madmen do not have the use of their intellects.

So far, so good. But then there comes a final objection - even if we grant that we can tell while awake that we are not dreaming, what about the possibility that we are only ever dreaming - that *everything* is a dream or madness?[82]

> There is still another objection to the aforementioned certitude about our actions. It runs as follows. I seem to see and to hear, whereas in reality I neither see nor hear; consequently, I have no certainty on this point.[83] (119)

This is, in highly schematic form, the core idea of the demon argument: the hypothesis that we are in some kind of special dream or madness state that is indistinguishable from ordinary states but in which

[82] I take this to be roughly equivalent to the denial of intelligible species, for Scotus, though he does not make the connection explicitly.

[83] *Sed adhuc instatur contra certitudinem dictam de actibus hoc modo: Videtur mihi quod videam vel audiam ubi tamen nee video nee audio. Igitur, de hoc non est certitudo.*

we are incapable of knowing. Henry himself did not offer a demon argument, but, in Scotus's reply, we can see an inchoate one.

Scotus's response to this last argument is to refuse to respond. He thinks it is just obvious that this kind of global skeptic is wrong and that there are self-evidently known things, but actually persuading the skeptic is hard: "it is one thing to show someone who denies a given proposition that it is true and quite another to indicate to someone who admits the given proposition how it is true." He uses as an example Aristotle, who does not seek to show how we know that the principle of noncontradiction is true, but simply points out that it is implicit in all our ordinary conduct. Scotus takes the same tack with the global skeptic. "If you hold that nothing is self-evident,"[84] he says, "I will not argue with you, for it is clear that you are a quibbler and are not to be convinced." He then makes the crucial distinction between the semi-skeptic,[85] who admits that we know some things, and the global skeptic, who denies all knowledge. The latter, he thinks, has an absurd position, but one that is not susceptible to refutation. The former, who admits we know some things, can eventually be argued out of their semi-skepticism.

Scotus, it should perhaps be mentioned, was also an influential expositor of the power distinction, and indeed was one of the few to endorse a version of the 'outrageous' distinction. As Courtenay (1985, 253) summarises it, Scotus identified God's ordained power with the actual, current order of things. At any point, God could choose to actualize his absolute power instead, thereby bringing about a different order of things. Incidentally, in doing so, He would *change* his own ordained power and would thus still be acting ordinately. The result is a different sense of the power distinction, where

[84] The reason the global skeptic must deny all self-evidence is that Scotus thinks that, if you can recognize anything as self-evident, that is sufficient to know that your faculties are not indisposed and thus that you are awake and not mad (120-121).

[85] Reid's much later use of this term, while certainly related, is narrower than what Scotus means to address.

instead of being a distinction between two senses or ways at looking at the same power, it is instead two distinct powers: God's ordained power within a given order of things, and his sovereign power to change the order of things and rewrite the laws. Unfortunately, the same language was used for both ways of construing the power distinction, and in later years under the influence of both Scotus and other more traditional writers there was considerable ambiguity and confusion, some of which was traded on in the emerging skeptical arguments. I have not been able to locate any point where divergence understandings of the power distinction were relevant to Scotus's critique of Henry. That said, it is by no means impossible to imagine how such a misunderstanding could arise. If you hold the 'outrageous' view of absolute power, then if certainty depends on divine illumination, and thus on God's ordained will, there can always be the worry that God, acting *de potentia absoluta*, could change his ordained will and withdraw illumination, rendering everything uncertain. But Scotus shows no sign of having entertained this argument.

VI. An Interlude of Aquinas on Demons

In order to preserve a semblance of narrative, I've elected to discuss Aquinas somewhat out of order - though Aquinas and Scotus were contemporaries, Aquinas was the elder. He was, of course, ultimately far more influential, but it is sometimes forgotten that his theology was considered quite unorthodox in its day, and the 'Angelic Doctor' was controversial and even at times persecuted. Aquinas travelled and taught widely, including two spells at the Theology Faculty of the University of Paris, and he was among those whose doctrines were fatefully condemned in 1277 (discussed in detail later).

Aquinas wrote on essentially every topic, and a full investigation would overflow the banks of this dissertation. Instead, I will concentrate on his theory of demons and demonic temptation, providing a sketch of what would eventually become the dominant view of how a deceiving demon might act. As we will see, the direction taken by Aquinas is quite different from that of the other figures discussed in this chapter. While Aquinas had the power distinction, he never worries about its epistemological

import. Instead, his concern is with the far less mighty, though still supernatural, powers of evil spirits to mislead and beguile us.

Aquinas's view is that the role of demons is to offer temptation. Aquinas is clear (for example in De Malo Q.3, A.4) that the devil cannot directly change our will and thus cannot cause sin directly, but only indirectly as a 'persuader' or tempter. Sometimes this temptation is of the ordinary, visible sort - the demon appears in some kind of assumed form and speaks honeyed words, attempting by rhetoric or logic to persuade us to wickedness. Sometimes, though, the temptation is extraordinary and invisible: the demon uses, effectively, magic (though Aquinas would of course not call it that) to interfere with the normal operation of our minds in such a way as to manipulate us into preferring the wicked to the good. McCraw (p. 31) outlines three different ways in which this might function:

> Invisible persuasion/temptation occurs when the tempter "presents something to a cognitive power as good" (De Malo Q.3, A.4). Most straightforwardly, a demon can do this by deceiving the mind of the tempted person to mistakenly think something good (or better than it is). The infamous temptation in Eden fits this schema. The devil (via serpent in the traditional story) persuades Adam and Eve to eat the fruit so that they may be like God [...]. Since this is certainly not an appropriate good, we can explain the temptation here as one of deceiving the intellect.

Here McCraw describes an avenue of deception where the demon (supposedly) intervenes directly with our intellectual faculty of moral discernment. In the Genesis story, Adam and Eve (presumably) correctly perceive the fruit as a fruit and so on, but, seduced by the serpent, they falsely believe that gaining knowledge of good and evil and becoming like gods are good things. Here I think McCraw has erred in two respects. First because Aquinas (in De Malo Q.3, A.4) explicitly calls the Serpent's corruption of 'the first human being' in Eden (along with the temptation of Christ in the wilderness) an example of *visible* persuasion - the means of persuasion wasn't supernatural interference with Adam's intellect, but rather the eloquence of the serpent's forked tongue! And second because

Aquinas in the same article explicitly denies that demons cause sin by deceiving the intellect. What he says is that *in principle* a demon could act invisibly upon the intellect, because demons are fallen angels and angels have the power to enlighten intellects. He goes on:

> But the devil, although he could by the ordination of his nature persuade human beings of things by enlightening their intellect as good angels do, does not do this. This is so because the more an intellect is enlightened, the more it can guard itself against the deceptions that the devil intends. And so we conclude that the devil's internal persuasions and revelations are by impressions on the internal and external sense powers, not by enlightenment of the intellect. (De Malo Q.3, A.4)

So the point of raising the power of demons to act on the intellect was actually to *rule it out* as a means of demonic deception. McCraw's other avenues of invisible deception are, on the other hand, legitimate avenues of Thomistic deception. These are deceptions of the inner and outer senses.

Deception of the inner senses depends on two claims of Aquinas's. The first is that material substances, though they cannot be created *ex nihilo* by finite spirits such as angels, can be *moved* by them. He takes this to be implicit in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. Because of this, "devils can in this way collect elements that they use to produce certain wondrous effects, as Augustine says in his work On the Trinity [...]. Therefore, nothing prevents devils from doing whatever can happen by the local movement of corporeal matter, unless they are by divine intervention prevented from doing so" (De Malo Q.3, A.4). The second claim is that our inner sense operates by the movements of material substances. For this Aquinas again cites Aristotle, who says that dreams are caused by the movements of blood and 'sensory vapours'. Aquinas then reasons that, since demons can move materials at will, demons could move blood and sensory vapours in such a way as to fool the interior sense into having, essentially, misleading dreams while asleep. They can also do this to the wakeful, where "devils can sometimes indeed move internal vapours and fluids even to the point that the use of reason is completely fettered, as is evidently the case with the possessed. For it is clear that great disturbance of

the vapours and fluids prevent activities of reason, as is evident in the case of the insane and sleepers and drunks" (De Malo Q.3, A.4), and where sometimes they instead act more subtly on the emotions without overthrowing reason entirely. The manifestations of this kind of deception are dreamlike phantasms - rearrangements of experience to give the impression that things are otherwise than they are. A demon might make someone see a golden mountain where none exists, but the demon couldn't make someone think that 1=2.

Deception of the outer senses is not especially well-described in *De Malo*, and it is not entirely clear how far-reaching it can be. The mechanism is the same as for the inner senses, being the supernatural manipulation of sensory vapours. Aquinas says that by this manipulation the outer senses can be made to "perceive things more acutely or more sluggishly", but declines to give a useful example of how this serves demonic interests.

Surprisingly, though virtually every aspect of Aquinas has been pored over for centuries, there is a dearth of philosophical literature dealing with his demonology. Dominik Perler, in the preamble to his *Does God Deceive Us* (2009) is a notable exception (his conclusions are more or less my own). Perler emphasises that Aquinas's demons are insufficient to support a full-scale skeptical demon argument. A Thomistic demon could deceive me into thinking that there are golden mountains, certainly. More insidiously, by repeatedly vexing me with hallucinations, it could make me distrustful of my inner and outer senses even in cases where in fact they are functioning perfectly. But, as Perler points out (174-5), it could not create a hallucinated external world where none exists. The demons can create chimaeras by combining the material bases of images we already have from the senses, but they cannot create new material bases *ex nihilo* - sensory illusions require some pre-existing sensory basis. Nor could it deceive me about anything that depends only on the intellect. This presumably includes, for example, the

truths of mathematics. It also includes truths about real essences[86] (2009, 176). If we attend to it properly, for Aquinas, our intellect can always, in principle, discern the essences of things. If a demon presents us with a deceitful phantasm, provided we are not clouded with emotion or otherwise inattentive, our intellect will be able to tell that the phantasm is a composite of incompatible essences. We won't be able to get to the truth of things, but we won't be taken in by the lie, either.

The spectre of demonic deception for Aquinas is serious, certainly, but it does not attain the devastating stature of later demon arguments. Aquinas shows no indication that he is even slightly tempted to a skeptical inference. As I will argue at length in Chapter 4, though, Descartes was, via a tradition of meditative literature, an heir of Aquinas, and Thomistic demonology played a significant role in the formulation and response to the Cartesian demon argument.

VII. The Condemnation of 1277

1. Introduction

The omnipotence questions of the high middle ages came to a kind of culmination in an episode of the late 13th century. This 'condemnation of 1277' settled the doctrine that absolute divine omnipotence includes the ability to do anything a created thing can do, which later served as a premise in demon scenarios devised by 14th century philosophers. The condemnation was precipitated by an inquisition against Siger of Brabant, whose own theory of omnipotence I will briefly address, before turning to the implications of the condemnation.

[86] i.e. definitional truths. On the Aristotelian/Scholastic paradigm, a definition is of a *thing* rather than of a *word*, and a good definition captures what it is to be that thing - its intrinsic nature, its essence. The Latin *essentia* in fact entered the philosophical lexicon as a way of translating Aristotle's somewhat obscure Greek *to ti ên einai* - that which it is to be [the thing].

2. Siger of Brabant

Siger wrote a series of '*impossibilia*' (sometime around 1270), being very brief disputations on certain absurd, almost paradoxical topics, intended as teaching examples of the arts of logic and rhetoric. Some of his *impossibilia* topics are: that the Trojan war is happening right now, that a logical contradiction is true, that nothing is evil. These propositions are obviously not being seriously entertained as open questions, but it is nonetheless interesting to look at how Siger treats them. The relevant one to skepticism is number II: "everything that appears to us are illusions (simulacra) and similar to dreams, so that we are not certain of the existence of anything"[87] (trans. Côté, 5).

Although on its face this looks like it might generate a kind of demon argument (the proposition suggests that *everything* might be a simulacrum or dream, raising the spectre of global skepticism), the arguments in favour of this position are, in fact, merely local. Siger considers two: (1) that the senses sometimes deceive us, and so they can generate no certainty at all. As Côté points out, the implicit argument must be a kind of 'bad company' or 'contamination' one, where the general unreliability of the senses means that we can have no grounds for trusting them in particular cases. And (2) (paralleling an argument we saw in Henry of Ghent) that there does not exist any 'superior power' that could act as a corrective for the erring senses, because every sense is prone to error, and 'all certainty comes from the senses' (Bazan, 74). These arguments are not really demonic in nature - they are, essentially, versions of the argument from illusion. Siger's responses to them are not especially compelling, either - the main thrust of his argument is to defuse (1) by pointing out that a sense can err in some situations but still be trustworthy in others, and then to rely on a kind of phenomenal conservatism: rather than going along with his skeptical interlocutor in thinking that (1) implies we need a guarantor for each sense-deliverance, Siger thinks instead that we should, *prima facie,* believe each sense-deliverance unless some other, more reliable, sense gives us reason to doubt. On this view,

[87] *Quod omnia quae nobis apparent sunt simulacra et sicut somnia, it quod non simus certi de existentia alicuius rei* (Bazan, 73)

the fact that all certainty resides in the senses is not a problem, because, where all the senses agree, we have no need or reason to demand a higher authority to act as a corrective. Siger's is thus an interesting chapter in the history of medieval skepticism, but lies somewhat afield from the demon argument itself. That said, Siger is worth mentioning because of his role in a historical episode which very much *is* relevant to the demon argument: the Condemnation of 1277.

In Siger's *Quaestiones Super Librum de Causis* 2, he asks the question of whether "a primary cause can naturally produce the effect of the secondary cause without the secondary cause."[88] The argument of this section is complicated and takes detours that are not worth reproducing here. Essentially, though, Siger takes issue with a claim of Aquinas regarding causation. Aquinas says that God must participate in the causal action of created things (because, for example, some created things are good, and goodness comes only from God). In fact, Aquinas says, it can be demonstrated that God's participation in created causation would be *sufficient* to bring about the effects by Himself (in *Summa Theologica* I, 105, Article 5). Siger thinks this position is absurd because it makes created things redundant. Indeed, it would allow for the ridiculous (Siger and Aquinas agree) possibility reported by Averroes, that God just does everything himself immediately - a view that would later be called 'occasionalism' and espoused by, among others, Malebranche. Siger thinks this scenario is repugnant to reason. His objection is not epistemic - this is *not* an example of a *reductio ad academicus*. Instead the objection is metaphysical: to create beings with essences that would ordinarily manifest as causal powers, but then to frustrate those causal powers, would be to act capriciously and imperfectly (*Super Librum de Causis* 2.21ff). Therefore Aquinas must be wrong.

[88] *Utrum causa primaria naturaliter possit producere effectum causae secundariae sine causa secondaria*

Here Siger faces a theological (rather than philosophical) problem. The way the Eucharist miracle was generally understood to function[89] was that the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the flesh and blood of Christ ('transubstantiation') while all of its accidents and causal powers as bread and wine are miraculously maintained by divine action. The intelligibility of this doctrine depends on the possibility of miraculous action itself sustaining secondary causal powers. When Siger argues against this, then, he risks undermining the accepted philosophical foundation of the Eucharist. This was generally a quick route to the attention of the inquisition.[90]

In order to preserve theological orthodoxy, then, Siger is careful to say that his objections to Aquinas are only as concerns demonstrability through natural reason, and that he *believes* (by faith and revelation) that God does sometimes replace or modify natural causation, as in the miracle of the Eucharist. It's just that this miraculous action is not part of the natural order and cannot be investigated by human reason. Siger's defence thus recalls the Power Distinction in contrasting God's natural action, which cannot replace the causal powers of created things, versus his theological or miraculous action, which can.[91] This is not an especially satisfying move, since Siger's objections appear to be aimed at the *possibility* of substitute divine causation, rather than its knowability - on his official view, it looks as though the Eucharist should be not just unreachable by natural reason, but repugnant to it!

[89] See Adams (2010).

[90] Redondi (1987) famously (and controversially) argued that Galileo's trial was *really* about the philosophical foundations of the Eucharist. Galileo's defense of atomist metaphysics was seen as a threat to the same substance-accident account that Siger ran afoul of.

[91] Scotus, for example, sometimes uses the language of 'theological power' to describe *potentia absoluta*. Note that this implies an interpretation of the Power Distinction according to which God does sometimes step in and actualize His *potentia absoluta*.

Alas for Siger, perhaps for this reason, his defensive tactic persuaded nobody. In 1276, Siger, already under suspicion by the Parisian Inquisition, was summoned to appear before the tribunal and, in response, fled to Italy where he died under mysterious circumstances.

3. Conclusion: God's Absolute Omnipotence and the Condemnation of 1277

Less than one year later, on March 7, 1277, the Bishop of Paris, Stephen Tempier, in consultation with sixteen masters of theology at the University of Paris, issued a 'syllabus of error' condemning 219 propositions (and several specific books) as erroneous.[92] In his introduction, Tempier writes that "…some students of the arts in Paris are exceeding the boundaries of their own faculty and are presuming to treat and discuss, as if they were debatable in the schools, certain obvious and loathsome errors" (translated in Uckelman, 205). The general view of contemporary scholars (though it is not undisputed) is that this condemnation was precipitated in part by the Inquisition's hearings against Siger of Brabant in the previous year, which provided the excuse for an attempt by the theology to control the teachings of the faculty of arts. That being said, the majority of the condemned propositions do not appear in Siger or in any other Parisian arts faculty member's writings of the time (though some appear to be drawn from misunderstandings of Aristotle and Averroes).

Some of the condemned theses are magical or astrological in nature - Tempier condemns, for example, the doctrine that a child can be conceived as a result of the concentrated power of the stars being present in a fluid (?), the doctrine that the planets are the organs of a celestial being, and the doctrine that we ought not to kill animals (Piché). But there are some other condemned propositions that are much more philosophically salient, and which, indeed, bring the two threads of epistemology and of divine power together in a skeptical knot. The condemnation of propositions 43, "that the First Principle cannot be the cause of diverse realities produced down here below, except through the

[92] Pierre Duhem (1984) famously, and controversially, declared 1277 to be the year in which modern science began. I hope it will be clear that I advance a much less radical thesis.

mediation of other causes,"[93] and 63, "that God is unable produce the effect of a secondary cause without the secondary cause itself,"[94] together with a number of other claims limiting God's omnipotence, are the most directly relevant to the skepticism question (they are also quite clearly aimed at Siger's *Quaestiones* discussed *supra*). The condemnation of propositions 43 and 63 were motivated by a desire to preserve biblical miracles against the kind of philosophical analysis seen in Siger. The virgin birth, for example, is naturally understood as an act of God in the world to produce an effect (the body of the incarnation) without an intervening natural cause (the act of procreation). The Eucharist might be described as Divine preservation of the causal powers of bread in spite of a substantial change into flesh. The denial of 43 and 63, though, arguably goes much further than preserving the possibility of miracles. If God can create effects without their natural preceding causes, while leaving more or less unrestricted His ability to do whatever He wills, you leave open the possibility that God could create *all* the effects of a cause, without the cause itself. There would be no way, even in principle, for a human mind to distinguish this situation from one where the cause is in fact present. It would be, in truth, a perfectly convincing illusion. God could deceive us.

Of course, one might object that God would never do such a thing - He would be prevented by his goodness.[95] Here the power distinction traced earlier at last comes back into play. The primary vehicle for the power distinction was, as I've mentioned, the Theology faculty of Paris - the very faculty responsible for the Condemnation. Viewed in the light of their distinction, we can rephrase the doctrine of the Condemnation. God's goodness constrains the exercise of His power, by constraining His will, but this constraint acts only *de potentia ordinata*. *De potentia absoluta,* on the other hand, God is unconstrained. He must be able to do all of the things implied in the Condemnation!

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[93] *Quod primum principium non potest esse cause diuersorum hic inferius, nisi mediantibus aliis causis...* (Piché, 43).

[94] *Quod deus non potest in effectum cause secondarie sine ipsa causa secundaria* (Piché, 63).

[95] Some later writers were happy to say that deception was consistent with God's goodness, and that in fact God not only *can* but *does* deceive us - Holkot, for example, says that God can and does deceive us, but only for the ultimate good.

In some sense, of course, the Condemnation is not at all novel. It is dedicated to preserving orthodoxy and all of its theses are plausibly congruent with orthodox Christian theology of the day. Not even 43 and 63 are exceptional in this respect. If you were to ask Aquinas, or even Anselm, whether in principle God might create a perfectly convincing illusion of a thing, either of them might well have said yes. . The key thing, though, is that neither Aquinas nor Anselm did feel obliged to take a stance on this question. It simply wasn't something worth addressing in their days. It sufficed to know that God was omnipotent and good, and the question of what God's omnipotence would look like unconstrained by His goodness just didn't arise. What the Condemnation did was to enliven this question by making it politically and theologically necessary to take into account a fairly strong doctrine of absolute omnipotence, on pain of possible heresy charges. So, by 1299, we find Scotus, in the unpublished *Lectura II,* explicitly stating that God's omnipotence suffices to create immediately any effect of any secondary cause (Scotus, n.d).

Thus, in an ironic turn of fate, the Condemnation of 1277, along with the related condemnations published in Oxford later that same year, though nominally designed to enforce doctrinal orthodoxy in the face of perceived philosophical challenge, laid the groundwork - in fact obliged philosophers to *teach* the groundwork - for a new kind of argument. This argument, the 'divine deceiver', uses the enriched conception of God's *de absoluta* power as a tool to investigate other phenomena. In Ockham, we will see it used to investigate the nature of contingency and necessity; in Wodeham, Autrecourt, and Mirecourt, we will see it turned to epistemological (though, I will argue, not exactly *skeptical*) ends.

Chapter Three: Late Medieval Skepticism and the Divine Deceiver

I. Introduction and Background

In part due to the aftereffects of the Condemnation of 1277, there developed in the 14th and 15th centuries a new paradigm in the study of divine power. In this paradigm, it was philosophically and theologically respectable to talk about counterfactuals that God could have actualized *de absoluta*. Since, on the dominant understanding post-1277, God's absolute power was limited only by logical possibility, many quite radical scenarios were opened to philosophical investigation. The most epistemically salient such scenarios are those involving widespread supernatural deception, not by demons or lesser angels, but by the Almighty Himself. This chapter charts the development of the divine deception argument and its skeptical implications.

It is worth emphasising at the outset that, since the possibility of divine deception was grounded in God's power *de absoluta*, it was not a 'live option' or real epistemic threat. Instead, the deployment of divine deception was *methodological* in character - deception scenarios were advanced only in order to accomplish various non-skeptical ends. What this chapter aims to show is that, in developing these methodological deception scenarios, two distinct 'escalations' occurred that, inadvertently, but significantly, increased the threat of genuine skeptical demon arguments.

The first of these escalatory moves occurred in Oxford, in the work of William of Ockham and his immediate successors. I will argue that, though Ockham and his followers were by no means skeptics, their distinctive epistemological use of the divine deceiver involved increasingly *plausible* deceptions. Eventually, in William Crathorn, we see him postulating what appears to be a case of not merely possible *de absoluta*, but *actual* divine deception.

The second move appeared in Paris. In the latter half of the chapter, I look at the contemporaries Mirecourt and Autrecourt, in whose writings the epistemic use of the deceiver takes centre stage. Here I argue that they exhibit an escalation in the *stakes* of the divine deceiver, in that they (especially Autrecourt) imagine a deception which extends to introspection and even logic. Throughout the discussion, I identify themes that will reoccur in the next chapter's investigation of Descartes and the skeptical Cartesians.

II. the Divine Deceiver in Ockham's Oxford

1. Introduction

The great English Franciscan William of Ockham studied theology at Oxford but never completed his Magister degree, instead working from London, where he shared the company of his student Adam Wodeham. He contributed widely to political and moral philosophy, logic, theology, and epistemology. Surprisingly, no consensus emerged on Ockham's contributions to the history of skepticism for many years - in some circles he was considered an early skeptic himself, while others took his writings to be profoundly antiskeptical. Since Marilyn Adams's magisterial *William Ochkam* (1989), the prevailing view has been that Ockham was not greatly preoccupied by skepticism himself, and was certainly no skeptic. The charges of skepticism that adhered to him later on are natural enough, but trade on misreadings of his philosophy - possibly deliberate misreadings, in the pall cast by Ockham's Avignon trial for heresy. In this section, I first examine Ockham's own philosophy, arguing that he was an early expositor of something like the contemporary 'disjunctivist' epistemology, alive to the epistemic importance of supernatural deception but certainly no skeptic himself. I then turn to the use made of Ockham's version of divine deception by two of his Oxford colleagues, Adam Wodeham and William Crathorn.

2. Ockham and the Intuition of Nonexistent Entities

Ockham had a view of the power distinction that was, by the 14th century, more or less orthodox. He held, against Scotus, that *potentia Dei absoluta* and *ordinata* are not two distinct powers in God (recall Scotus conceived of absolute power as a kind of second-order power to change what is ordinate), but rather are two ways in which the human philosopher can consider the single power of God (Quodlibetum VI, q. 1; Ockham, 1991, 491). The philosopher can think of God's power either according to the divine will (de ordinata), or *simpliciter,* without regard to the divine will (de absoluta). As Courtenay (1985, 255) points out, this means that the agreement between Scotus and Ockham that God only ever acts ordinately is only superficial. Scotus's God can only act ordinately because of a kind of technicality: were God to exercise his absolute power, it would change the structure of the world to make that exercise ordinate. Ockham's God can only act ordinately because of his fixed and perfect will. What this means is that Ockham's investigations of *potentia Dei absoluta* are investigations of a peculiar sort, into the kinds of things that would be 'absolutely possible' for an unconstrained God. If Ockham says something is possible *de absoluta*, he means something quite idiosyncratic and abstract - he's not seriously advancing it as a live possibility.

That said, Ockham is extraordinary in tracing out the sheer scope of absolute omnipotence so construed. Ockham, echoing Scotus (and thus the Condemnation), holds that (*de absoluta*) God can bring about himself any effect that would ordinarily be brought about by some secondary cause. For this reason, God can also maintain himself any effect that would ordinarily be sustained by a secondary cause. And, of course, God can destroy any created thing in an instant.[96] With these theses, we have the

[96] Elizabeth Karger provides some references in a helpful footnote (228, footnote 9): Wodeham LS prol, q. 2, vol. I, 37, 3-5: "... nulla est notitia simplex in anima, quin illam posset Deus causare vel prius causatam conservare obiecto eius non exsistente."

"Ockham, *Reportatio* II, q. 12-13, OTh V, 259, 21-260, 1: "... talis cognitio [intuitiva] nunquam est, nec conservatur naturaliter, nisi obiecto praesente et exsistente. Ideo ista cognitio intu itiva naturalis corrumpitur per absentiam obiecti. Et posito quod maneat post corruptionem obiecti, tune est supernaturalis quantum ad conservationem licet non quantum ad causationem."

building blocks of a full-scale skeptical demon argument. It's worth spending a moment examining how this goes.

Think about a case of ordinary perceptual knowledge, say, of a tree. I wake up one morning fancying a walk. It's a clear, sunny morning, I'm fully alert and awake, nobody is running around replacing real trees with realistic plastic impostors, etc. I look at a tree.[97] According to the order of nature that God has laid down, light glances off the tree and into my eyes, sensory and perceptual processes occur,[98] and I form a belief: "there's a tree." This belief is a good one: it was formed in good circumstances by a reliable process, it establishes a genuine causal connection to the tree, and so on, and we would generally call it knowledge. But, on Ockham's view, the very fact that my good belief is possible shows that it is an effect of a secondary cause - the tree itself. This means that God could, were His will otherwise, annihilate the tree, overthrow the natural order of things, and create himself *the very same cognition* that would ordinarily result from the causal processes of sense-perception. The situation would be *in principle* indistinguishable from the normal one, except that my tree-cognition would correspond to no actual tree. And of course, if this situation is possible, we can construct skeptical arguments from it in the familiar way:

> **Premise:** if I know 'there is a tree,' then I can rule out the possibility that there is only empty space
>
> **Premise:** I cannot rule out the possibility that God has annihilated the tree leaving only empty space
>
> **Conclusion:** I do not know 'there is a tree'[99]

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[97] The example is Ockham's own.

[98] Of course Ockham would have a very different account of those processes from that of a modern perceptual psychologist.

[99] I want to highlight that even the exclusively sensory modes of deception in Ockham operate very differently from the kind of deception that, for example, Aquinas attributes to demons. Recall Aquinas' demons act upon bodily vapors and

Ockham himself would, of course, reject any such argument, on at least two grounds, one obvious and one obscure. The obvious ground for rejecting skeptical conclusions is that Ockham is only talking about a power God has *de absoluta*. In fact, God's will constrains His power, and He only ever acts ordinately. Since annihilating trees while deceiving us into believing in them is clearly inconsistent with the manifest will of God, the second premise is just false: we certainly can rule out the deceiving God possibility. This ground applies equally to the various other forms of deception argument I will identify in Ockham below, and is sufficient to explain why Ockham does not consider himself a skeptic of any sort.

The obscure ground turns on peculiarities of Ockham's theory of judgement. For reasons that have sometimes puzzled contemporary historians (Karger, 2004; Panaccio and Piché, 2009), Ockham holds that, were God to miraculously cause an intuitive[100] cognition of an annihilated tree, the resulting cognition (though identical to the one caused by the extant tree) could lead to the true judgement "there is no tree" (!). He says that "…when the same intuitive knowledge remains in place and the thing has changed, the intellect first judges the thing to be when it is and afterwards judges it not to be when it is not" (*Ord.* Prologue Q.1). It's important to note that Ockham's actual view is slightly less radical than these statements make it appear. He does not claim that, in every such case, we would in fact form the appropriate negative judgement. What he claims is that, in cases where we have the intuitive cognition of the tree but nonetheless unaccountably think "there is no tree," we would be forming a true intuitive judgement of nonexistence.[101] In response to the obvious objection that this makes no

effluvia, inducing hallucinations and dreams by manipulating our bodies. Ockham's divine deceiver deceives the senses [to the extent that it can indeed be called deception] by miraculously creating the cognition (or phantasm, or idea) directly before the mind. The operation of the sensory apparatus itself is unaffected.

[100] Where 'intuitive' here roughly means 'immediate' or 'not dependent on a reasoning process', and 'abstractive' just means the opposite.

[101] *Si Deus causet in me cognitionem intuitivam de aliquo obiecto non existente et conservet illam in me, possum ego mediante illa cognitione iudicare rem non esse, quia videndo illam rem intuitive et formato hoc complexo 'hoc obiectum non est'…* Quoted and discussed in Karger, 2004, note 15.

sense at all, Ockham responds that *judgements*, such as that a tree is or is not physically present, are the combination of a cognition and the thing itself. Since, in the case of the annihilated tree, God produces a cognition which is not allied to an actually existing tree, there cannot be a genuine judgement that the thing is. In fact, and startlingly, he claims that it causes a true judgement that the thing is not: "Therefore intuitive knowledge of a thing and the thing itself may cause a judgement that the thing is, but when the thing is not then the intuitive knowledge without that thing will cause the opposite judgement" (Simpson, 2021, Q.1.153).[102] The 'will' here is misleading, as Ockham clearly means to say that the intuitive cognition of a nonexistent *may* cause a judgement of nonexistence in the same way as the intuitive cognition of a real thing *may* cause a judgement of existence.

In fact, I think the 'cause' language is also misleading. Ockham is clear that it is not even logically possible to have an intuitive judgement that a nonexistent thing exists. Since God can create immediately any effect of a secondary cause, it must not be the case that the role of the actual tree in the judgement that the tree exists is *causal* (though, irritatingly, Ockham describes the relationship using the word "*causa*"), or else God could create intuitive judgements of the existence of annihilated entities.[103] I think that, to best understand what Ockham must mean, we have to bear in mind that

[102] For ease of reference, I've used here the translation and paragraph numbers from Simpson, 2021. Note that what Simpson here calls 'intuitive knowledge' is what I have been calling 'intuitive cognition.'

[103] It must be said that the nature of the relationship is a bit mysterious. Ockham's preferred language is that the judgement is caused by the cognition and by the thing both, as 'partial causes' (OTh I 56, 9-21; Ibid. 70-71, 21-9). It is possible that when Ockham talks of the actual tree, or, perhaps more revealingly, the *existence* of the tree, 'partially causing' a judgement, he is just using somewhat infelicitous causal language to describe a constitutive parthood relationship. This, I believe, is the kind of thing Ockham is getting at at the end of Quodlibetum V Question 5. There he worries that "you might object that God can produce an evident assent to the contingent [proposition] in question through the existence of the thing as through a secondary cause. Therefore, he is able to do it by himself alone" (Ockham, 1991, 417). That is, you might think that, since the existence of the tree can, as a contributing cause, bring about an evident intuitive judgement, God ought to be able to do so himself. But, Ockham replies, this is not so. "I reply that here there is a fallacy of a figure of speech, just like there is here: 'God can produce a meritorious act through the mediation of a created will; therefore he can produce such an act by himself alone.' And this is [a fallacy] because of the different connotations in the one case and in the other." (ibid.) The analogy is interesting. It is of course true that God could do himself the very same act that some created thing did, but, the thought must be, when done *by God* that act would cease to be 'meritorious', because the grammar of a meritorious act requires that the act be committed by a created will. In the same way, God could create a

Ockham's talk of divine assumption of secondary causal powers and the like is really just a means to an end. The real Ockhamist analysis of God's absolute power is that He can do whatever is not logically impossible. Thus, whatever the mysterious connection is between tree and judgement must be, at root, logical. What Ockham has in mind, then, I think, must be that the actual tree is a kind of grammatical *part* of the intuitive judgement that the tree exists. This thought sounds odd, admittedly (how can a physical object be a part of a mental act?) but there are, in fact, more contemporary philosophers who have endorsed similar views. Bertrand Russel, for a time, flirted with much the same idea (see Lebens, 2017).[104]

It is fair to say that Ockham's is a counterintuitive view. It entails, among other oddities, that in some circumstances the only way in which we could genuinely form a judgement would be wholly nonrational. If we seem to see a tree, but God has, unbeknownst to us, obliterated the tree itself, the only way in which we can form a genuine judgement is if we unaccountably assent to the proposition 'there is no tree' despite having an intuitive cognition of a tree! Small wonder that Ockham's associates were reluctant to accept his theory.[105]

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cognitive state indistinguishable from that involved in an affirmative intuitive judgement, but the grammar of intuitive judgement would mean that the created thing would not really *be* an intuitive judgement.

[104] The view exists outside the analytic tradition, too. For example, David W Smith (2013, 198ff) interprets Husserl's analysis of the structure of experience in just such a way. Smith's Husserl explains a cognitive 'intentional act' as being a relation between a subject and a real 'intentional object' (eg, an actual, physical tree), through the medium of 'intentional content' (eg, our idea of a tree). In fact, the Brentanian notion of "intentional inexistence" that inspired Husserl is often taken to be an updating and reintroduction of Scholastic theories. See Runggaldier 1989; McDonnell 2006.

[105] Karger raises another potential problem with Ockham's theory, though I do not think it is ultimately compelling. Karger points to a passage in the *Reportatio* (Rep. II, q. 12) in which Ockham says that God could act to enable an intuitive cognition of something too far away to ordinarily induce one, which would be involved in a correct intuitive judgement that that thing exists (Karger, 2004, 234). As Karger says, this appears to be inconsistent with Ockham's theory of judgement. If an object is too remote to causally effect a cognition of it, then presumably it is also too remote to effect a judgement that it exists. Presented in this form, I do not think the conclusion follows. Since Ockham's theory must require (as we saw earlier) two qualitatively distinct roles for the secondary cause, I don't think it would trouble him to say that only the causal process involved in creating cognitions is 'range limited'. Certainly, if my above analysis is right, no range limitation would apply to a logical or grammatical relationship! In any event, there is a second issue, which is that the *Reportatio*, as Karger herself identifies, reflects an early stage of Ockham's theorising, before the full theory of judgement

3. Ockham and the Skeptic

So why did Ockham feel the need for such an outlandish theory of judgement? Elizabeth Karger, in *Ockham and Wodeham on Divine Deception as a Skeptical Hypothesis* (2004), argues that he was motivated by the prospect of demonic skepticism. Her main evidence for this idea is that Ockham's friend and colleague Adam Wodeham, who does not share Ockham's theory of judgement, more or less admits that, without it, the possibility of divinely inspired intuitive cognitions leads to a skeptical argument that destroys 'all philosophical certainty.'[106]

Karger's explanation is an attractive one, but there remains the *prima facie* issue that Ockham's view does not seem to succeed in avoiding demon arguments. For example, Ockham certainly holds that God can (de *absoluta*) prevent a secondary cause from creating its effects. He also holds (Karger, 231; Quodlibetum V, 5) that God could instil a false conviction directly into our minds. He says that "God can cause an act of believing through which I believe a thing to be present that is [in fact] absent. And I claim that this belief-cognition will be abstractive, not intuitive. And through such an act of faith a thing can appear to be present when it is absent, but this cannot happen through an evident act" (Ockham, 1991, 416).[107] So, leaving the tree intact, God could simply prevent it from causing perceptual cognitions in us, while simultaneously instilling the conviction that there is no tree (or is

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was introduced in the *Ordinatio*. Since the offending claim appears only in the *Reportatio*, it is entirely possible that the mature Ockham would simply have rejected it.

[106] *...tunc contradictio esset quod Deus certificaret me de existentia cuiuscumque ab eo distincti, et ita periret certitudo omnis philosophica*. As Karger points out, Wodeham eventually conceded that this argument shows we have certainty only if God is not deceiving us (229, note 12). But see below on why Wodeham does not at all mind this conclusion.

[107] *Tamen Deus potest causare actum creditivum per quem credo rem esse praesentem quae est absens. Et dico quod illa cognitio creditiva erit abstractiva, non intuitiva; et per talem actum fidei potest apparere res esse praesens quando est absens.*

instead a giraffe, or whatever).[108] The resulting belief system would be of a different *kind* from the intuitive judgement engendered by normal perception (Ockham explicitly says that the divinely created conviction would be 'abstractive' rather than 'intuitive'), but it still seems like this possibility ought to devastate our epistemic position!

I want to suggest some similarities between Ockham's approach and a contemporary line of antiskeptical argument - the 'disjunctivist' reply - that work to defuse this concern. As Duncan Pritchard summarises this view in his *Epistemic Angst* (2016, 124ff), the disjunctivist holds that, in cases where we have genuine knowledge, we have perceptual experiences that are both factive and introspectively accessible: if you see (for example) *p*, then *p*, and you can tell you are seeing *p*. This latter claim should be qualified a bit, though, because the disjunctivist does not hold that the introspective accessibility of seeing *p* entails distinguishability from non-factive states. Or, to put it more nicely, here's Pritchard again:

> On the one hand, we have a "good" case where the agent possesses paradigmatic perceptual knowledge. On the other hand, we have a corresponding "bad" case—such as a BIV case [...]—where the agent's experiences are *introspectively indistinguishable* and in which she lacks perceptual knowledge of the target proposition (but nonetheless blamelessly supposes that she possesses such knowledge) (124, my emphasis).

It is legitimate, I think, to wonder what the introspective accessibility thesis actually amounts to, then. If you cannot introspectively distinguish genuine perceptions (for example) from demon-mediated hallucinations, in what sense can you be said to have introspective access to your perceptions? I take it the disjunctivist replies that, well, in the good case (which is the only case in which you really perceive

[108] This kind of argument makes it seem as though Ockham ought to be committed to the possibility of divine deception about non-sensory judgements, too. If God can directly cause us to credit a falsehood, albeit abstractively rather than intuitively, could He not directly cause us to believe "2+2=5?" Given the context of these remarks (responding to an objection he himself raises to his own theory of intuitive judgement), it is perhaps unsurprising that Ockham does not even raise this concern.

things), you would reflect on your experience and, by a reliable process, come to the correct belief that you are perceiving things. The fact that, in the bad case, you wouldn't be able to do the same is no threat *in the good case*.

The view's efficacy against the skeptic depends largely on the 'externalist' move whereby being in a position to know something depends not just on the conduct of your mental life, but also on whether or not you happen to be placed in a knowledge-prone "good case." If this move is acceptable, then it's entirely consistent to accept the triad

1) in a demon world, you do not know you have hands, and
2) the demon world is first-person indistinguishable from the real world, **and also**
3) in the real world, you know you have hands (and know that you know, etc...)

Ockham's strategy, if it is to be antiskeptical, must take a similar tack. His 'bad case' is the divine deception scenario. If God the deceiver were to, by any means, implant in us a cognitive state indistinguishable from an intuitive judgement that a tree exists (while annihilating the tree), the resulting state would not amount to an intuitive judgement. There would be no way for us to distinguish that situation from a genuine intuitive judgement of a tree. But, Ockham must be thinking, it is *still the case that in the real world we have intuitive judgement*. It's not entirely clear whether Ockham holds that intuitive judgement is introspectively accessible in the same sense as contemporary disjunctivists, but it seems to fit his language well enough. So, I think Karger's explanation is, in the final accounting, quite plausible.

Ockham, then, influenced by the Condemnation's emphasis on absolute omnipotence, presents extraordinary new avenues of supernatural deception. These possibilities do not lead him into skepticism. That being said, the way in which he *avoids* skepticism is quite idiosyncratic. Without

taking a stance on the efficacy of the disjunctivist reply, it is worth observing that even contemporary disjunctivism is sometimes seen as counterintuitive and/or radical. In Ockham's day it would have been more radical still. The result is that Ockham gave his successors potentially powerful skeptical arguments, but in many cases they were unprepared to accept the attendant *anti*skeptical tools.

4. Wodeham and Methodological Skepticism

Karger, as we saw in 1.2., takes Adam Wodeham to have fallen from Ockhamist premises into a kind of skepticism. It is certainly true that Wodeham accepted the possibility of divine deception. He writes, for example, that God could cause any and all evidence in the same way as He can cause visions, explaining this by the familiar post-1277 principle that God can do whatever a secondary cause can.[109] It is also true that Wodeham attached epistemic significance to that fact. This section will show that the epistemic significance in question was not skeptical, however, but methodological: Wodeham's goal was to refute what he saw as a problematic infallibilism in Ockham's epistemology.

Some of Wodeham's pronouncements certainly read as though he were embracing a kind of skepticism - he says, for example, that the intuitive judgement that something is white is only certain "unless God deceives me."[110] But this first impression is misleading. Here I follow Adam Langridge, who, in his doctoral dissertation (2015), points out that Wodeham was writing in an environment (Ockham's Oxford) dominated by philosophers, such as Ockham himself, who assigned special epistemic privilege to intuitions about contingent facts - direct deliverances of the senses and the like. As we just saw above, Ockham's view was that intuitive judgements not just amount to knowledge,

[109] *...concedo quod omnem evidentiam complexam apprehensivam tantum quolibet istorum trium modum quam Deus potest causare posita visione, potest Deus causare illa circumscripta tam in essendo quam in causando, et hoc tam respectu rei extra animam quam respectu rei in anima, cuius evidentiae complexae visio ipsa non est pars. Probatur per principium saepe allegatum: quidquid potest Deus mediante efficiente secundo etc.* (Wodeham, LS I, 164)

[110] *...aliquod iudicium est evidens posita intuitiva, puta iudicatur quod haec albedo est nisi Deus decipiat me, demonstrata albedine visa.* (Wodeham, LS I, 170)

but are so absolutely certain that not even the intervention of God Himself could shake them! Wodeham, an admirer of Aristotle and classical scholasticism, perceived a tension between this exaltation of perceptual intuition on the one hand, and Aristotle's account of *scientia* in terms of demonstration on the other.

According to Wodeham (and indeed the dominant medieval reading of Aristotle), *scientia* is distinguished by its demonstrative character. In order to count as *scientia,* something must be demonstrated through rational argumentation from (indemonstrable) 'intellectual intuitions' (Langridge, 183ff). For Wodeham, an obvious consequence of this account of *scientia* is that scientific knowledge has to be open to (at least some) doubt: "*omnis veritas scibilis est dubitabilis*" (Wodeham, LS I, 227). The reason for this is that a demonstration has the function of increasing our confidence in the demonstrandum: you cannot *demonstrate* that the whole is greater than the part, because that claim is already maximally certain. Since scientific knowledge is demonstrated, it must not be antecedently certain! By 'open to doubt', then, Wodeham means that apprehension of the terms of the truth is not sufficient to compel assent to an affirmative judgement - ie, the claim is not known *per se nota*.

The problem Wodeham worries about is that Ockham's theory of judgement makes every genuine intuitive judgement maximally certain *per se nota*: any claim of the form 'there's a tree', assuming it is really judged, is, *by definition*, true. So Wodeham wants to preserve scientific knowledge and demonstration, not against skepticism at all, but against infallibilist perceptual realism![111]

The point of Wodeham's divine deceiver, then, is to undermine infallibilist perceptual realism by showing that intuitive judgements about contingent truths are, in fact, dubitable. The deceiver

[111] Some similarities between Wodeham's and Descartes's strategies will be noticed in Chapter Four.

argument is used to undermine the exalted station of absolute certainty that Ockham (and Chatton, etc) attributed to intuitive judgements.[112] Once seen as dubitable, these claims can properly serve as the conclusions of Aristotelian demonstrations (which will eliminate the instrumental doubt introduced by the deceiving God in the first place.)

Because Wodeham's doubts depend on *potentia Dei absoluta*, they are not serious threats to our knowledge. The doubt only has to be strong enough to undermine logical certainty. In the world of real epistemic possibility, governed not just by absolute power but by God's ordained will, the doubt disappears. Wodeham is thus no skeptic either.

5. Crathorn's Escalation and Actual Deception

William Crathorn, a near contemporary of Ockham at Oxford, also took Ockham's theory of divine power and generated deception scenarios from it. Crathorn, though, is significant for two main reasons. First and foremost, he exemplifies the Oxonian escalation by giving an example of (what he takes to be) *actual* divine deception. In this way, he brings the deceiver from a purely hypothetical problem, and one about absolute possibility at that, to a live possibility with possibly dire implications (though, as we will see, he seems unaware of the scope of the problem). Second, Crathorn models a particular methodological use of the deceiver with striking parallels with Descartes.

In his *Sentences* commentary, Crathorn he offers an argument for the following remarkable thesis: "Another conclusion to be proved is that in this life we will not be able, on the basis of any sensory cognition, to have a natural, evident, and altogether infallible cognition of complexes of this sort: *That is a stone; That is bread; That is water; That is fire*; and so on for others." (Pasnau 2002, 290).

[112] This also explains why Wodeham, like Ockham, seems uninterested in demon arguments targeting anything other than sensory knowledge of the external world.

As we will see momentarily, this thesis is less skeptical than it appears (Crathorn has an alternative to sensory cognition, and in any case, as with Wodeham, whose arguments are similar, the goal here is only to establish fallibility). The argument for it, though, is a direct application of Ockhamist divine power principles. First consider the Eucharist. It is clear, says Crathorn, that a pagan and a Christian looking at the consecrated host have all the same sense-impressions and all the same sensory cognitions. But the pagan will just identify the consecrated Host - the very body of Christ - as bread. Therefore, sensory cognition alone does not suffice to know *that is bread.* Crathorn says: "let someone secretly consecrate the host when no one is looking, and then present it to some great Christian philosopher. It's evident that that Christian could in no way naturally cognize that there is bread under or within those accidents."

The same problem generalises to the existence of every created thing: "God could annihilate the nature of any given corporeal substance, and preserve its accidents in the same form and shape that they had before. Therefore, a wayfarer cannot through the existence of accidents infallibly cognize that any corporeal substance exists. But a wayfarer has a natural cognition of a corporeal substance's existence only through the cognition of accidents." (ibid.)

Crathorn then runs variants of the same argument to show that, just as people can have no infallible sensory knowledge regarding the existence of things external, they can have no such knowledge that qualities or accidents are externally instantiated.[113] God could destroy a white tree while preserving the causal powers of whiteness, deceiving us into thinking there was a colour instantiated out in the world when there really is not. Or, "without any whiteness existing or present to someone capable of seeing

[113] Crathorn also has a number of additional arguments, involving hallucinations and so forth, for this second conclusion. Pasnau looks at these arguments from the perspective of medieval species and representationalism debates in his (1997).

it, God could create a species of whiteness in that person's brain, in the part first receptive of a visible species, without his being aware of the fact." (292) This latter example seems to involve a slightly different exercise of divine omnipotence from the standard Ockhamist ones. Rather than conserving the causal powers of a destroyed thing, God is in this scenario miraculously creating white species *ex nihilo* in the brain. The result is more or less the same, however - in either case, God's miraculous action generates a cognition indistinguishable from genuine colour perception. This being the case, we cannot in general trust the veracity of our colour cognitions.

But, as I mentioned above, Crathorn by no means uses this kind of deception for skeptical purposes. Rather like Descartes, he is using divine deception to undermine the power of the senses in order to advocate an alternative epistemological foundation. He begins by arguing that first-personal introspective knowledge such as "*I see whiteness, Whiteness is something, That which I see is something*" (293) is secure. The reason given for this is that, without this kind of knowledge, the security of claims like 'the whole is greater than the part' would be undermined, which in turn would mean that "all cognition and human knowledge (scientia) would perish, which is absurd to say" (294).

Fortunately, he thinks that an "evident cognition" that "I see" is implicit in the experience of whiteness. Likewise there must be an "evident cognition" of whiteness, and then

> [S]ince whiteness is an extended thing having part after part, someone seeing whiteness (whether this whiteness is a thing seen outside the perceiver or a species of whiteness existing in his head) can from the very fact that he sees such a thing evidently and altogether infallibly cognize this complex: *This whole is greater than its part* (294, emphasis original).

The order here is a bit unusual by medieval standards, in that Crathorn recovers knowledge of first principles *after* first-personal introspective knowledge, though the actual reasoning just seems to be the familiar one that the first principles are implicit in experience in the same way that is the experiencer's own existence.

Crathorn's next move is to recover knowledge of the external world. The argument is not especially well-developed, but its general structure will be familiar to modern readers.

> ...although a wayfarer on the sole basis of sensory cognition cannot have evident and altogether infallible cognition that such sensed qualities are outside him, nevertheless on the basis of a sensory cognition and this complex known per se, *God or the first cause does nothing groundlessly and supernaturally so as to lead human beings into error,* he can evidently conclude that such sensed things exist. (295, emphasis original)

That is, among those first principles known *per se* is that God is not a deceiver. As he puts it later on, everyone can prove by reason alone that "God produces no supernatural effect so as to verify a lie or induce a multitude of human beings into error. For this would be incompatible with his goodness" (299). Since the basis for the earlier doubts was divine deception, the elimination of divine deception as a possibility recovers our ability to know that whiteness inheres in external objects and so forth.

The real point of this whole discussion, for Crathorn, is to get to knowledge of the 'articles of faith'. Having established that the way in which we know things about the external world is on the basis of the senses *together with* the *per se* proposition that God is good and not a deceiver, Crathorn argues that knowledge of the core tenets of that Catholic faith can be established in precisely the same way. The apostles, for example, could have established the veracity of the teachings of Jesus by reasoning that, since those teachings were accompanied by miraculous signs (healing lepers and so forth), and since God would not perform miracles in service of a lie, the teachings must be right. Crathorn concedes that this is a sort of knowledge only available to the faithful, but seems entirely untroubled by that fact. This seems palatable in the case of the articles of faith, but it should perhaps be of more concern that knowledge of trees turns out to depend on being a Catholic. It is important to remember, though, that for Crathorn a failure to be a Catholic in the relevant sense is not just an accident of birth, upbringing, and religious sensibility: it is a cognitive failure, precisely akin to failure to

acknowledge that twice two is four. It is less shocking that such a radical cognitive failure might undermine knowledge seemingly outside the religious sphere than it would be on a more contemporary understanding of religiosity.

In summary, then, Crathorn, like Ockham and Wodeham, well understood that the conception of divine power he was working under had epistemic implications. Like them, this did not lead him to any kind of embrace of skepticism, since this kind of divine deception is only possible *de absoluta*. When we consider God's goodness - the ordained limits on His absolute power - the worries disappear. One might reasonably feel that Crathorn has escaped too easily - after all, he gives no argument whatsoever that 'God is not a deceiver' can indeed be known from reason alone! In fact, he appears to have given a pretty compelling argument that God is in fact a deceiver: God *actually* deceives the pagan into thinking that the consecrated host is mere bread. Crathorn does not worry about this at all, which perhaps just shows that skepticism and sensory knowledge were not his real targets. The real point of the discussion was to show (to Catholics) that the Catholic faith could be known (by Catholics) on the basis of natural reason, and the 'skeptical' concerns are advanced as methodological tools to illuminate *how* natural reason could accomplish this feat. The structure of Crathorn's methodological argument closely resembles that which we will see in Descartes two centuries later: Crathorn sets up a skeptical deception scenario in order to undermine our *prima facie* faith in the senses, in order to reestablish knowledge on rationally knowable (*per se nota*) propositions - in particular that God is not a deceiver - instead. These parallels will be investigated more in the following chapter.

III. Skepticism on the Continent: Autrecourt and Mirecourt

1. Introduction

Contemporary with the Ockhamist school in Oxford, divine deception was developed in the University of Paris. This section discusses the Parisian form of the divine deceiver, first by examining Mirecourt's methodological use of the deceiver to demarcate our knowledge of external things from

our knowledge of logical certainties. As I argue, the skepticism in Mirecourt has been somewhat exaggerated. Nonetheless, his version of deception is a useful baseline for the subsequent discussion of his contemporary Nicholas of Autrecourt. Autrecourt, I argue, intends to employ the divine deception scenario as a *reductio ad academicus,* but his soaring rhetorical flourishes lead him to envision a kind of deception scenario that is more radical than any that came before.

2. Two Degrees of Certainty: Mirecourt

John of Mirecourt, like virtually everyone else discussed in this chapter, had most of his writings condemned as heretical. In fact, Mirecourt's condemnation by the Paris theology faculty happened in the same year (1347) that Autrecourt was forced to recant and burn almost all of his writings. The degree of connection between Mirecourt, Autrecourt (of whom more follows), and Ockham is somewhat controversial. Van Neste's 1977 *A Reappraisal of the Supposed Skepticism of John of Mirecourt* collects evidence that there was only minimal collaboration between Mirecourt and Autrecourt in fact, and that lumping them together (as 'the 14th century skeptics' or so) is largely the result of taking their condemnation documents at face value. Be that as it may, it was certainly the case that popular perception in the middle ages was that Ockhamist philosophy in the figures of Mirecourt and Autrecourt led to objectionable skepticism in the halls of the University of Paris.

Some of the skeptical charges with which Mirecourt was saddled are clearly false. As Courtenay demonstrated as early as his (1972), for example, Mirecourt simply did not hold that God could alter the past. Mirecourt's view appears to have been the perfectly orthodox one that, in eternity past, God had the option (*de absoluta*) of not creating the world, or of creating it differently, and so from that point of view the actual history of the world is not absolutely necessary. However, given that it has

already happened, it's just logically impossible for the past to have been otherwise, and God cannot change what has already happened, even according to his power *de absoluta*.[114]

The main substance of skepticism in Mirecourt is his discussion of 'natural certainty' in the *Commentary on the Sentences*. In question six, he distinguishes between natural certainty (*evidentia*) on the one hand and 'special certainty' on the other.[115] This distinction seems to be original to Mirecourt, and is quite contrary to the position of Autrecourt, who, as will be discussed shortly, recognizes only the category of certainties reducible to the principle of noncontradiction (among which he appears to count basic perceptual beliefs). In Mirecourt's view, 'special certainty' is of the same kind: the certainty which attaches to *per se nota* propositions that compel assent immediately once fully comprehended. Natural certainty, on the other hand, is compelled by 'causes' and concerns contingent propositions. In introducing this latter notion, Mirecourt is careful to specify that it does not apply to miracles, but rather to the natural causal order of the world.

Mirecourt has a complex relationship with divine deception. He is quite clear that God cannot directly intervene in cognition so as to cause us to fail to assent to a fully comprehended special certainty - presumably because it is just part of the definition of a special certainty that it compels assent. He can, however, act through secondary causes to deceive us even in our own heads.[116] God's inability to intervene *directly* in cognition precludes the kind of divine deception prevalent in Ockham and Wodeham, because Mirecourt is unwilling to grant God the power to create intuitive cognitions of

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[114] Though, I should observe that the fact that some people, even if they were motivated by political animus, read this doctrine into Mirecourt's writings shows that it was not completely *unthinkable*. The ability to change the past would allow incredibly powerful skeptical demon arguments, of a sort that, to the best of my knowledge, have never seriously been proffered.

[115] *duplex est evidentia: quedam est evidentia specialis primi principii, alia est evidentia (5) naturalis nostri ingenii* (Q.6 4.1)

[116] *Mediantibus causis secundis, potest Deus causare errorem respectu primi principii; ista patet, quia potest dubitare de eius entitate et huiusmodi.* (Q6 12.6)

nonexistent entities. Van Neste has a very nice textual argument that Mirecourt was reluctant to openly condemn that doctrine (which was very influential), but that he nonetheless strongly indicates his preference for the alternative, and, in fact, tacitly assumes it when convenient (Van Neste, 119ff). Robert Pasnau interprets the view as follows:

> Mirecourt urges the adoption of a view on which there is no real distinction between a thought and the power of thought. On this sort of account, God cannot simply put the thought into someone's mind and then have that person think it. To give a person a new thought requires changing a person's intellect. Of course, God can create wholly new intellects, and create them so that they are, right now, having a certain thought. But, if God decides to give me a whole new intellect that has a certain thought as its content, it would evidently not be me who is having that thought. Perhaps God can also simply reach in and change my intellect. But in that case the thought imposed would seem to be an alien one, not my own. Mirecourt thus reaches the striking and surprisingly plausible conclusion that "God cannot, by himself, cause any error within the soul." (Pasnau, 2017, 120)

That said, even the somewhat more limited *potentia absoluta* of God in Mirecourt is sufficient to allow a devastating deception argument. Mirecourt considers the conclusion that (using Pasnau's translation, but see below) *"No one evidently knows [scit], with the aforesaid evidentness, that anything other than oneself exists. One does not know, for instance, that whiteness exists, that a human being exists, that two things or many things exist, and on and on, or that a human being is different from a donkey, and so forth."* (Pasnau, 119, Footnote 2)[117] Pasnau interpretes this passage rather skeptically, as saying that "our grasp of the existence of anything beyond oneself must inevitably be subject to some qualification." (ibid.) In some sense this is right, but it is important to observe that the 'aforesaid evidentness' refers to the sense of 'special certainty' introduced at the beginning of the question. Mirecourt is denying that our knowledge of the existence of things external (including,

[117] *Quinta conclusio est negativa; est ista, quod evidentia predicta nullus scit evidenter quod aliqua res alia ab eo est, utpote nec quod albedo est, nec etiam quod homo est, nec etiam quod duo sunt, nec etiam quod multa sunt et sic de talibus, nec quod homo est aliud ab asino et huius<modi>* (Q.6 37)

startlingly, God) is of the same kind as our knowledge of the principle of noncontradiction or of our own existence. He is not denying, as Pasnau's translation appears to say, the possibility of *knowledge* of these things. The Latin simply introduces the list of examples with *utpote nec*... - these are meant to be examples where we cannot 'know with the aforesaid evidentness,' not examples where we cannot know full stop. That said, it is true that, for Mirecourt, our knowledge of external things has less exalted epistemic status than knowledge reducible to noncontradiction, in that it does not compel immediate cognitive assent and can therefore be doubted. The mechanism Mirecourt uses to demonstrate the possibility of doubt is divine deception. He says that God can 'indispose' (*indisponat*) things either directly or by means of secondary causes so that we judge falsely concerning what there is.[118] Nevertheless, and perplexingly, he avers that God cannot deceive, because deception is contrary to duty and so against His nature.[119] Mirecourt emphasises reduplicatively that, while God can 'indispose' himself or mediately, he nonetheless does not deceive.[120] This is, of course, difficult to sort out. The best explanation I can see (and the one that appears in Van Neste) is that there is a covert appeal to the Power Distinction going on here. What Mirecourt means to say is that, *de absoluta*, God has the power to deceive us directly or indirectly, but that any such deception would violate his *de ordinata* powers. This is the only interpretation that doesn't make Mirecourt flatly inconsistent, unless he believes that God can, directly and by His own actions, lead someone to believe the opposite of what is true, while still somehow not 'deceiving' them.

So Mirecourt seems to me less of a skeptic than perhaps Pasnau reads him as. His use of deception arguments is much like Ockham's - an attempt to delineate two categories of certain knowledge, one

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[118] *Deus potest res se solo vel mediantibus causis secundis taliter disponere vel indisponere, quod anima, iudicans de obiecto suo, iudicabit aliter quam est; patet, quia Deus humorem aliquem potest in oculo causare; patet etiam de ludificationibus* (Q.6 42.4).

[119] *Deus non potest aliquam decipere, quia quicumque deciperet faceret aliter quam deberet* (Q.6 42.5)

[120] *Quod Deus res sic indisponat vel se solo vel mediante causa secunda, non tamen decipit, quia non facit aliter quam deberet.* (Q.6 44)

absolutely certain in virtue of logic and the 'grammar of the world,' and one based on the created order of things and the beneficence of God. Mirecourt's divine deceiver is not skeptical, but it serves as a nicely worked out example of epistemic methodological deception in its Parisian form.

3. Autrecourt versus Arezzo

We have seen that essentially none of the figures involved in the history of the demon argument, including Mirecourt, intended to use it for skeptical purposes. To be sure, the charge of skepticism appeared occasionally, but generally only as a spectre to be avoided, or as a tool of refutation - what I have called the *reductio ad academicus* argument. This style of argument reached its zenith in an exchange between Nicholas of Autrecourt and one Bernard of Arezzo. Here Autrecourt employs the *reductio* with such fervour that it ends up sounding like a persuasive skeptical argument itself, so that Heinrik Lagerlund says "the only thinker of the fourteenth century who ends up defending a kind of skepticism was Nicholas of Autrecourt" (272). This claim probably goes too far, as we shall see, but it remains true that Autrecourt was rather radical.

Autrecourt was a *Magister* at the University of Paris, in the Arts faculty, in the first half of the fourteenth century. He was eventually condemned for teaching heresies and deprived of his position, though there is evidence that he continued to teach and write. Few of his works now survive - the exchange with Arezzo is fragmentary except for the first two letters, and his *Tractatus* exists only in a single incomplete manuscript.

Autrecourt's opponent, Bernard of Arezzo, is an otherwise unknown Scotist. Since his writings do not survive, we must to a certain extent infer his views from Autrecourt's letters (which may, of course, not be entirely faithful.) It seems certain that Bernard holds the post-1277 orthodoxy that God's absolute omnipotence involves the ability to do Himself anything that a secondary cause could do.

Like Ockham, he thinks that this ability implies the absolute possibility of intuitive cognition concerning non-existent entities, where God destroys a thing but himself sustains our cognitions of it. Autrecourt responds that this position collapses into a terrible skepticism, and therefore ought to be rejected. The exchange is remarkable in many ways, and is worth looking at in some detail.

Autrecourt's first letter (Autrecourt 1994, 46ff) begins by attributing three theses to Bernard (these are not literal translations):

1. 'Clear intuitive cognition' (*notitia intuitiva*) is that by which we judge that a thing is (if it is) or is not.[121]
2. The inferences "X does not exist, therefore I do not see X" and "I see X, therefore X exists" are invalid,[122] and indeed commit the same fallacy as "Caesar does not exist, therefore I do not think of Caesar."[123]
3. Having an intuitive cognition (*notitia intuitiva*) of something does not imply the existence of that thing.[124]

Thesis 1 says that, when we judge that there is a tree over there, we do so by means of an intuitive cognition of the tree (though the judgement is not necessarily *identical* to the cognition). Thesis 2 seems just to be intended as a straightforward consequence of 3 - the idea is that, just as 'thinking of something' is not a veridical act (you can think of something that isn't real), neither is vision. Of course, if you can see something that isn't there, then both proposed arguments have obvious

[121] *Notitia intuitiva clara est per quam iudicamus rem esse, sive sit sive non sit.*

[122] '*Obiectum non est; igitur not videtur'; non valet consequentia; nec ista: 'hoc videtur; ergo hoc est'.*

[123] It's not clear from the surviving writings what Autrecourt's theory of perception is, exactly, but presumably there is some kind of representational mental content, whether it be a *phantasm, species, notitia,* etc. that serves as the direct object of perception. So we can 'see a tree' in the sense of having a tree-like phantasm, species, or notion, even while there is no actual tree being represented.

[124] *Notitia intuitiva non requirit necessario rem existentam.*

counterexamples.[125] And Thesis 3 is the characteristic Ockhamist claim about the cognition of nonexistent entities.

From these propositions, Autrecourt deduces two further claims:

4. All cognitions (*apparentia*) of external objects could be false.[126]
5. By the natural light it is impossible to be certain when any cognitions (*apparentia)* of external objects are true or false.[127]

In 4 and 5, Autrecourt talks about *apparentia* instead of the *notitia intuitiva* of 1 through 3. In context, there is no indication that he means to shift topic - he is simply being inconsistent with his terminology. This is (alas!) a common practice in medieval philosophical writing.

It seems that Autrecourt expects Theses 4 and 5 to follow easily from 3. In fact the move should be somewhat more complicated than Autrecourt here admits. Saying that *every* cognition might be false (at once) is logically stronger than saying that *any* cognition might be false. Moreover, 3 only asserts the existence of intuitive cognition of nonexistence: what Autrecourt would require is the stronger claim that, for every cognitive impression of something that exists, there could be an introspectively indistinguishable cognitive impression of a nonexistent object.

All Autrecourt says about this lacuna is that Bernard admits that both appearances 'represent [the object] as being in the same manner'- which is not quite the same as saying that the two are indistinguishable. There *is* an apparent argument in the following sections (4-6), which relies on

[125] Though it is worth noting that, at least to the extent that the explicit "I see x" could be construed as involving a *judgement*, Ockham might have found space to accept 3 while rejecting 2.

[126] *Omnis apparentia nostra quam habemus de existentia obiectorum extra, potest esse falsa.*

[127] *In lumine naturali non possumus esse certi quando apparentia nostra de existentia obiectorum extra sit vera vel falsa.*

Thesis 2. The argument is that, since Bernard calls the inference "I see X, therefore X exists" fallacious, any attempt to infer the existence of X will be uncertain.[128] Autrecourt's reasoning is rather suspect: the fact that an inference pattern is generally invalid hardly means that it *never* holds, but, be that as it may, Autrecourt infers that we cannot be certain of the existence of any external objects. Since we cannot be certain of their very existence, no judgements concerning the attributes of external objects can be certain either. Autrecourt is clear that he thinks his chain of reasoning holds even in ordinary cases - if it is ever the case that God deceives us about an external object, then *in general* the inference from appearance to reality cannot produce certainty. All you would be able to say (section 7) is that, if I see X, *so long as God does not deceive me*, then X exists. Of course, Autrecourt does not at all like this conclusion - he observes, for example, that it would make all the works of Aristotle uncertain, since Aristotle did not acknowledge the possibility of divine deception and so did not qualify any of his claims with 'so long as God does not deceive me'.

At section 9, something interesting happens. Revisiting the indistinguishability thesis, and apparently in reply to something Bernard wrote in his own defence (which we no longer have), Autrecourt finally asks Bernard how possibly to distinguish between something caused naturally and something caused by God. He clearly thinks this task impossible - at the very least, he says, it would require an encyclopaedic knowledge of all natural causes (which nobody save God has). The purpose of this remark, which seems somewhat out of place, must be to press on the introspective indistinguishability issue above: if divinely-created cognitions cannot be distinguished from naturally-created ones, then the move from 3 to 4 and 5 is more plausible.

Christophe Grellard, in his paper *Nicholas of Autrecourt's Skepticism* (2009, 122), interprets this passage as involving the power distinction in an interesting way. His idea is that Bernard's missing

[128] Tacitly assuming that we only know of the existence of things via their appearances.

defence relies on distinguishing between the world *de ordinata*, in which God doesn't deceive us and thus in which we have no intuitive cognitions of nonexistent entities, vs the world *de absoluta* in which He might. The trouble for Bernard is that, as a follower of Scotus, he accepts what I called earlier the 'outrageous' form of the distinction, where God actually can, at any time, overthrow the existing order and institute a new one. This gives Autrecourt too much room to manœuver: if *de Absoluta* acts of God could happen at any time, the only way to be sure they aren't happening is by adducing some criteria of discrimination.[129] So he challenges Bernard to do that, confident the task is impossible.

So far, this is an unusually lucid *reductio ad academicus* argument. But now, at section 11, Autrecourt makes the step that Ockham and Wodeham mysteriously never did - he extends the deception beyond just the objects of sensation. He says

> …it seems to me, that from your claims it follows that you have to admit that you are not certain of the existence of the objects of the five senses. But what might be even harder to stomach: you must say that you are not certain of your own acts, for example, that you are seeing, or hearing; and what is worse, that you are not certain that anything is, or has been, perceived by you" (Autrecourt, 1994, 53).

This is because the means by which we know of our own actions and memories is 'abstractive cognition', which is, according to Bernard (and again the orthodoxy of the day), always less clear than intuitive cognition. Here Autrecourt uses a somewhat dubious principle for which he provides no evidence, namely that a less clear cognition cannot give more certainty than a clearer one. So, since our knowledge of our own actions is less clear than intuitive cognition, and intuitive cognition cannot give certainty, neither can we be certain of our own minds.

[129] For Ockham, for example, this problem would not arise, because Ockham does not believe that God could, in the relevant sense, actualize power *de absoluta*. For Ockham, in fact, no appearances ever are divinely-caused, and the discrimination problem is thus extremely easy!

Now Autrecourt has got his arm in: it also follows that Bernard cannot be certain of *any proposition at all!* Here (section 13) the argument is a bit unclear, but it appears to be that we can only identify propositions by an abstractive cognition. Since abstractive cognitions are, by the argument above, uncertain, we cannot know for certain whether anything is a proposition. So, we "are not evidently certain whether there is, or has been, any proposition," and thus we "are not certain whether [any] proposition is true or false" (53).[130] And, finally, the deathblow: Bernard cannot unequivocally profess belief in the articles of faith. Instead, he has to say 'I am in doubt', because he cannot be certain even of the content of his own beliefs.

Autrecourt summarises the devastating litany of uncertainties in sections 14 and 15: Bernard does not know whether he is in sky, earth or water; whether today's sky is the same as yesterday's; whether there *is* a sky; whether there is a Pope; whether or not he has a beard, hair, a head; what happened in the past; whether to believe witness testimony in court cases; whether Christ suffered and died and was resurrected. The onslaught continues: Bernard cannot know the most elementary facts of philosophy. He can't know that a cognition is distinct from what is cognized, because he can't know there are cognitions. He can't know there are propositions, and so *a fortiori*, that there are contradictory propositions. He can't know that *he has a mind*. "And, as it seems to me, from your position there follow things that are more absurd than follow from the position of the Academics."[131] (Autrecourt, 57). *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

[130] *Et etiam sequitur quod non esis certus an aliqua propositio set vera vel falsa, quia non estis certus evidenter an aliqua propositio sit vel fuerit.*

[131] This claim appears here because Augustine reports that even the Academics never dared to question the existence of the external world. See Grellard, 2018, 253.

It is a stupendous broadside. In the course of it, though, Autrecourt has taken the deception argument further than anyone before him. The deceiving God he saddles Bernard with not only messes with sensory knowledge, but, in the end, annihilates logic (in the offhand remark that Bernard cannot be certain that there are contradictions), introspection, faith, and even the *cogito*. But it is, of course, meant as a *reductio* of Bernard, not as a statement of Autrecourt's own views. In that very letter to Bernard, Autrecourt says that, in order to avoid such absurdities, he himself defends the position that all intuitive cognitions are certain.

The full defence is now lost to use, but, insofar as we can reconstruct it, it centres on what Grellard calls "the power of epistemic faculties to correct each other." In practice, this means the power of different sensory modalities to come to agreement regarding an external thing. Perceptual illusions can be defeated, for example, by appeal to the sense of touch in the case of a stick distorted by water; or by appeal to the mathematical laws of optics in the case of the tiny image of the sun in the sky (Grellard, 2009, 129). He then raises the dream argument, in rather worrying terms:

> It is evident that in sleep the appearance is not clear. For, no matter how vividly it appears to someone in sleep that he has seen a camp, the light of heaven, etc., nevertheless everyone experiences when awake that appearance he gets through sight is clearer and is different in kind, and so he is more attracted by this. For, if they were equally clear, he would have either to say nothing is certain for him or to admit that in both appearances what appears to be true is true (translation from Grellard, 2009, 130).

Here Autrecourt concedes that, if there were dreams qualitatively indistinguishable from waking experiences, we should be stuck with skepticism (or dialetheism). But he thinks that there are no such dreams, and so well-corroborated sensory knowledge in good conditions is certain. He does not try the crucial demonic skeptic's line of argument that, for all we know, *everything* might be just such an extraordinary dream, though given the first letter to Bernard it seems like the thought should have occurred to him.

Similar examples of Autrecourt's flirtations with skepticism can be found in his second letter to Bernard. This letter, though fascinating, is not at all times relevant to the deception argument, and so I will not go through all of it in detail. There are a few points that bear examination, though. Autrecourt's central claim, with which he begins the letter, is that every certainty follows from a single first principle, the principle of noncontradiction. This means that every certainty is an 'unqualified certainty,' of the same unquestionable veracity as noncontradiction itself. An immediate corollary is that certainty does not come in degrees - either something is as certain as the principle of noncontradiction, or else it is not certain at all!

This of course has rather dire implications for the number of certainties. In the end, Autrecourt accepts as certain only immediate perceptions, the articles of faith, and propositions known *per se nota.* The latter category is reducible to the first principle either immediately or through a chain of reasoning, and in either case is such that 'the consequent is factually identical to the antecedent' and so follows self-evidently. As a result (in section 11), the vast majority of judgements concerning the external world are said to be uncertain. All inferences from the existence of some set of things to the existence of some other thing are uncertain, for example, because their consequence and antecedent are not factually identical. The ultimate point of this is to show that the existence of a property, such as whiteness, does not with certainty allow the inference to the existence of a material substrate of that property (a white thing). There are idiosyncratic Ultricurian reasons why Autrecourt insists on this point that are not especially relevant to the present story - it suffices to say that he wanted to diminish the stature of Aristotle in order to advocate for a form of atomism. By section 24, having argued that Aristotle's philosophy, being founded on the substance inference, cannot have any certain knowledge in it, Autrecourt suggests (somewhat noncommittally) that perhaps there is not even any *probable* knowledge in it either. The reason is a critique of induction. Autrecourt argues that the way to arrive at probable knowledge is by inductive inference from premises known with certainty. He gives as

example the belief that fire is hot. Supposedly, the way in which we arrive at 'fire is hot now' is by an inductive inference from the certain knowledge that, in the past, fire was hot when touched). But, since all of Aristotle's starting premises were uncertain, all of his inductive inferences fail, and as a result he knows nothing even to a probable standard!

In the end, Autrecourt has a very pessimistic view of our ability to know substances and causes with certainty, and it is this pessimism that led to his ultimate condemnation, and to the view of some modern scholars that he is himself a skeptic. He certainly would not admit to the charge - he does not deny the possibility of knowledge in general, or express any sympathy with the Academy. But it is still true that, compared to many scholastic philosophers of the day, he has a much more restrained, probabilist epistemology. Many truths that an ordinary scholastic would think amounted to *scientia,* Autrecourt instead believes are known at best only probably. He therefore provides arguments that are 'skeptical' in the sense that they diminish our epistemic pretensions. Contemporary commentators often compare him to Hume, with some justice - both are worried about our knowledge of causes, for example.

What is interesting, to my mind, is that despite Autrecourt's devastating employment of the deceiver argument as a *reductio* of Bernard, he never uses it in a positive way for his own modestly-skeptical ends. Grellard (2009, 136) says that it would be *inconsistent* for him to do so, given his criticism of Bernard. That seems overly strong - Autrecourt reduces a particular form of deception argument to absurdity, sure, but that does not necessarily preclude him from employing a weaker form of divine deception himself. Rather, I think the simple explanation is the right one: deceiver arguments would not really work to establish the kind of modest skepticism of Autrecourt. Instead, they would tend to collapse his view into full-scale demonic skepticism. A divine deceiver undoubtedly *could* deceive us about projective induction, say, by changing the natural order so that something that occurred by natural law in the past no longer occurs in the future, but this would undermine even probable

induction from certain premises of the sort Autrecourt wishes to keep intact. The deception argument is simply too sharp a sword for Ultricurian purposes, and he must have recognized the danger and so avoided using the argument altogether. The apparent problem, however, is that there are two passages where Autrecourt does seem to make use of God's power to deceive. First, in section 25 of the second letter to Bernard, Autrecourt is in the midst of his argument that we can have no certain knowledge of substances. Here he explicitly mentions the argument of the first letter, saying that *Bernard* ought to accept his thesis, because according to Bernard, God could create an accident without an underlying substrate. Thus 'there is no substrate' is not a logical contradiction when conjoined with 'there is an accident', and so the substance inference cannot be evident. So far as I can see, Autrecourt at no point concedes that God could, in fact, deceive us about this matter - it is offered only as a way of showing that Bernard's doctrines should compel him to accept Autrecourt's own. That is, it is another kind of *reductio*.

The other passage of note is a fragmentary argument in the fifth letter to Bernard.[132] Here it seems Autrecourt is again using divine power to militate in favour of the conclusion that we cannot have certain knowledge of substances. Here the argument is that God, in the miracle of the Eucharist, actually does separate the accidents and substances of a thing, so that the bread of the Eucharist appears to be bread but is in fact substantially the body of Christ (and presumably, were the miracle not revealed in scripture and through faith, we would be unable to discern the difference). This is interesting, in that the appeal is not to the *de absoluta* power of God, but rather to his *actual* miracles. The argument then takes an interesting turn: Autrecourt appears to want to argue that we can have no certain knowledge regarding the perfection of things. The basis for this argument is the miracle of the Incarnation: God assumed human flesh, of course, but there is no particular reason why it *had* to be human. Autrecourt seems to think that God could equally well, at least in his absolute power, have taken the form of a stone or a donkey. Now, as we know from the New Testament, even the apostles

[132] Weinberg, 1942 is the definitive edition.

themselves could not discern the divinity of Christ. Thus, by the natural light alone, it would be impossible to tell that a stone or donkey was not substantially identical with God Almighty. Consequence: we cannot know with certainty that a particular stone is not, in truth, more perfect than a man (Autrecourt, 1994, 36). Without the context of the rest of the letter, it is impossible to know for certain whether this argument, like the former, was offered as a *reductio*, but it seems very likely: Autrecourt, after all, as an atomist, did not hold to the Aristotelian hylomorphic account of matter. It is not clear what his analysis of the Eucharist would have been, but presumably it would not have involved substantial change without accidental change. So the scope for God to deceive here only exists if we accept Aristotle's analysis, and disappears on Autrecourt's. Thus, Autrecourt must not be offering the possibility of divine deception as proof that we cannot know substances, and must instead be trying to reduce hylomorphism to a skeptical absurdity.

This being said, the lesson of Autrecourt is, in some ways, the same as that of Ockham and Wodeham. The deceiving God argument is a dangerous tool. Autrecourt uses it, in its full power, against Bernard, but, when it comes time to defend his own epistemological views, quasi-skeptical though they be, he realises that the deception argument will turn in his hand and cut him, and so avoids it.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter and the last have tried to trace the complex history of supernatural deception in medieval thought. In this chapter I've tried to elucidate two main themes of that history arising in the 14th century. The first theme is *methodological* deception: building on the framework of omnipotence enshrined by the Condemnations, 14th century philosophers used divine deception scenarios in various ways - some epistemological, but none of them really skeptical. Wodeham used methodological deception to undermine sensory infallibilism and make more room for his preferred variety of Aristotelian demonstration. Autrecourt used the time-honoured *reductio ad academicus* strategy we saw in Chapter Two in order to undermine Aristotelianism and advance atomism).

The second theme is *escalation* in the plausibility and scope of supernatural deception scenarios. In the course of their methodological deployment of divine deception, these same authors saw fit gradually to increase the plausibility or power of the deception. On the one hand, positive epistemic deployment of deception scenarios (in Oxford) was aided by making them more plausible - by gradually bringing them out of the realm of mere *de absoluta* possibility. On the other hand, the rhetoric of Parisian deception scenarios, particularly when employed *reductio ad academicus* by Autrecourt, encouraged the positing of more and more radical deceptions, in which more and more ordinary beliefs were undermined.

These late medieval deception arguments were quite widely available moving into the Early Modern period, in many cases in prominent sources such as Ockham, or in sources who were publicly condemned and therefore notorious in a different way (Autrecourt, Mirecourt). The coming chapter will show how Early Modern philosophers, including of course Descartes himself, took from the existing tradition, and from the Thomistic demons of Chapter 2, in formulating an emerging new kind of epistemological literature.

Chapter Four: The Cartesian Demon

I. Introduction

This chapter represents the conclusion of the dissertation. In it, I trace the final stage of the demon's development - its codification in Descartes, and its adoption as an explicitly skeptical strategy in Descartes' skeptical successors, especially Pierre-Daniel Huet.

The first section of the chapter opens the Early Modern period with a look at the meditation literature of Teresa of Ávila. In it, I emphasise Teresa's use of demonic deception as an extension of medieval Thomistic claims discussed in Chapter Two: that the power of demons to deceive is limited to their ability to physically manipulate matter, and especially vaporous matter, and thereby interact with our sensory organs.

The second section of the chapter is a detailed exegesis of the deceiving God and evil demon arguments in Descartes. I argue that these are, contrary to what is frequently asserted in the literature, distinct arguments, and that each is drawn from a distinct trend in earlier philosophical history, for a distinct purpose. The deceiving God, I claim, is modelled on the most radical versions of the divine deceiver found in, for example, Autrecourt (discussed in Chapter Three), and, in Descartes, takes on a particularly salient role as a deceiver *about mathematics*. Meanwhile, the evil demon is drawn from the meditative tradition exemplified by Teresa, and represents a much more modest form of supernatural deception. It is introduced, I claim, to serve specific meditative functions integral to the role Descartes conceived for the *Meditations on First Philosophy.*

In the final section of the chapter, I address the post-Cartesian skeptics. This section centres around the figure of Pierre-Daniel Huet, a notable critic of Cartesianism and participant in the great "Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns" in 17th century Paris. Huet, I argue, takes the deceiving God argument

from Descartes and employs it in two distinct ways: first, in a classical *reductio* mode, as illustrating an absurdity in the Cartesian system, but second, in his posthumous *Traité*, as an outright skeptical demon argument. I show that Huet developed his own form of skepticism, quite distinct from that of the ancient Academics and Pyrrhonists, and that this form of skepticism was a perfect fit for the evil demon argument. Finally, I conclude with some reflections on the demon argument and its place in the history of epistemology.

II. Teresa of Ávila and the Meditative Demon

Christia Mercer argues persuasively that part of the means by which the medieval demon was transmitted to Descartes was the *Interior Castle* of (now Saint) Teresa of Ávila. The previous chapter traced the gradual development of an epistemological demon argument in the arts and theology faculties of medieval universities, but, as Mercer points out, there was, simultaneously to this, another strand of Christian thought engaging with demons and epistemology, that of spiritual meditation. This second strand includes a number of women who were in their day extremely influential thinkers and writers, but who were, of course, barred by sexism from the university faculties of the first.

As Mercer has it, Teresa's goal in the *Castle* is to guide her readers on a contemplative journey in which introspection leads to greater self-knowledge, and greater self-knowledge involves/brings along a greater understanding of God. The framing device is, eponymously, a castle - the castle of the soul, through whose rooms Teresa will guide the reader. The problem, of course, is that it is easy to become lost - to muddle around in blind darkness, never finding oneself or God. The reason for this customary blindness is that we customarily mislead by seductive but ultimately unjustified beliefs - unlike Descartes, these are not sensory beliefs about external objects but rather, in the main, intuitive moral doctrines such as that "public honour is valuable" (Mercer 2016, 10).

The seduction of these appealing but ultimately false beliefs is personified in the form of demons - demons that lie to the meditator, pretending that the 'temporal pleasure of the present' is 'almost eternal', deceiving the mind by 'illusions' (6th Mansions, VIII.10). Mercer characterises Teresa's response to the challenges of demonic deception as a kind of retreat into self-knowledge. Teresa says, for example, that "it is said that the devil does not know our thoughts, much less can he penetrate a secret so profound that God does not reveal it even to us." (5th Mansions, I.5), referencing Aquinas - if one achieves a communion with God through inner contemplation, then one is secure against the meddlings of demons, because demons cannot know or interfere with our secret thoughts (nor, of course, directly with the mysteries of God). Later, in the 6th Mansions, she is discussing the pain of the soul's longing for God (in quite remarkable and poetic terms) when she hits upon another surety against demonic deceptions:

> Perhaps you wonder why we may feel more secure against deception concerning this favour than in other cases. I think it is for these reasons. Firstly, because the devil cannot give such delicious pain: he may cause pleasure or delight which appears spiritual but is unable to add suffering, especially suffering of so keen a sort, united to peace and joy of soul. His power is limited to what is external; suffering produced by him is never accompanied with peace, but with anxieties and struggles. Secondly, because this welcome storm comes from no region over which Satan has control. Thirdly, because of the great benefits left in the soul which, as a rule, is resolute to suffer for God and longs to bear many crosses. (6th Mansions II.10-11)

The first two points really seem to be two parts of the same argument, which is this: spiritual pains such as that of Christ on the cross or Teresa in meditation are 'pains of the soul', occasioned by no external cause. For this reason, it is a pain that is accompanied by 'peace of soul' - that is, the beatitude of the soul is an infallible mark that the accompanying pain comes from no external cause. Because of the Thomistic thesis mentioned earlier, that demons can act only on external things, though, a demon could not produce a pain of the soul in truth, and because the mark of pains of the soul is a peace and beatitude, the demon could not counterfeit one either. The third point is the simple argument that the demons would not do anything that produces lasting benefit in the soul.

Teresa distinguishes two types of spiritual vision or experience: an 'intellectual' vision in which the senses are not engaged but in which the soul nonetheless experiences an awareness of the presences of God, as against an 'imaginary' vision in which the presence of God is alloyed to appearances in the inner sense. The former is more secure against diabolical intervention, since it is a simple and direct experience of an uncomplicatedly positive presence. It is also durable, so that that Teresa says: "I believe it to be impossible for the devil to produce an illusion lasting so long, neither could he benefit the soul so remarkably nor cause such interior peace" (6th Mansions VIII 9). The latter, imaginary visions, on the other hand, are those "whereby it is held that the devil is more liable to deceive people than by the other visions I have already described. This is probably true." (6th Mansions IX 1). This is because one component of an imaginary vision is a kind of image in the mind, and these mental images can themselves be counterfeit. Some people may "fabricate, piece by piece, what they fancy they see: no after effects are produced on the mind, which is less moved to devotion than by the sight of a sacred picture. It is clear that no attention should be paid to such fancies, which pass more quickly than dreams from the memory." (6th Mansions IX 6). In the same way, the Devil, "who is a clever painter", might "present before [one's] eyes the living image of Christ" (6th Mansions IX 11). Here again we see parallels with Aquinas: the devil can deceive us by operating on our bodies and our outer and inner senses, but not by direct interference with the intellectual faculty of the soul.

The strength of Teresa's influence on Descartes is difficult to judge. Mercer's structural comparison seems to show that Descartes's meditative genre, though perhaps ultimately descended from Ignatius, had a more direct ancestor in the later medieval and early modern meditative literature exemplified by Teresa. What is less clear to me is whether Descartes' demon strategy is, as Mercer says, strikingly similar to Teresa's. As we will see soon, there are certainly interesting points of agreement. But, it seems to me, there are very significant points of departure, as well. Mercer herself raises the most significant such: Theresa's demons are literal and actual; Descartes' demon is hypothetical. More than

that, though, Descartes's demon[133] is paired, and indeed sometimes conflated with, his version of the deceiving God, which, as the previous chapter has illustrated in some detail, is itself a philosophical move with significant history in the medieval universities. As I will show in the following sections, it is surely the case that Descartes' epistemological use of the deceiving God / evil demon was informed by and modelled on the time-honoured scholastic strategy of *reductio ad academicus.* Thus what Mercer shows, it seems to me, is not so much that Descartes took his whole strategy from Teresa, but that the *Meditations on First Philosophy* represent a syncretism - a fusion of the academic deceiving God argument with the meditative tradition's accessible, personal literary style. I will conclude my discussion of Descartes with an explanation of how, exactly, this syncretism functions.

III. Descartes

1. Introduction and Background

Descartes was a child of the reformation, born at the tail end of the 16th century in a Europe wracked with religious conflict. It was also a time of philosophical and scientific novelty - Copernicus and Bruno, together, had popularised the idea that there might be worlds beyond Earth (Bruno, of course, losing his life in the process). Brahe had proven that *stella novae* were not atmospheric phenomena, and hence that the heavens were not immutable. Galileo was active, touting his telescope and the writings of the ancient atomists, until his condemnation in Descartes' early adulthood.

In this milieu, Descartes was educated at the Jesuit college of La Flèche.[134] The Jesuits were formed as part of the Counter-Reformation, and the core of their curriculum was the traditional scholastic Aristotle (though the preferred commentators of the Jesuits were somewhat idiosyncratic - see Hatfield, 2014, 8-9). That said, to Aristotle they added a wide variety of ancient philosophy. Key

[133] It is perhaps also worth observing that Descartes' "evil demon" is a (somewhat dubious) translation of *genium malignum* / 'malin genie', rather than, as Teresa uses, a form of the more theological *diabolus*.

[134] The Royal College Henri IV.

among the ancients studied at La Flèche was Cicero, who was taken as a model both of Latin rhetorical style (the influence of which is clearly visible in the pellucid Latin prose of the *Meditations*) and of civic virtue and responsibility (Kainulainen, 2018).

As Descartes matured, he must have encountered a philosophical community increasingly aware of the ancient skeptics. Beginning with the Latin publication of Sextus Empiricus' *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (See Chapter One), Western European philosophy underwent what Popkin memorably called the *crise Pyrrhonien*.[135] It should be acknowledged that the success of Sextus (and, for that matter, of Montaigne) owed much to the historical moment. The Reformation represented not just a religious crisis, but an epistemological one - one of the traditional sources of knowledge, the *dogma* of the Church, was very much in question. Protestant reformers argued for their conclusions on the basis of rationality; Catholic counter-reformers argued that the same rationality compelled diametrically opposite conclusions. Small wonder that some in this climate were attracted to a philosophy that questioned pretensions to dogmatic knowledge, and even the utility of rational argumentation itself.

Descartes entered these conversations as a reformer - not a Protestant reformer (he remained a devout, if somewhat heterodox, Catholic his whole life) but a philosophical (and scientific and mathematical) one. His goal was nothing less than the overthrow of Scholastic Aristotelianism. To accomplish this revolution, he hoped among other things to garner approval from the Church and holders of power to publish a textbook (now known as the "Principles of Philosophy") that would (he hoped) become standard in, particularly, Jesuit education (Hatfield, 2013, 26-9). He published a number of works that served as groundwork, and as differing styles of presenting essentially the same philosophical program. Many of these works share a use of some kind of 'method of doubt' - the employment of skeptical

[135] Academic skepticism, particularly that of Cicero, continued to have a significant influence. Contemporary scholarship continues on the question of the extent to which Popkin was right to emphasise the importance of Sextus' rediscovery (see Charles and Junquiero Smith, 2017).

arguments to serve ultimately nonskeptical Cartesian ends. Only in the *Meditations*, though, does that method of doubt involve the vaunted deceiving God and evil demon arguments, though, and so my discussion of Descartes will centre on that work.

2. The Meditations

The *Meditations on First Philosophy* represent Descartes' attempt to formulate the philosophical reform project begun in (for example) *Discours de la Méthode* for a broader audience, and thereby pave the way for his new textbook, the *Principia philosophiae*. This broader audience meant that the *Meditations* would have to convince, in addition to the modern philosophers, a large number of people who had been educated in the classical Scholastic mode. As Hatfield (2014, 44ff) discusses, Descartes thought that such people were wedded to Scholastic Aristotelianism not because of any argument, but because Aristotelianism appeals to empirical prejudices naturally acquired in childhood, as survival-aids. Descartes thought that he therefore needed a nonrational means of persuading people to give up these beliefs (which were, after all, formed nonrationally in the first place). To this end, he adopted an existing literary genre that *already* had the function of nonrational persuasion: that of the spiritual meditation.

Hatfield emphasises the *Spiritual Exercises* written by Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, as a model for the Cartesian *Meditations*. He says that:

> "Such exercises seek to train a meditator's mental faculties. Works in the genre follow a standard order. First, one retreats from the world of the senses, in order to meditate upon religious images (with Ignatius) [...] Then one trains the will to avoid the error of sin. The exercitant sequentially focuses on the relevant cognitive faculties: first the senses, then the imagination and intellect, and finally the will." (2014, 45)

The structure of Descartes' *Meditations* is similar, beginning as it does with a purgative doubt that compels a mental retreat from the senses, followed by a rumination on the goodness of God, and then a sequential look at cognitive faculties. Certainly Ignatius was among Descartes' sources, but I think Mercer is correct to point out that there was significant meditative literature that Descartes could draw upon, largely written by women, and most obviously and significantly by Teresa of Ávila. From Teresa, Descartes gets a number of the more specific features of his *Meditations*, including, most significantly for our purposes, the device of personifying the purgative phase as a malicious demon. Because this is a meditative work, it is often helpful to distinguish the persona of the 'meditator' from Descartes, the author of the book. I follow the convention set by Hatfield of using 'she/her' pronouns for the former, to aid in distinguishing them.

3. The First Meditation and the Method of Doubt

In his preface to the reader, Descartes describes the First Meditation as providing reasons which give us possible grounds for doubt about all things, especially material ones. The purpose of this doubt is, following Loyola and Teresa, as a purgative, to expunge from the meditator all her preconceptions, and thereby lead her mind away from the senses. In light of my earlier remarks about the role of the *Meditations* in Cartesian philosophy, we should see this as part of the Cartesian educational reform program: the method of doubt is a way of undermining scholastic empiricism, as a precondition for the acceptance of Cartesian rationalistic mechanism. To that end, Descartes emphasises beliefs derived from the senses, though, officially, his goal is to purge *all* preconceptions (not just the sensory ones). This is the famous Cartesian 'method of doubt.' Descartes is therefore not aiming to defend skepticism, nor is he primarily aiming at a refutation of skepticism (although he believes he has one[136]). His goal, rather, is to *use* skepticism as a methodological tool in order to undermine scholastic

[136] Indeed, with some pomposity, he pronounces himself "the first philosopher ever to overturn the doubt of the skeptics" (AT VII 550/CSM II 376). Broughton (2002), with whose interpretations I am generally sympathetic, even makes refutation of Pyrrhonian skepticism into a major aim of the method of doubt.

empiricism, by establishing principles so securely that they can unseat even the evidence of the senses! This employment of skepticism is, in fact, somewhat reminiscent of the use to which it was put by the medieval scholastics themselves. One thinks, for example, of Wodeham's use of the Ockhamist divine deceiver to undermine the exalted status of sense-deliverances in Ockham's own epistemology.

To accomplish his purgative, Descartes invokes several different skeptical arguments. Rhetorically, these are structured as an incoming tide: first one skeptical argument sweeps in, undermining a swathe of beliefs. Next, the meditator remembers a device by which to recover a bit of ground. Then another skeptical argument comes in. Each time, the waves reach a bit higher, until, finally, (almost) no beliefs remain. The actual instruments of doubt, these waves of skeptical argumentation, are drawn from the rediscovered ancient skeptics, together with bits of the medieval tradition, and some novel material from Descartes himself. Descartes himself acknowledged this debt,[137] famously saying in the *Second Replies* that

> Nothing contributes more to acquiring a firm knowledge of things than first accustoming ourselves to doubt all things, especially corporeal things; so, even though I had long ago seen many books on that subject by the Academics and Skeptics, and though it was not without distaste that I reheated this cabbage, still, I could not avoid devoting one whole Meditation to it. (AT VII 130/CSM II 94).

This theme is repeated elsewhere, too. In his *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (AT VIIIB 366–7/CSM I 309) he carefully distinguishes his antiskeptical position from the view that "God is to be denied, or that he can deceive us, or that everything should be doubted, or that we should entirely withdraw our confidence in the senses, or that we should not distinguish between being asleep and being awake," which latter views he attributes to the ancient skeptics and professes to have refuted.[138]

[137] Albeit dismissively. Descartes was, alas, prone to diminishing or erasing his reliance on prior scholarship.

[138] Gail Fine deals with this at length in Chapter 13 of her (2021).

As we will examine in some detail later, however, the peculiar text *Conversations with Burman* does have Descartes claiming that the demon argument in particular is a new invention of his own, going beyond the "customary difficulties of the skeptics" (AT V 147/CSM III 333) It is worth recapitulating the 'reheated' ancient arguments in their Cartesian form, to set the background for a more detailed study of the 'deceiving God' and 'evil demon' arguments that close the meditation. My assessment of these arguments largely agrees with that of Hatfield (2014).

Descartes begins with the senses, since (at least on the scholastic model), the vast majority of the meditator's prereflective beliefs originate in the senses. His first skeptical challenge, then, is an argument from the fallibility of the senses. He says that "from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once"[139] (AT VII 18/CSM II 12). This argument, rather inchoate here, must be a version of an argument from illusion or perceptual inconstancy - Descartes says that this deception happens with things that are 'very small or in the distance', so the idea must be that we sometimes mistake a far-off silhouette for Pierre when it is in fact Jean, and similar. But the path from occasional perceptual misapprehension to any kind of wide-ranging skepticism is a difficult one, and Descartes quickly gives up on it. As he points out, these misapprehensions occur only in what we might call perceptually suboptimal conditions: low light, objects far away or small, etc. There is no particular reason to generalise the fallibility of the senses to perceptually optimal conditions (Descartes' famous example is the meditator's perception that she is now seated by the fire). So the doubt retreats, leaving intact most sense-perception based beliefs, but having brought into question those formed in suboptimal conditions.

The next strategy is a Cartesian version of the ancient 'dreams and madness' argument. There is some diversity of opinion in the literature about whether there are two arguments (one from madness and

[139] *hos autem interdum fallere deprehendi, ac prudentiae est nunquam illis plane confidere qui nos vel semel deceperunt.*

one from dreams) or whether the possibility of madness is not an independent argument, but rather introduced as a segue into the dream argument. Hatfield (2014) takes the latter view, Broughton (2002, 65) the former. I am inclined to side with Broughton,[140] though I think it is fair to observe that the arguments from madness and from dreams are continuous and deserve to be discussed together. Descartes first introduces a madness hypothesis according to which one is "so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say that they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware" (AT VII 19/CSM II 13). The mention of the 'vapours of melancholia' is an appeal to something like a humoural theory of mind, according to which madness is the result of an imbalance in fluidic humours in the body. Descartes himself holds a variant on the traditional humoural theory, but one that retains fluids/vapours - the famed 'animal spirits' - as important causal parts of minds. So, in the *Optics*, Descartes explains that

> "It is the soul which sees, and not the eye; and it does not see directly, but only by means of the brain That is why madmen and those who are asleep often see, or think they see, [voyent . . . ou pensent voir] various objects which are nevertheless not before their eyes: namely, certain vapours disturb their brain and arrange those of its parts normally engaged in vision exactly as they would be if these objects were present." (AT VI 141/CSM I 172)

Thus the madness and dream hypotheses share a causal explanation of how perceptual beliefs could be quite significantly mistaken.[141]

Descartes segues from madness to dreams, observing that, even if the meditator is not mad, she has regular episodes of vivid hallucination while asleep. Descartes suggests, somewhat surprisingly, that

[140] At least, I agree with Broughton that Descartes' apparent dismissal of the madness hypothesis should not be taken to show that he is 'assuming the rationality of the meditator' or any such idea. In fact, I am inclined to read his dismissal as a rhetorical flourish - the meditator first hastily dismisses the madness idea, but then quickly realises that the dismissal was rash, since the existence of dreams shows that, at least some of the time, she *isn't* rational!

[141] Broughton strongly emphasises the causal character of Cartesian skeptical hypotheses.

there are no markers by which one can tell that one is asleep. The meditator at first tries to reassure herself that "All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep" (AT VII 19/CSM II 13). Unfortunately, she finds herself unable to take solace in that, because she recalls many occasions on which she was tricked by "exactly similar thoughts while asleep."[142] The usual reading of this passage has the "exactly similar thoughts" referring back to the 'distinctness' of the putative markers by which one could tell whether one is asleep - Hatfield, for example, says that the meditator now realises that "the vividness[143] proposed as a mark of sensory reliability can occur in dreams. She quickly concludes 'that waking and sleeping can never be distinguished by any sure signs'" (2014, 79). Hatfield certainly has the meditator's conclusion right, but I am not positive that he has the reasoning right. It seems to me at least possible to read *similibus cogitationibus* as referring to the meditator's immediately preceding metacognition that what she is currently perceiving seems too vivid to be a dream. The advantage of this reading, in addition to greater fidelity to the text (the metacognition is, properly speaking, the only *thought* to which Descartes has referred), is that it would more closely align the Cartesian dream argument with the dream argument offered by the ancients (which, after all, Descartes claims merely to be recapitulating at this point). Recall from Chapter One that Cicero makes use of a dream argument in the *Academica*. In that argument, Cicero distinguished the *in principle* distinguishability of dreams and waking reality from their distinguishability *in the dream*, and relied only on the latter in making his argument. It seems to me likely that Descartes has something similar in mind - it isn't that appearances in dreams are identical with those of waking experience, so that the two could not be distinguished even while awake, but rather that, while dreaming, the meditator is sometimes persuaded (falsely!) that her experiences are just as distinct and vivid as they would be were she awake.

[142] *Quasi scilicet non recorder a similibus etiam cogitationibus me aliàs in somnis fuisse delusum.*

[143] Hatfield uses this term to translate Descartes' *distincta.*

Thus persuaded, the meditator supposes that she is dreaming - what skeptical consequences follow? Well, if she is dreaming, then she isn't sitting by the fire, or moving her hands about. Maybe her real hands look different than the dream hands. Indeed, maybe her real hands have been chopped off or something. This is, of course, a very great victory for doubt - in doubt are all particular claims about the material world, to include the whole sciences of physics, astronomy, and medicine (AT VII 20/CSM II 14). But the victory is not total - the meditator reasons that a dream, being the product of the imagination, must be ultimately composed of some really existing things, just as a painting must be composed of really existing colours. If that is true, then, even in a dreamworld, beliefs that only concern themselves with these most basic constituents of the world ought to be untouched. Descartes' example of this kind of belief is mathematics: even in a dream, he says, two plus three makes five. So again the doubts recede a bit, but now everything except for the basic truths of mathematics and logic is under suspicion.

It is in this situation that Descartes introduces his two famous skeptical arguments, the deceiving God and the evil demon. Their purpose must be, if at all possible, to cast doubt even on the subjects "which deal only with the simplest and most general things" - geometry, logic, arithmetic, and so forth.

4. The Deceiving God and the Evil Demon

The purpose of the method of doubt is to unseat our customary but unmerited faith in the senses, and thereby to undermine scholastic empiricism and pave the way for mechanistic rationalism. The utility of the method of doubt is explicitly bound up with the mind's attempt to "detach itself from the senses". This being the case, it is not surprising that the targets of the Cartesian skeptical scenarios are primarily beliefs about external things, justified on the basis of the senses. The extension of doubt to the eternal truths, to include mathematics, by means of the deceiving God argument, though, is more surprising. More surprising still is the vanishment of the doubt concerning mathematics once the deceiving God is replaced with the pious alternative of the evil demon. Here I argue that the case of

mathematics shows that the move from God to demon is not as philosophically innocent as Descartes makes it seem, and that this is deeply connected with his synthesis of the two medieval deception traditions: divine power, and demonic malice.

4.1. What is the Problem?

As we have just seen, at the end of the dream argument Descartes believes he has succeeded in casting into doubt "corporeal nature in general, and its extension, the figure of extended things, their quantity or magnitude and number, as also the place in which they are, the time which measures their duration, and so on."[144] But this doubt is insufficient to undermine mathematics:

> "That is possibly why our reasoning is not unjust when we conclude from this that Physics, Astronomy, Medicine and all other sciences which have as their end the consideration of composite things, are very dubious and uncertain; but that Arithmetic, Geometry and other sciences of that kind which only treat of things that are very simple and very general, without taking great trouble to ascertain whether they are actually existent or not, contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three together always form five, and the square can never have more than four sides, and it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity" (AT VII 21/CSMII 14)[145]

That is, because of the simplicity and generality of the subject matter of mathematics (I take this to be the genus to which belong the examples of Arithmetic and Geometry, though it is far from clear what

[144] *Natura corporea in communi, eiusque extensio; item figura rerum extensarum; item quantitas, sive earumdem magnitudo & numerus; item locus in quo existant, tempusque per quod durent, & similia.*

[145] *Quapropter ex his forsan non male concludemus Physicam, Astronomiam, Medicinam, disciplinasque alias omnes, quae a rerum compositarum consideratione dependent, dubias quidem esse; atqui Arithmeticam, Geometriam, aliasque ejusmodi, quae nonnisi de simplicissimis & maxime generalibus rebus tractant, atque utrum eae sint in rerum naturâ necne, parum curant, aliquid certi atque indubitati continere. Nam sive vigilem, sive dormiam, duo & tria simul juncta sunt quinque, quadratumque non plura habet latera quàm quatuor; nec fieri posse videtur ut tam perspicuae veritates in suspicionem falsitatis incurrant.*

'other science of that kind' Descartes might have in mind), it is not the sort of thing about which we could be mistaken even in a dream or bout of madness. This is much the same position as Descartes staked out as early as the *Regulae*, where he says that

> "These considerations make it obvious why arithmetic and geometry prove to be much more certain than other disciplines : they alone are concerned with an object so pure and simple that they make no assumptions that experience might render uncertain; they consist entirely in deducing conclusions by means of rational arguments. They are therefore the easiest and dearest of all the sciences and have just the sort of object we are looking for. Where these sciences are concerned it scarcely seems humanly possible to err, except through inadvertence. " (AT X 362 / CSM I 12)

Descartes introduces the deceiving god scenario as a way to cast into doubt even these most secure of sciences. Descartes believes that God is omnipotent (though he does not spell out a theory of omnipotence in the first meditation - as Hatfield (88) points out, it is important for the rhetoric of the *Meditations* that this starting point be an unreflective preconception about God). This omnipotence affords Him significant capacity for deception. The version of the divine deception hypothesis that Descartes appears to have in mind is one where God creates us with systematically defective faculties (Hatfield 87). So, supposing that this all-powerful God were to bend himself on deception, "how do I know that I am not deceived every time that I add two and three, or count the sides of a square, or judge of things yet simpler, if anything simpler can be imagined?"[146] (AT VII 21/CSM II 14). The means of deception here are not completely clear. God could clearly bring about a world in which there are no trees (as we've seen, this much was established pretty securely in 1277), but it is less obvious that He could create one in which squares have five sides. In fact, though, Descartes' theology

[146] *Imò etiam, quemadmodum judico interdum alios errare circa ea quae se perfectissime scire arbitrantur, ita ego ut fallar quoties duo & tria simul addo, vel numero quadrati latera, vel si quid aliud facilius fingi potest?*

of omnipotence did entail, rather radically, that the truths of mathematics are wholly dependent on God. He says as much quite explicitly in a letter to Mersenne (15 April 1630):

> "The mathematical truths that you call 'eternal' have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely, no less than the rest of his creation. To say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. Don't hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it's God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. There's not one of them that we can't grasp if we focus our mind on it. They are all inborn in our minds, just as a king would, if he could, imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects." (AT I 145 / CSM III 23))

Descartes then considers the natural objection: if the truths of mathematics wholly depend on God, could He change them? Answer: *yes*, if God's will were changeable, but God, being perfect, has a fixed and unchanging, eternal will. The fixity and eternity of mathematics is thus *guaranteed* by God, rather than being prior to Him. The best way to understand what is happening in this remarkable letter is a covert appeal to the medieval Power Distinction: Descartes is saying that, in respect of His *potentia absoluta*, God could change the truths of mathematics. But God's absolute power is constrained by his Will to manifest as ordained power, and God has *ordained* the truths of mathematics in a fixed and unchanging way. Here then is the explanation for the Deceiving God's ability to touch mathematics: the Deceiving God, by definition, wills otherwise than does an omnibenevolent God. Thus the Deceiver's absolute power to change mathematics would not necessarily be constrained by a fixed and eternal will. And so he could make squares five-sided, just he could make illusory trees. Descartes points out that we struggle to conceive of maths being changeable, but quite sensibly points out that we should not expect to conceive of the fullness of God's (absolute) power.

In his slightly later May 27th letter to Mersenne, Descartes clarifies that God brought about the truths of mathematics as sole and efficient cause, in the same way that He brought about everything else. When Mersenne asks "…what necessitated God to create these truths; I [Descartes] reply that nothing

did: he was as free to make it not true that the radii of a circle are all equal as he was to not create the world" (AT I 152/CSM III 25).

So the deceiving God scenario indeed undermines mathematics. But, following the introduction of the deceiving God, another strange thing happens. Descartes does not end the First Meditation with the deceiving God. Instead, he offers two additional arguments. The first is a kind of 'atheistic deceiving God' - the idea seems to be that, if we are the products of blind chance or causal necessity, then we should be even more suspicious of our ability to know things than if we are the products of a (possibly deceptive) God. I don't take this argument to have been very important to Descartes, and he never mentions it again. The second, though, is the famous evil demon, which ends up being the final supernatural deception scenario used in the First Meditation, and the most enduring legacy of the Cartesian skeptical arguments. His stated reason for replacing the God with the demon is a bit unclear. What he says is that

> "I shall then suppose, not that God who is supremely good and the fountain of truth, but some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that the heavens, the earth, colours, figures, sound, and all other external things are nought but the illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself in order to lay traps for my credulity; I shall consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses, yet falsely believing myself to possess all these things" (AT VII 22-3/CSM II 15)[147]

[147] *Supponam igitur non optimum Deum, fontem veritatis, sed genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summe potentem & callidum, omnem suam industriam in eo posuisse, ut me falleret: putabo coelum, aërem, terram, colores, figuras, sonos, cunctaque externa nihil aliud esse quàm ludificationes somniorum, quibus insidias credulitati meae tetendit: considerabo meipsum tanquam manus non habentem, non oculos, non carnem, non sanguinem, non aliquem sensum, sed haec omnia me habere falsò opinantem.*

It is traditional to regard the substitution as more or less a pious but ultimately inconsequential linguistic variant - to suppose that the demon is meant to be equivalent to the Deceiving God, but more theologically acceptable. Hatfield (92) writes that

> "Most likely, he called his hypothetical deceiver a "malicious demon" in order to give full rein to this reason for doubt, without having the meditator concentrate extensively on the thought that God could be a deceiver, a proposition that he considered false (indeed, contradictory), which others considered impious, and which he intended to refute later."

In the Second Meditation, Descartes writes that he is "supposing that there is some supremely powerful and, if it is permissible to say so, malicious deceiver..." (AT VII 26/CSM II 18)[148], which certainly makes it sound as though the evil demon is meant to just be a 'malicious' variant of the deceiving God. That said, I want to raise a question about the actual equivalence of these two hypotheses, and advance an alternative explanation.

The question is this: something is missing from the evil demon scenario, as Descartes describes it: any mention of mathematics. Nor again is there any when he recapitulates the doubts at the outset of the Second Meditation: "I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false; I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses; I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind." (AT VII 24/CSM II 16). These - body, figure, extension, movement, place - are subjects cast into doubt by the *dream* argument, the subject matters of the physical sciences, not those of mathematics. Nowhere again in the Meditations does Descartes mention or even hint that the demon scenario is meant to undermine mathematical certainty, and indeed he cheerfully uses arguments that depend for their effect on the laws of logic without worrying that he might be deceived about those! What is going on?

[148] *Quid autem nunc, ubi suppono deceptorem aliquem potentissimum, &, si fas est dicere, malignum.*

Hatfield, for one, is unimpressed. He writes:

> "In listing what the evil-deceiver hypothesis calls into doubt, Descartes includes only external objects and one's own body. He does not repeat the challenge to mathematics. Does this mean that he did not really call mathematics into doubt? Hardly. More likely, he is focusing on those doubts that begin the Second Meditation – wherein the meditator is directed toward a new object of thought, not based in sensory images. Doubts about mathematics are taken up again in the Third Meditation."(92)

I want to suggest that this is premature - that there is good reason to think that the deceiving God and the evil demon are philosophically distinct, and that the difference between them has everything to do with mathematics.

4.2. God, Demons, and Mathematics

Here, I think, we see the influence of the Cartesian synthesis. The deceiving God scenario closely mirrors the classical *Potentia Absoluta* skeptical scenario in its most radical, Ultricurian form. The Evil Demon, meanwhile, appears much more closely to reflect the Thomistic theory of demonic deception, especially as filtered through meditative literature. Let us take each of these in turn.

There are actually a number of parallels between Descartes and Autrecourt. Both were devout Catholics who nonetheless found themselves repeatedly in conflict with the religious authorities. Both wished to reform or supplant Aristotelian scholasticism in various ways, and employed skeptical argumentation as a methodological and rhetorical tool in that pursuit. Recall from Chapter Three that, in the course of his philippic against Bernard, Autrecourt argued that, given Bernard's theological and epistemological commitments, he was vulnerable to a deceiving god argument of unprecedented scope and power, one that undermined not just external sensory knowledge, but, in the final

reckoning, knowledge of any propositions whatsoever. Autrecourt did not explicitly mention mathematics, but he did say explicitly that the deceiving God would undermine knowledge that any propositions were contradictory or true or even that they are in fact propositions. Since He thereby undermined even knowledge of first principles and eternal truths, Autrecourt thought *a fortiori* that God could (on Bernard's theory) deceive us about mathematics. Descartes' deceiving God is much the same - the most radical version of the medieval deceiver, capable of undermining our knowledge even of the first principles. But of course Descartes (like Autrecourt) does not believe that God is actually a deceiver - indeed he thinks God is *demonstrably* not a deceiver. Just as Autrecourt's divine deceiver depends on the false and dangerous views of Bernard, the divine deception argument of the First Meditation rests on a naive preconception of God that is conclusively refuted by the beginning of the Fourth Meditation.

Descartes' version of the ontological argument appearing in the Third Meditation is well-known. As Hatfield points out, the argument is actually introduced by way of mathematical deception. The meditator asks herself

> "What about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on? Did I not see at least these things clearly enough to affirm their truth? Indeed, the only reason for my later judgement that they were open to doubt was that it occurred to me that perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident. And whenever my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind, I cannot but admit that it would be easy for Him, if He so desired, to bring it about that I go wrong even in those matters which I think see utterly clearly with my mind's eye." (AT VII 36/CSM II 25)[149]

[149] *Quid verò? Cùm circa res Arithmeticas vel Geometricas aliquid valde simplex & facile considerabam, ut quòd duo & tria simul juncta sint quinque, vel similia, nunquid saltem illa satis perspicue intuebar, ut vera esse affirmarem? Equidem*

Notice the repeated references to God (rather than to the *genium malignum*) and to *supreme* power. I take this to show that we are worried about specifically the deceiving God here, rather than the evil demon. This should not be a surprise, because as we just saw above, the reason why God could deceive us about mathematics is intimately connected with His supremacy and omnipotence *qua* Creator. The point of the ontological argument that follows, then, is to show that the deceiving God doubt was based on a misapprehension: while God certainly does exist, and certainly has the absolute power to deceive about maths, the idea that He could be a deceiver is, in fact, incoherent, and this incoherence stems from a false 'preconceived belief' about His 'supreme power'.

Descartes begins by articulating the (dubious) principle that the cause of an idea must have at least as much perfection as that which the idea represents.[150] That being the case, the cause of the idea of a maximally perfect God must really be maximally perfect. Since only an actually existing God is maximally perfect, God actually exists. And, of course, it is not too hard for Descartes to argue that maximal perfection is incompatible with active deception (though it is compatible with creating finite, imperfect beings that are wont to be deceived). This is why, in the *Conversation with Burman,* Descartes says of the deceiving God hypothesis that "what the author says here is contradictory, since malice is incompatible with supreme power" (AT V 147/CSM III 333) - by definition, supreme power involves the ability to create anything, which requires maximal perfection, which is, in turn, incompossible with malice or deception. The Cartesian divine deceiver, then, is a *reductio* of a particular theology of omnipotence[151] - a "slight and metaphysical doubt" based on a demonstrably

non aliam ob causam de iis dubitandum esse postea judicavi, quàm quia veniebat in mentem forte aliquem Deum talem mihi naturam indere potuisse, ut etiam circa illa deciperer, quae manifestissima viderentur. Sed quoties haec praeconcepta de summâ Dei potentiâ opinio mihi occurrit, non possum non fateri, si quidem velit, facile illi esse efficere ut errem, etiam in iis quae me puto mentis oculis quàm evidentissime intueri.

[150] In his language, causes must possess either 'formally' or 'eminently' everything that is in their effect. This principle applies also to ideas, in which case the cause of the idea must possess every perfection that is in what the idea represents. (AT VII 40-41/CSM II 28).

[151] Just as it was for the medieval scholastics.

incoherent conception of God. Small wonder that, as a device to fix doubts in her mind, the meditator opts instead to imagine the evil demon!

In this I agree with Hatfield. The device of the demon has a genuinely *meditative* purpose, following Loyola's (and Teresa's!) method: "Our attention to the reasons for doubt may waiver and ingrained habits of belief prevail. Consequently, Descartes adopts a common practice from spiritual exercises and devises a program for training the will so as to keep old beliefs at bay. [...] As a dramatic device for affecting the will, Descartes instructs

the meditator to consider that not God but 'some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning' is out to deceive her." (Hatfield 2014, 91) In order for this device to be effective, it needs to be grounded in something familiar and orthodox - something the meditator can return to often and easily.

Though it seems odd to say so from a 21st century vantage, in Descartes' day the demon doubt had just such a familiar and coherent metaphysical basis. It is not incoherent, in the way of the deceiving God, because while it is certainly very powerful and very cunning, it is not *omnipotent*. While the sources of the deceiving God argument[152] were far from theologically orthodox, it seems clear that the demon doubt was deliberately modelled on unimpeachably orthodox sources - Saint Thomas Aquinas, and the recently canonised Saint Teresa of Avila.

In Section II of this chapter we saw that Teresa shared with Aquinas (discussed in Chapter Two) the view that demons and the devil are limited in their deceptive powers to the material world and the inner and outer senses of the body. In Aquinas, at least, this is because demons have power over the

[152] And, for that matter, of the illusion, madness, and dream arguments!

physical matter of the world. In particular, they have the power to physically manipulate the various vapours which are responsible for sense-perception. Teresa is not writing an academic treatise and so there is no explicit metaphysical rationale for the limitation of diabolical powers to the external, material world - presumably she has something like the Thomistic account in mind.[153] Notice the similarities between what demons can do on this account and how dreams and madness operate: recall that dreams and madness, for Descartes, interfere with the proper flows of the vaporous animal spirits whereby the soul's faculties of perception are mediated. So, if I am right, and the Cartesian evil demon is deliberately modelled on this Thomistic/Meditative demon doubt rather than on the deceiving God, then we should expect it to be epistemologically equivalent to the *dream and madness* scenarios, not to the deceiving God. If this is right, then, once the deceiving God scenario is ruled out, even if the demon doubt remains intact,[154] Descartes should feel that he has redeemed his claim to know mathematical truths and other purely intellectual truths. And indeed this is precisely what we see happen at the conclusion of the Third Meditation.

4.3. Resolving a Puzzle: The *Conversation with Burman*

Gail Fine (2021) is primarily interested in arguing that Descartes' skepticism was, at least in his own view, no more radical than that of the ancients. In the course of this discussion she has a footnote (Fine 2021, 331, note 23) which raises an interesting puzzle. In the *Conversation with Burman*, a record

[153] The ultimate aetiology of this view is biblical. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that "the god of this world [*Deus hujus sæculi*] hath blinded the minds of them which believe not;" common exegesis made this refer to Satan. Likewise, John 12:31 calls him "the prince of this world" [*princeps hujus mundi*]. The devil's ability to deceive via the manipulation of vapours is particularly appropriate, since he is "the prince of the power of the air" [*principem potestatis aëris hujus*] (Ephesians 2:2).

[154] Descartes does not at any point actually argue that demonic deception is impossible. Hatfield (2014, 92) seems to think that the proof of God's existence is also meant to refute the demon, but, as we have seen, Hatfield takes the demon to be equivalent to the deceiver God. I think a more likely explanation is that Descartes thinks that demonic deception *is* possible, just as dreams and madness are possible. If the demon personifies doubt, it wouldn't do to have the demon go away at the end of the Third Meditation, when there are still so many doubts left!

written up by Burman four days after the eponymous conversation,[155] we have Descartes claiming some kind of novelty for the demon argument in particular. What he says in full is that

> "The author [ie, Descartes] is here making us as doubtful as he can and casting us into as many doubts as possible. This is why he raises not only the customary difficulties of the sceptics but every difficulty that can possibly be raised; the aim is in this way to demolish completely every single doubt. And this the purpose behind the introduction of the demon, which some might criticise as a superfluous addition" (AT V 147/CSM III 333).

If authentic, this passage has Descartes asserting two things: first, that his demon argument is not among the customary arguments present in the writings of skeptics, and second, that it might be seen as superfluous. If one takes the view that the demon argument is a mere rephasing of the deceiving God argument, then both of these claims are puzzling. As Fine points out, we know from the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet* (AT VIIIB 366–7/CSM I 309) that Descartes counts "that [God] can deceive us" among those themes about which "the sceptics have long been harping on," and so pretty clearly among the 'customary difficulties of the skeptics.' If the demon just is the deceiving God, this is problematic, since then Descartes both asserts and denies its skeptical pedigree. Of course, if the arguments are distinct, then there is no such problem. In fact, I think we can go further. According to the view I defend, Descartes is modelling the deceiving God on medieval deceiving God arguments. As the previous chapter has shown, the history of these arguments is indeed closely connected with skepticism, and indeed it would not be absurd to call Autrecourt a skeptic in a mitigated sense. So Descartes counting the deceiving God among the customary difficulties of the skeptics is quite reasonable. Meanwhile, the demon is modelled on distinctly *non*-skeptical sources (Saints Aquinas and Teresa, the biblical Satan), so, while it would be misleading to call it *original*, it is more or less correct to say that it is not among the customary difficulties *of the skeptics*.

[155] It is worth emphasising that the *Conversation* is a problematic source. Burman is, at best, paraphrasing - it certainly isn't a transcript of the conversation - and the somewhat slapdash character of the manuscript sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish what words are being attributed to Descartes vs Burman himself.

The 'superfluity' of the demon raises another potential puzzle (though a less interesting one). The point of the passage must be that, by the time Descartes introduces the demon, he has already introduced maximal doubt by way of the deceiving God. That being the case, any further skeptical argument is redundant. Here the puzzling thought is just that, if the demon and the deceiving God are in fact the very same argument phrased two different ways, then it *isn't* a further skeptical argument and therefore is not superfluous. It's only if the demon is a distinct argument that it makes sense to call it superfluous at all.

5. Conclusion

Descartes is no skeptic. His deployment of the arguments of ancient skepticism is meant as a methodological tool to further a project of reforming the foundations of science (and the education system). That said, his presentation of those arguments is powerful and compelling, and it is small wonder that many of his readers thought the skeptical case of the First Meditation overshadowed the rest of the *Meditations*. I have argued that the two distinctively 'Cartesian' arguments, the deceiving God and the evil demon, are taken directly from an existing medieval tradition. The divine deceiver is used by Descartes more or less as it was historically, as an outrageous skeptical scenario used to draw out absurdities in particular theological and epistemological views. The demon shares its historical use in meditation literature as a device for training the mind, but has been repurposed to be more epistemological.

Given the force of the Cartesian presentation of skepticism, it should not come as a great surprise that, amidst the general revival of skepticism at the time, Descartes was taken as a friend to skepticism. He was so interpreted, both by adversaries of skepticism (such as the author of the 'certain broadsheet') and by skeptics themselves. In the next section, we will look at the development of skeptical

philosophy in response to Descartes, where we will find the Cartesian arguments finally appropriated in defence of an avowedly skeptical conclusion.

IV. Skeptical Cartesians: Pierre-Daniel Huet

1. Introduction and Background

In contrast with the voluminous scholarship on Descartes, there is comparatively little work done on his skeptical interlocutors. Richard Popkin (2003) identifies three key figures who have attracted the majority of attention: Pierre Bayle, Simon Foucher, and Pierre-Daniel Huet. To this we might add the great Blaise Pascal.

While Bayle was certainly sympathetic with skepticism, and certainly influenced by Descartes, he makes no use of the demon or deceiving God arguments, preferring a historical approach (exemplified by the monumental *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique*) of the sort that Cicero regards as the true ground of skepticism, and I will therefore refrain from discussing his work.

Hickson (in the *Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, 2019, 678) calls Simon Foucher a "skeptic *malgré lui*." This seems right. Foucher is a critic of Cartesianism and a Cartesian, a self-professed apologist for the ancient Academy who titled almost all of his books with the distinctly Pyrrhonian phrase "the Search for Truth". Probably the best way of approaching his complexities is to see him as a skeptic, taking the time-honoured skeptical method of reducing a 'dogmatic' philosophy - in this case Cartesianism - itself to skepticism. To him we owe the popularisation of several now-familiar attacks on Descartes: it was Foucher, for example, who argued that Cartesian substance dualism leads to skepticism about the external world (Hickson 2019, 681) Foucher is doubtless a vital figure in the history of Cartesianism and skepticism. His relevance to the history of the demon argument, however, is minimal. Foucher is primarily concerned with veil-of-perception type arguments, puzzles about ideas and the senses, and the like. His skepticism is, in many respects, quite

mitigated: while he is dubious of our ability to learn metaphysical truths through sense-perception, he actually defends Cartesian criteria of truth, the self-evidence of '2+2=4', and so forth. In response (we surmise) to his friend Huet's employment of the deceiving God in the *Censura* (much more on that below), Foucher found it necessary to disavow the argument himself, writing that

> "We should not think that piety requires us to speak in this way of divine power. For it serves only to overturn all the certainty that we can have concerning God, and to destroy not only theology, but also religion. That is what the Cartesians need to consider, they who take their master at his word rather than interpreting him charitably." (translation from Hickson, 2018, 337)

Foucher was fond of the ancient Academy, and in some respects himself a skeptic, but the deceiving God went too far for him, and he made no epistemological use of it.

It is difficult to classify Pascal, especially the Pascal of the *Pensées*, neatly as a skeptic or anti-skeptic. Much of his writing expresses clear sympathies with Pyrrhonism, Montaigne, and skeptical theses. On the other hand, he also frequently expresses the 'certainty' of principles, the reliability of observation, and other distinctly antiskeptical theses. Maia Neto (2022, 160) explains this apparent contrast as theological in aetiology. Pascal, according to Maia Neto, uses skepticism and dogmatism as vehicles for illustrating the dual nature of mankind after the Fall

> "Skeptics show, correctly, that we cannot ultimately justify our beliefs but they cannot avoid believing them anyway. Dogmatists argue, correctly, that human beings cannot avoid accepting these principles as true but they cannot provide rational justification for their assent. So the only two logically possible philosophical positions fail partially and cannot be reconciled since they are contrary to one another. Only the doctrine of the Fall of Man explains the human epistemological predicament, reconciling what each philosophical position has correctly acknowledged. It has been revealed that human beings have a double nature, the prelapsarian one in which plain truth was enjoyed, and the fallen one, in which the original

> desire for truth remained but corruption of the faculties precluded human beings from attaining plain truth naturally. Skeptics take into account only the Fallen state and therefore cannot explain why we do assent even in the absence of rational justification, while dogmatists presume no Fall happened and therefore wrongly assume that we are still capable of fully possessing naturally the truth. Although human corruption is more visible in the Pensées than the reminiscences of the prelapsarian state, the proof requires that both dogmatists and skeptics are equally half wrong and half right, for Pascal holds the view that both states must equally be acknowledged." (160-161)

In the service of this point, Pascal has to state the skeptical arguments quite strongly. His way of framing the skeptical position is very clearly influenced by Descartes' method of doubt. In the Contrariétés, he emphasises that, "without faith, there can be no certainty whether man is created by a good God, or by an evil demon,"[156] and call this "the strongest of the skeptics' arguments." He does not develop the argument further, so it is difficult to see exactly how he thought it functioned, but we can presume he had the Cartesian deceiver God or evil demon (which Pascal seems to have conflated, along with the dreams and madness argument) in mind. Pascal is thus perhaps not a true demonological skeptic himself, but he shows quite clearly that within a very few decades, Cartesian methodological skepticism was being taken as a profound grounds for *actual skepticism*. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Pierre-Daniel Huet, the implacable foe of Cartesianism, who, paradoxically, is the best example of Cartesian arguments being appropriated for explicitly skeptical ends.[157]

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[156] *...n'y avant point de certitude hors la foi, si l'homme est créé par un Dieu bon, ou par un démon méchant*. Pascal in fact goes on to say much the same thing about dreams, arguing that dreams are indistinguishable from waking experience except by faith: *De plus que personne n'a d'asseurance hors de la foy s'il veille où s'il dort, veu que durant le Sommeil on croit veiller aussy fermement que nous faisons, on croit voir les espaces, les figures les mouvemens, on sent couler le temp[s] on le mesure & en fin on agit de mesme qu'Eveillé* [Contrariétés 14 (Laf. 131, Sel. 164), weird spelling in the original]. I've argued above that this is not the correct reading of the Cartesian dream argument, but it does seem to have been Pascal's. Huet correctly (in my view) interprets the dream argument, writing that "although when we are awake we realise that we were mistaken in previously considering the dream evident, the latter remains doubtful for 'we could never be sensible of it, whilst the fit of sleep.'" (Maia Neto 2022, 159, *Traité* I.79).

[157] There is not a huge body of scholarship on Huet's epistemology. Beyond Popkin, there is a book-length look at Huet and Descartes by Lennon (2008), which I have used extensively for my comments on the *Censura*, along with an essay

Huet was a titan of the *respublica literaria* - linguist, poet, novelist, scientist, tutor to the Dauphin of France, geographer, historian, bishop, ex-bishop, philosopher. He was, according to his autobiography, much taken with Cartesian philosophy in his youth, but later renounced it. The reasons for Huet's break with Cartesianism turn out to be somewhat complex, and not purely (or even principally) intellectual. Huet was, with the best will in the world, somewhat venal. Reading him, one is often reminded of his friend and frequent correspondence Leibniz: they share a towering, polymathic intellect, and also a petty preoccupation with rising in the favour of the powers that be (whether they be the French Academy, or the King). Thus one explanation for Huet's vocal criticism of Descartes was an attempt to curry favour with the King and Church. This explanation had some adherents at the time (Lennon, 2008, 6), but I side with Lennon in thinking it unlikely to be the whole story. Huet was a social climber, but never intellectually dishonest. He would not have changed his mind about a philosophy just because the King didn't like it. Nor would he under any circumstances have denounced (and spent *years* denouncing, in repeated editions) a philosophy he secretly still admired.

No, for Huet to change his mind required something more personal. And indeed he had just such a personal reason. Huet was elevated to the Academie Française in August 1674 - the very year in which Perrault's *Critique de l'Opera* inaugurated the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. The Querelle may strike some contemporary readers as absurd, and in some ways it was: a composer called Jean-Baptiste Lully wrote an opera, Alceste, which attracted some negative critical attention for its infidelity to the Greek myth. The librettist was Philippe Quinault, who happened to be a family friend of Charles Perrault (who, incidentally, would go on to write Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty). Perrault went to his friend's defence with the *Critique de l'Opera,* which, somewhat absurdly, claimed that

(2019) in the Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism. There is also a paper on Huet and Foucher by Michael Hickson in the Machuca and Reid (2018, Chapter 23) collection, and some essays by José R. Maia Neto, Popkin's Student, of which his (2008) is the most germane. Maia Neto has also recently published a superb book (2022) dealing with Huet's skepticism in the *Traité* and its relationship to his contemporaries.

Quinault and Lully's *Alceste* was superior to Euripedes'. The classicists in the Academie Française were not, to put it mildly, impressed. They riposted that everything of artistic value comes from classical antiquity. The *Modernes* replied that classical literature was all well and good in antiquity, but now, in the glorious modernity of Louis XIV, a new style of artistic production was necessary. And on it went.

Into this milieu stepped Huet the classicist and philologist. Huet, naturally, sided with the *Anciens*. The Cartesians, meanwhile, were customarily grouped with the *Modernes.* This is probably not surprising: Descartes himself was a radical - an education reformer and advocate of the new science. Though devout, he was widely regarded as dangerously heterodox. Perhaps surprisingly, the main reason Huet, at least, seemed to associate Cartesian philosophy with the *Modernes* was Cartesian denigration of the faculty of memory. For Huet, it seems, to disparage memory was to disparage history and the past. Particularly in Malebranche, Huet saw the Cartesians as emblematic of everything wrong with the *Modernes*: an overweening arrogance, faith in their own intellects, disdain for the past, religious heterodoxy, and so forth. He thus set out, in a long series of publications, to overthrow Cartesianism.

In the following sections, I will examine how Huet used skepticism against the Cartesians, and how he buttressed that skepticism with arguments taken from the Cartesians themselves. I will first look at the skeptical dimension of his critique of Descartes and Cartesianism in the *Censura philosophiae cartesiane.* I will then conclude by showing how, in the *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain*, we finally see a proper demon argument (of the deceiving God variety) in favour of a skeptical conclusion.

2. The Role of Skepticism

Huet's principle weapon against the Cartesians is skepticism. Lennon (2019) takes this strategy to fall out of a broader approach to Christian apologetics. Said approach is actually quite ancient: as early as Lactantius (see Chapter One), the arguments of the ancient skeptics were being used by Christian apologists to undermine the claims of rival philosophers, and indeed to undermine reason itself, thereby leaving open the way for faith and revelation.

Huet's skepticism, like Lactantius's, is broadly Academic, in the Ciceronian mode, though he takes arguments from the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* too[158] His characteristic skeptical thesis, with which he begins the posthumous *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain*, is that "the truth cannot be known by human understanding, by means of reason, with perfect and complete certainty."[159] As Hickson puts it, this thesis was in the service of "a claim that Huet made at the outset of his earlier *Demonstratio evangelica*, namely, that skepticism, which renders doubtful and uncertain everything that we know by reason and the senses, is not opposed to religion" (Hickson 2018, 323).

Maia Neto identifies one other significant contributor to Huet's variety of skepticism: Descartes himself. He says that Huet

> "Valorises the 'skeptical' part, or that which could be brought back to skepticism, of Cartesian thought. Discussion of Cartesian doubt occupies almost a third of the *Censura.* The disposition to doubt, of everything in Descartes, symbolises for Huet the truly 'philosophical' disposition. At the beginning of his meditation, Descartes had thus adopted the good, skeptical method, but, alas, he discarded it too quickly." (Maia Neto, 2008, 11, my translation)

[158] Huet did not even read Sextus Empiricus until later in life - his first exposure to skepticism, by his own report, was actually through Descartes!

[159] *La Verité ne peut être connue de l'Entendement humaine, par le secours de la Raison, avec un parfait et entiere certitude* (the somewhat haphazard capitalization and accenting is in the original).

The critique of Descartes in the *Censura* is then an attempt to show that all of the antiskeptical argumentation that follows the First Meditation fails to overcome the Cartesian doubts. Huet first summarises the Cartesian method of doubt, then argues first that the *cogito* is not certain (on several grounds) and then that Descartes has not offered any 'criterion of truth'. Most of this argument does not relate to the demon hypothesis and can therefore be passed over rather quickly.

Against the *Cogito*, Huet argues that Descartes misrepresents it as a self-evident proposition when in fact it is an inference. Construed as an inference, it is open to criticism on a number of grounds. For example, Huet argues that "I think" and "I exist" must be temporally separate thoughts. This means that when Descartes thinks about whether or not he exists, he cannot be relying on the present-tense premise "I think". Instead, all he has to go on is the *memory* "I thought". Since Descartes traduces the faculty of memory, he can't be certain of that premise, and in any case the inference "I thought therefore I now am" is transparently invalid (Lennon 2019, 789). He also criticises the *cogito* for being circular [since the premise "I think" covertly includes "I exist"]. And finally, he criticises it on divine deception grounds.

3. The Demon Against the Cartesians

Huet takes Descartes to have a very radical theology of omnipotence. His reading is clearly motivated by the same kinds of factors discussed above in consideration of mathematical deception. He reads Descartes as holding that God (at least *de absoluta*) can do *anything*, including logical impossibilities. He says that "indeed, the opinion of Descartes is that it is possible that God cause contradictory and opposing sentences to be true simultaneously"[160] (*Censura* I.28). If we are worrying about a deceiving God who can do this, then the *cogito* - at least when construed inferentially, as Huet thinks it must be - is itself invalid (and thus the conclusion, "I exist", is uncertain,) because God could have brought it

[160] *Cartesii quippe sententia est, efficere Deum posse, ut contraria & repugnantia enuntiata, vera simul esse possint.*

about that "he who thinks, at the very time he thinks, is not"[161] (I.31). The structure of the argument is that of a skeptical scenario: it could be the case that you are introspecting, realise that thinking is occurring, and so on, and yet, unbeknownst to you, still do not exist! Since this scenario is possible, the *cogito* inference is invalid.

Now it is important to observe that Huet, at least in the *Censura*, does not *endorse* the theology of omnipotence that generates this argument. The argument is thus a particularly powerful *reductio ad academicus* in the style of the medievals: Huet is arguing that Descartes holds a theology of omnipotence according to which even contradictions might be true, and thus that Descartes cannot be certain even of the cogito, since Descartes' God could bring about a world in which a logically valid argument has true premises and a false conclusion. That said, there is a notable difference between Huet and the scholastic purveyors of *reductio ad academicus*: Huet is an academic skeptic! This changes the rhetoric quite considerably. A medieval scholastic would have to take a *reductio ad academicus* to show that one of the premises must be false (in this case, that the Cartesian theology of omnipotence is wrong). Huet instead wants to show, like an ancient skeptic, that his opponent has no good reason to reject the conclusion that nothing is known for certain.

We can see another instance of the same basic pattern later in the *Censura* that helps give some clarity in how Huet employs the deceiver. In the second chapter, Huet is trying to show that Descartes has no 'criterion of truth'. By this he means a reliable indicator that a proposition is known rather than merely believed. Huet identifies three putative criteria in Descartes. As Hickson phrases it

> "Huet observes that some Cartesians treat 'I think, therefore, I am' as if it were itself a criterion, but Huet considers this view absurd since propositions, their truth, and the mark of

[161] *id quod cogitat, eo ipso tempore quo cogitat , non esse.*

> their truth must be distinct things. Thus the skeptical objections to Descartes's criteria will focus on the natural light, clarity and distinctness, and evidence." (2018, 326)

To show that these putative criteria are unsuccessful, Huet employs a variety of arguments. Many of these are taken directly from Sextus Empiricus - in particular, the 'Five Modes of Agrippa'. Hickson again is worth quoting at length.

> "Huet observes that clarity and distinctness is a relative concept (the third mode of Agrippa): one and the same idea can appear clear and distinct to one person, but not to another. This phenomenon gives rise to interminable rational disagreements (the first mode of Agrippa): "The Cartesians also disagree among themselves and, using the same standard of truth, maintain opposite and contradictory views". Either these disputing Cartesians will simply assert that their own perceptions (and not their opponents') are clear and distinct, in which case they will fall prey to the Agrippan mode of hypothesis (the fourth mode); or they will bring in something other than clarity and distinctness to decide these disputes, which demonstrates that clarity and distinctness cannot be the ultimate criterion of truth. But whatever additional criterion they appeal to in order to decide the dispute will then be questioned, and the dispute will either go on ad infinitum (the second mode), with each further criterion being bolstered by yet another criterion, or the dispute will be circular (the fifth mode), since the disputants will support the further criterion by means of criteria posited earlier in the dispute." (2018, 327-8)

Huet supplements these Agrippian arguments with other, more original ones, including another use of the divine deceiver. This occurs at II.83. In this passage, he is attempting to show that the criterion of the 'natural light' is illegitimate. Huet takes the natural light to be more or less synonymous with the intellective faculty of the soul, the "the faculty of knowing given to us by God" (From Descartes' *Principles*, AT VIIIA 16; CSM I 203). Again there are a variety of arguments - Huet says, for example, that to use the natural light as a criterion of truth in the face of Cartesian skeptical doubts is circular,

because the existence of a divinely-granted faculty of knowing (ie, the natural light) presupposes that we know things. Then at *Censura* II.83 Huet delivers what Lennon (2008, 149) calls the 'trump argument:'

> "Finally, since according to Descartes God can bring it about that twice two is not four, if we imagine that God has in fact done what He can do, the natural light will be mistaken in knowing that twice two is four. It therefore cannot be a sure criterion, because it can be false"[162]

This argument is structurally identical to the earlier one against the *Cogito*. Huet first states the Cartesian theology of omnipotence: God can actualize contradictions. Then he concocts a possible scenario where God has used this power: 2+2≠4. Finally, he traces a damning consequence of that scenario. Huet does not state this last step quite as explicitly as the others, but for the argument to make any sense the idea must be that, in the hypothetical scenario where God has made 2+2≠4, He has still given us an intellective faculty that falsely represents that 2+2=4 (i.e., this is a deceiving God). Notice that God could do this even though the natural light by definition grasps only true knowledge, because God can actualize contradictions! Since there is a possible scenario in which the natural light is wrong, then, it is not a reliable guide. QED.

Huet is sometimes more careless in how he presents these arguments. Lennon (2008, 149ff) devotes considerable discussion to variants of the argument where Huet seems to be confused about whether he means to invoke the *possibility* of divine deception or its *actuality*, or where he (understandably) grows confused in tracing out the consequences of a scenario in which God actualizes not just an impossibility but a contradiction. One of these discussions is worth looking at in more detail, though,

[162] *Denique cum scitum sit Cartesii, Deum efficere posse, ut bis bina non sint quatuor, si fingamus Deum id effecisse quod poteit efficere fallax erit Lumen naturale, quo cognosco bis bina esse quatuor. Certum igitur Criterium hoc esse non potest, quod potest esse falsum.*

because I think Lennon errs in his diagnosis of it. Here is the relevant passage of Huet, as Lennon translates it:

> "As to what they say about God not being able to create a man who does not know the truth at all, I willingly agree as a Christian. But how does that comport with the generally accepted position of the Cartesian philosophy that God can bring it about that two and two are not four, and that contradictory propositions can be true simultaneously? For let us imagine that God has brought about what they say He can, and that twice two is not four. I shall then certainly err when I am aware through simple perception, or in any other way, that two added to two make four. Let us also imagine that God has brought it about that he who is thinking does not exist, or that he is not thinking when he thinks he is; I shall certainly err when I then say, 'I am thinking, therefore I am.' God is therefore able to bring it about that I err in things that I know through simple perception, since He is able to bring it about that the things that I know through simple perception are false."

Lennon feels that this argument is unsatisfying, because in a scenario in which contradictory propositions are both true, it is not right to say that 'simple perception' errs: it correctly grasps the truth of P, it's just that not-P is also true![163] Here I think Huet has just been a bit careless with his language in invoking the simultaneous truth of contradictory propositions. Really what he wants is just a scenario in which 2+2≠4 - that is, the same skeptical scenario as in the previous argument. The *possibility* of such a scenario is shown by God's power to actualize contradictory propositions simultaneously, but, on my way of reading it, that is not intended to be the skeptical scenario itself.

In all of these uses of the deceiver, we have seen Huet embark on a specifically anti-Cartesian project, using Cartesian assumptions that he himself does not accept. This is much in the vein of ancient

[163] The epistemic implications of possible worlds in which both P and not-P are true are difficult to sort out. I'm not sure Lennon is right to say that the simple perception that P 'does not err' in such a world. I suppose it both errs and not. Huet has no worked-out logic of inconsistency and so frequently confuses himself in these matters.

skeptical anti-Stoic argument, but it means that these 'deceiving God' scenarios, though powerful, are not really being proffered as general-purpose skeptical arguments. That said, there is another interesting version of the argument in a different work of Huet that seems more nearly to fit that bill.

4. The Demon Against Human Knowledge

The *Traité philosophique de la faiblesse de l'esprit humain,* though published both pseudonymously and posthumously, was originally written as part of the manuscript that was published as the *Censura*. The point of the *Traité* is, as discussed above, to argue for the thesis that "the truth cannot be known by human understanding, by means of reason, with perfect and complete certainty."[164] To this end Huet advances thirteen (!) 'proofs'. He begins[165] with arguments from illusion and the fallibility of the senses, moves onto Pyrrhonian arguments from change and relativity, continues into an argument from philosophical disagreement, and then, as the ninth mode, gives a "reason to doubt all things, proposed by Descartes" (I.X.85). He states this reason immediately: "That we do not know that God did not wish to create us with such a nature that we always fool ourselves, even in those things which seem to us most clear"[166] (I.X.85, my translation). Notice that here in the *Traité* Huet has finally articulated explicitly that the deceiving God scenario is meant to be *epistemically* possible - "we do not *know"* that God has not brought it about. Huet is quite clear that, from a Christian perspective, God is not a deceiver, and indeed that the Christian *knows* (*sçait)* God is not a deceiver. But this is a revelatory knowledge, not a rational one, and speaking purely philosophically (*parler en philosophe*) we have no reason not to suppose that God could deceive (I.X.86).

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[164] Huet the Christian thinks that people know things by a faculty other than the understanding, by means of faith and revelation.

[165] Actually he begins with an 'argument' from scripture, but the first philosophical argument is that from illusion.

[166] *Que nous ne savons pas si Dieu ne nous a point voulu créer de telle nature, que nous nous trompions toujours, même dans les choses qui nous paroissont les plus claires.*

This argument explicitly holds a vital place in Huet's skeptical argumentation:

> "This doubt is of the greatest impotence for hindering our spirits from receiving any proposition as certain, while we do not make use of anything other than our reason… [which certainty] could not be other than destroyed, if reason does not borrow the security of faith" (I.X.86-7)[167].

As Maia Neto (2022, 160) points out, the language here is taken from Pascal, who says using strikingly similar French that, without faith, we can have no certainty whether humans are created by a good God or an evil demon.[168] But Huet goes further than Pascal. Pascal thought the dogmatists and skeptics were each half-right. Huet's sympathies lie almost entirely with the skeptics. We can see this, in fact, in how Huet marked up his own copy of the Port-Royal edition of Pascal's *Pensées.* In each case where Pascal provides a contrast between a skeptical statement and a dogmatic one (intending to show a contradiction that can only be resolved by his theological argument about the Fall), Huet underlines and marks up the skeptical statement… and ignores the dogmatic one (Maia Neto 2022, 161-2). Pascal hopes for a symmetry - dogmatism cannot be rationally defended; but not everything can be doubted. Huet agrees with the irrationality of dogmatism, but finds universal doubt quite congenial.

Having offered his deceiving God, all Huet has to do is defend the possibility of the scenario. He takes its epistemic possibility more or less for granted - he appears to think that the burden is on the dogmatist to show that the deceiving God is *impossible*, since otherwise its invulnerability to evidence (Huet would say 'to reason') makes it a *de facto* epistemic possibility. But he does think there is one

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[167] *Ce doute est de telle importance pour empêcher nos esprits de recevoir aucune proposition comme certaine, tant que nous ne nous servirons que de notre raison, que tant s'en faut que Descartes l'ait détruit, mais même qu'il ne peut aucunement être détruit, si la raison n'emprunte le secours de la foi.*

[168] Quoted in the Background section earlier.

possible counterargument: that the deceiving God scenario is impious. To rebut that charge, he wrote a (brief) chapter (Book III, Ch.14). Here's the objection:

> "If God made man of such a nature that he fooled himself always, even in the things that seemed to him most evident, as Descartes proposed, it follows that God is a deceiver, that which no man fears of God"[169] (III.234).

Huet's initial response is somewhat petty - he says that since Descartes is the author of the deceiving God argument, it's for him to respond to the charge of impiety. He then provides a few actual counterarguments, notionally on behalf of Descartes, but pretty clearly on his own behalf. First, he says that a God who makes humans so that we always fool ourselves is not necessarily a 'deceiver' thereby. The argument here is clever: he points out that everyone agrees that 1. God is not a deceiver and 2. God has created humans that are *sometimes* deceived. Since 1. and 2. are unanimously agreed to be compatible, Huet thinks 1. should also be compatible with 3. God has created humans that are *always* deceived (III.269-70).

Huet has a second ingenious argument: that God could make humans that are always fooled without thereby being a deceiver, because He has made it clear through scripture and experience and reason itself (cf. the rest of the *Traité,* of course!) that human reason is not to be trusted. God - even the 'deceiving God' of Cartesian radical doubt- is thus more of a 'raconteur of fables' than He is a liar, since He has no expectation that we should believe anything He 'says'. That is to say, a God who desires that humans be skeptics is not to be blamed if dogmatists (who are, after all, defying His manifest will!) fall into error (III.270-2). Obviously Descartes would never give this argument. Descartes does not think God could deceive us. Huet, though, does.

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[169] *Si Dieu avoir fait l'homme de telle nature, qu'il se trompat toujours, même dans les choses qui lui paroissent les plus évidentes, comme Des Cartes l'a proposé, il s'ensuivroit que Dieu seroit trompeur, ce qu'aucun homme craignant Dieu...*

Let us then take stock of this *qua* demon argument. In Chapter Zero, I laid out two criteria for a demon scenario: the scenario must make it so many of our beliefs are false, and it must nonetheless be undetectable by any evidence. Huet's divine deceiver scenario certainly makes many of our beliefs false, but is it evidence-impervious? I think the answer here must be yes. At several points I have suggested that there is a close connection between evidence-imperviousness and generality: if a scenario is very general in the sense of making a wide swathe of our ordinary beliefs false, then it will tend to be evidence-impervious, since those ordinary beliefs will be unavailable as disconfirmatory evidence. Huet's deceiver is a good example - while Huet does not dwell much on the question of disconfirming the deceiver (treating this as self-evidently impossible), he is very clear that he is imagining a scenario in which God has given us *globally* defective faculties. In such a scenario, any bit of evidence or chain of reasoning we might try to use is going to be corrupted by the divine deceiver's defective faculty. So if someone tries to give an argument that we are not being deceived, Huet can simply nod along for a while, saying, in effect, 'yes, yes, very good... but then again, perhaps your argument only seems good because God has given me defective faculties." Any and all further arguments will be met in exactly the same way. So far, this is of a piece with Descartes.

In Chapter Zero I then distinguished a demon *scenario* from a skeptical demon *argument*. The latter uses the possibility of a demon scenario in order to argue that our epistemic situation is very much worse than we would otherwise believe. Descartes did not do this: he thought that the epistemic consequences of the deceiving God were eliminated by a proof of God's existence and perfection. Huet, on the other hand, believes that the Cartesians were very wrong to think knowledge and certainty could be recovered. Ultimately, Huet thinks that the correct epistemic attitude to take is universal suspension of belief, after the manner of the ancient skeptics.

So I think it would be right to say that Huet (and Descartes before him) have given us a genuine demon scenario. Huet parts ways with Descartes in using that scenario for a genuine demon *argument* in favour of a skeptical conclusion. What I now want to do is give a brief assessment of Huet's skepticism, how it differs from that of the ancients, and why those differences make his demon argument, for perhaps the first time in history, appropriate.

5. An Appraisal of Huet's Skepticism

In introducing Huet I rather glibly described him as some kind of Academic skeptic influenced by Pyrrhonian arguments. That description is not entirely wrong, but it is misleading. In fact Huet had a version of skepticism all his own, and one that departed from that of the ancients in significant respects.

Book II, Chapter 8 of the *Traité* is devoted to the idea that one should not blindly follow the teachings of any particular author or sect. On its surface, this notion is much in keeping with ancient skepticism, which, after all, tended to advocate for itself largely on the basis that the disagreement of the philosophical schools showed none of them knew what they were talking about. But Huet extends this mistrust to *skeptical* sects. He says (II.212-3) "we must not even hand ourselves over in this way to the Academicians or to the Skeptics [= Pyrrhonians], unless we are ready to abandon them." He goes on "For, as Arcesilaus changed the system of Pyrrho, and Carneades that of Arcesilaus, and Philo that of Carneades, and Antiochus that of Philo, it is just that we have the same right." Finally, he gives two examples of how he proposes to 'change the system.' Here is the first:

> "For example, we abandon the Academicians and the Skeptics, in that they profess to seek the truth, and examine all things to find it, and consider them from all sides, for which they are

> given the name 'Zetetics". For what truth have they found by such a long and constant search?"[170] (II.214)

This is truly remarkable. The ancient skeptics - especially the Pyrrhonists, but to an extent the Academics, too - were characterised by exactly this seeking. To part ways with them here is not some footnote, but a radical departure from the whole history of skepticism: it is, in a sense, to give up the project. What Huet claims to have is not just reasons to doubt all the dogmatic claims so far adduced, but reason to doubt reason itself - Huet's skepticism closes off all further inquiry.

It is thus not surprising that Huet's second point of departure from the ancient skeptics is of equally foundational significance. Huet says that, while the ancients sought a 'fixed and constant state of soul', moderation, and the stability to endure, he instead most values the evasion of opinion and arrogance, and the preparation of the spirit for the receipt of faith (II.215). Huet thus jettisons not just the main feature of ancient skepticism but also its principal motivation. Huet still sees an ethical purpose to skepticism, but that purpose is much changed. Instead of the Pyrrhonist's tranquillity hard-won through ceaseless striving for truth, we have a kind of humility imposed by a recognition of the poverty of our epistemic position. It is a much more pessimistic skepticism.

It is also, I want to suggest, a skepticism that fits much more neatly with the demon argument. In Chapter One I argued that the demon was a poor fit for ancient skepticism, and particularly for Pyrrhonian skepticism, because by its very nature the demon is an inquiry-ending argument. If one accepts the premise of the demon, there is *no point* in seeking the truth, because the truth is forever hidden in the abyss. So, for the ancient Pyrrhonists, ever concerned with their 'search after truth' and the attainment of tranquillity thereby, the demon is a wholly inappropriate argument. But those same

[170] *Par example, nous abandonnons les Académiciens et les Sceptiques, en ce qu'ils font profession de chercher la vérité, et d'examiner toutes choses pour la trouve, et de les considerer de tous les côtés, ce qui leur a donné le nom de Zetetiques. Car quelle vérité ont-ils trouvée par une si longue et si constante recherche?*

reasons that make the demon inappropriate for the Pyrrhonist make it very attractive for Huet. Huet's goal is precisely to close off inquiry: he sees further seeking after truth as pointless, even impious. Where the Pyrrhonists want to exercise human reason forever, Huet wants to humble it, to prepare the way for faith. The demon serves these purposes well.

V. Conclusions: the Demon Triumphant?

The history of the demon argument is just a small part of the history of skepticism, which is itself but a tiny part of the history of epistemology. What I have attempted to show is that even this fragment of a fragment is a vast and far-reaching subject matter; one that touches upon wide swathes of intellectual, religious, and even political history.

How did the demon argument arise? The answer requires us to trace several strands of thought: ancient skepticism, medieval theories of divine omnipotence and diabolical deception, later medieval thought experiments about a deceiving God, genre considerations in early modern devotional literature, and the eventual synthesis of these strands and more in the Cartesian method of doubt and its subsequent skeptical appropriation by Huet.

In hindsight, the invention of the demon argument can feel inevitable. Skepticism started out well enough, it can seem, with its quaint illusion arguments involving bent oars, but, over time, as philosophers pondered and problematized ever more deeply, ever more powerful skeptical arguments and ever more bleak epistemic prospects developed, until inevitably we ended up with an inquiry ending, all-annihilating argument: the demon.

I think this impression is mistaken, though. Despite the demon's prominence today, a historical study shows that it in fact requires quite a historically unusual form of skepticism, and a confluence of

background metaphysics and even theology, in order to make the demon 'click.' It could easily never have been developed. The traditional, ethically motivated skepticism of a Pyrrho or even (if I may be permitted to speculate somewhat in conclusion) a Nagarjuna will have little use for it.

This last brings me to the point on which I would like to end the dissertation. I have often felt that contemporary antiskeptical epistemology is failing to really address skepticism. Skepticism is frequently dismissed as a nonviable or even nonexistent position, which nobody could reasonably hold. This seems to me unfair: there are and have been real skeptics, who advanced skepticism as a serious philosophical thesis, with alleged ethical and quality-of-life advantages over other epistemic attitudes. In my view, contemporary philosophy should take these claims seriously. What I think this dissertation illustrates, though, is that those philosophically 'serious' forms of skepticism are mostly not going to be the ones employing the demon argument. Indeed, insofar as they follow the Pyrrhonians in finding virtue in a ceaseless quest for knowledge, they should be just as troubled by the demon as nonskeptical philosophers. I have not even attempted to suggest a response to the demon - it's possible that no satisfying response exists - but I think it is reassuring, at least, that many skeptics ought to be looking for one, too.

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