

KENNINGTON ON DESCARTES' EVIL GENIUS

BY HIRAM CATON

In his note in this *Journal* on "The Finitude of Descartes' Evil Genius," Richard Kennington argues, contrary to prevailing opinion, that the texts "by no means establish that the Evil Genius is omnipotent, but imply rather his finitude."<sup>1</sup> To correct this misapprehension is to remove the basis for the dominant interpretation of the Cartesian "foundation" of science as an effort to construct a presuppositionless metaphysics. For the finitude of the demon implies the exemption of mathematics from doubt, and mathematics are just what Cartesian metaphysics presupposes.<sup>2</sup> We shall explain why Kennington's argument does not suffice to sustain his interesting and important thesis.

His textual argument pivots upon the difference in the meaning of "omnipotens" and "summe potens." The second expression may mean merely "very" or "extremely" powerful. Descartes consistently ascribes "omnipotens" to God, whereas he never speaks of the demon except as "summe potens," or some variation on this expression, e.g., "potentissimus." Commensurate with this difference, only the existence of the world, but never the truth of mathematics, is said to be that which the demon renders doubtful. This reading is confirmed by the French translation approved by Descartes, which consistently renders "summe potens" as "très" or "extrêmement puissant."<sup>3</sup>

The striking parallel contrast between the omnipotent God and the very powerful demon disappears, however, upon the observation that the demon is not "thrice mentioned in the *Meditations*."<sup>4</sup> A *genium* is mentioned in only one of the three passages Kennington cites; the others speak only of a "deceiver." It follows that the only strict textual evidence against the omnipotence of the demon must be drawn from that passage. In what is to my knowledge Descartes' only explicit commentary on the expression "summe potens" as it occurs there, Descartes explained to Burman that "here the author utters a contradiction, because *summa potentia* is not consistent with malice (*maliginitas*)."<sup>5</sup> It is a contradiction in light of the later proofs that the omnipotent God is necessarily veracious; consequently, it is a contradiction only if *summa potens* means "omnipotent." The context confirms this reading; for Descartes explains that he introduced the demon in order to pass beyond ordinary skeptical objections to "all possible objections."<sup>6</sup> Although Kennington does not refer to these remarks, he asserts that if the demon were omnipotent, "the principle of noncontradiction would be suspended, and all further reasoning would have to cease."<sup>7</sup> Descartes, however, expressly admits that the demonic doubt is contradictory and confused, contrary to Kennington's claim that

<sup>1</sup>JHI, 32 (1971), 441.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 442-43, 445.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 442-43.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 442. The passages Kennington cites are AT VII, 22, 25, 26.

<sup>5</sup>AT V, 147; also, 150-51.

<sup>6</sup>AT V, 147; for similar statements, see AT VII, 141, 158.

<sup>7</sup>Kennington, 442; 445.

properly understood it is a genuine *ratio dubitandi*. Furthermore, Descartes says, in the passage which introduces the demon, that by suspending judgment, he can avoid error "however powerful, however cunning" his deceiver may be: presumably he may even be omnipotent.<sup>8</sup> Just this regress to the skeptical *epochē* is the primary evidence for the interpretation of the doubt as a search for a presuppositionless beginning.

Kennington does not consider the possibility that the *deus deceptor* is the *medius terminus* through which God and the demon are identified.<sup>9</sup> Just prior to the *Cogito*, the deceiver is described as "some God, or whatever other name it may be called" (*aliquis Deus, vel quocunque nomine illum vocem*), and each subsequent mention of the deceiver is similarly phrased.<sup>10</sup> Although Kennington believes that all these passages refer to the demon, which they never mention, it seems at least equally plausible to say that Descartes wishes to suggest that "Deus" and "genium" are interchangeable terms. The ground for the identity is explained in the *Replies to Objections II* when Descartes writes that "unless reason tends toward truth . . . God, who has given it to us, merits being regarded as a deceiver."<sup>11</sup>

Yet even if the demon were less than omnipotent, Kennington's claim that the scope of the doubt would thereby be reduced is contradicted by the texts. For against those who prefer to deny the existence of an omnipotent God rather than acknowledge the dubiety of all things, Descartes argues that the less powerful his "author," the greater the likelihood of deception.<sup>12</sup> This episode goes unmentioned in Kennington's argument, despite Descartes' assertion that the atheist ought to doubt the truths of mathematics.<sup>13</sup>

Kennington's argument amounts to the observation that the *Meditations*,

<sup>8</sup>This statement is repeated in the *Principles* I, 6, where the deceiver is said to be "all-powerful." Kennington claims (443) that this statement must refer to God because the demon is not mentioned in the *Principles*. This appeal is unconvincing in view of Kennington's claim to find the demon in the Second Meditation, although he is not mentioned there. Kennington's attempt to excise the doubt of mathematics (*Principles* I, 5) on the ground that it is removed in *Principles* I, 7 avails little because *Principles* I, 30 acknowledges that mathematics were doubted.

<sup>9</sup>In his "Descartes' *Olympica*," to which Kennington refers in support of his argument, the author in fact argues for the identity of God and the demon.

<sup>10</sup>AT VII, 24; also 25, 26, 36. A further connection between the omnipotent God of the First Meditation and the deceiving *aliquis Deus* of the two subsequent Meditations is in the fact that the former is said to be a "vetus opinio" and the latter is said to be a "praeconcepta." Kennington's statement that the deceiver of the Second Meditation is never said to be the "author" of Descartes' being is incorrect: AT VII, 28-29; V, 151.

<sup>11</sup>AT VII, 144, 146; *Prin.* I, 30. See my "The Theological Import of Cartesian Doubt," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 1, 4 (1970), 223-26.

<sup>12</sup>AT VII, 21; *Prin.* I, 5.

<sup>13</sup>*Prin.* I, 5; AT I, 150; AT VII, 141, 158, 428, 446. Although Kennington is evidently mistaken in asserting that only divine omnipotence is a reason for doubting the truths of mathematics, a strong case could be made for the thesis that doubt of these truths is not, despite Descartes' express statements to the contrary, part of Cartesian doubt. I have argued that position, on different grounds than those presented by Kennington, in my *The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes* (New Haven, 1973), 116-29.

especially the French translation, refrain from attributing omnipotence to the deceiver. But there is a plausible explanation for this procedure. It is well-known that Descartes was sensitive to the possible shocking effects of his doubt; and the notion of an omnipotent but evil deceiver is certainly shocking.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore not remarkable that the *Discourse*, which is addressed to a popular audience, should have omitted these notions, or that the French translation should moderate the doubt.

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<sup>11</sup>AT VII, 7, 346; V, 153, 560.

### REPLY TO CATON

BY RICHARD KENNINGTON

I maintained that pre-*cogito* doubt in *Medit.* I-II is not intended by Descartes to be universal, but exempts certain truths or propositions, citing *Prin.* I, #10, #13, #49 as confirmation. For – briefly stated – the omnipotent God, who renders dubious mathematics and the principle of contradiction, is expressly replaced as the ultimate *ratio dubitandi* by the Evil Genius, never said to be omnipotent, after which mathematics is not mentioned in the lists of dubitables. Prof. Caton raises six diverse criticisms, although he is prepared to accept the thesis “on different grounds” (footnote 13) that pre-*cogito* doubt is not meant to be universal.

1) Caton objects that “the only strict textual evidence” bearing on the omnipotence of the Evil Genius must be drawn from a single passage in *Medit.* I (Haldane-Ross I, 148; A-T VII, 22); only there does “*genium*” appear; two later passages referring to a “*deceptor*” do not refer to the Evil Genius. Since the passage at issue expressly replaces God with the Evil Genius, we must compare the power of each, but also what each renders dubitable, in order to understand the Evil Genius. Descriptions of power differ: Caton acknowledges that no version of the *Meditations* imputes omnipotence to the Evil Genius. As a corroboration of, and indeed a precise indication of, the difference, we must compare what is rendered dubious – which Caton ignores. God had been said to be all-powerful (“*qui potest omnia*”), the creator of Descartes, and a reason for doubting the existence of bodily things as well as of mathematics. The Evil Genius is said to be supremely powerful (*summe potens*), not said to be creator of anything, and a reason for doubting bodily things, but not mathematics. These data, and the withdrawal of the omnipotent God from pre-*cogito* doubt, justify the identification of the “*deceptor*” found in the sentence prior to the *cogito* (H-R I, 150; A-T VII, 25) as the Evil Genius: he is “*summe potens*,” is not said to be a creator, or to render mathematics dubitable. A similar identification is required of the “*deceptor*” mentioned shortly after the *cogito* (H-R I, 151; A-T VII, 26): he renders dubious only the bodily.

Caton, however, cites the phrase “however powerful, however cunning” in the first passage, and objects, “presumably [the Evil Genius] may even be omnipotent.” This phrase, which indicates no more than a possibility, must be

taken in the context of the just-preceding list of what is rendered dubitable by the Evil Genius, as well as the subsequent lists. Otherwise the specification of dubitables becomes wholly redundant, and could have been replaced by "doubt of all things"; we are asked to believe that Descartes, for whom mathematics was of some importance, refrained from mentioning that he doubted it. What confirms the importance of these lists is that they omit "time," a "universal" which had been previously asserted as "true," and whose truth must be presupposed for "this proposition, 'I am, I exist'" to be "necessarily true every time that I utter it or conceive it in my mind" (cf. H-R I, 146 with 148, 150; A-T VII, 20, 24, 25).

2) To establish the omnipotence of the Evil Genius Caton relies on the Burman manuscript, which is not a Cartesian writing, but a record of a conversation with Descartes made by a Dutch youth. It must therefore be used judiciously, especially as it does not adhere consistently to the order within the texts discussed. "*Summe potens*" implied omnipotence, but only, in Caton's words, "in the light of the later proofs," i.e., the theology of *Medit.* III-V, which the structure of pre-*cogito* doubt can scarcely presuppose.

3) Caton's judgment that "demon doubt" is no "genuine *ratio dubitandi*" cannot be imported into pre-*cogito* doubt for the same reason—it is derived from the later theology of *Medit.* III-V. And if it is so imported, Caton should accept my conclusion that pre-*cogito* doubt is not based on an omnipotent *ratio dubitandi*.

4) Although "demon doubt" is no "genuine *ratio dubitandi*" Caton stresses Descartes' remark that the Evil Genius is introduced to raise "all possible objections" (Burman manuscript). This belongs with the class of Cartesian statements which advocate the "doubt of all things." With equal explicitness Descartes points out in *Prin.* I, #10 that he does not doubt all things, as every careful reader recognizes. Certain terms and propositions are expressly exempted, and other exemptions implied. Leibniz, in his comments on *Prin.* I, #1, which invokes "doubt of all things," remarks that perhaps Descartes sought "to stimulate the sluggish reader through novelty" (Loemker II, 630).

5) Caton believes that God, despite his express withdrawal in *Medit.* I, remains in pre-*cogito* doubt and is identical with the Evil Genius. His premises are the omnipotence of the Evil Genius, which we have examined; and a similarity between phrases that refer to two deceivers in the paragraph that culminates with the *cogito* in *Medit.* II. The first is introduced as "*aliquis Deus, vel quocunque nomine illum vocem. . .*" Nothing required that "*aliquis Deus*" be identified with the God "*qui potest omnia*" and is creator, etc.; he is dismissed in the same breath with a sentence. Several sentences later the second appears: "*Sed est deceptor nescio quis, summe potens, summe callidus, qui de industria me semper fallit*" (A-T VII, 24-25; H-R I, 150). What is similar in the two passages is precisely what Caton seeks to deny: neither implies omnipotence nor doubt of mathematics. (The second deceiver must be the Evil Genius, as argued in 1) above.) Caton acknowledges that he needs rhetorical considerations to establish that God is meant in these two passages. He thinks that it was too shocking for Descartes to say what he supposedly meant, that the omnipotent God cannot shake the truth of the *cogito*. It is unreasonable, however, to hold that he was too prudent to utter what he in fact declares to be untrue in *Medit.* III, where God can suspend the truth of the *cogito* (H-R I,

158-159; A-T VII, 36). It would indeed be rather shocking if Descartes were to maintain that the *cogito* is "necessarily true" although he had supposed that a God who could suspend logical necessity could possibly be deceiving him.

6) Caton makes the interesting objection that "even if the demon were less than omnipotent" the scope of doubt would not be reduced, for "Descartes argues that the less powerful his 'author' the greater the likelihood of deception" (H-R I, 147; A-T VII, 21). The "less powerful" author is the "atheist" assumption that man's author is "fate or chance or a continuous series of things." But Caton misconstrues this famous comparison, as his reference to "demon" shows: it concerns difference of power exclusively. Since the "greater likelihood" is not greater than that arising from the omnipotent deceiver who jeopardizes mathematics—with whom it is not being compared—there is no necessity for it to include mathematics or be universal. Descartes' point is traditional: man is more likely to be imperfect and err if his cause is "fate" or blind nature than if nature is ruled by intelligence.

Descartes' assertions that the atheist should doubt mathematics are based, not on an atheist view which has replaced the omnipotent and possibly deceiving *ratio dubitandi*—as Caton thinks—but precisely on the latter (e.g., *2d Replies*, H-R II, 39; A-T VII, 141). The problem correctly stated is: at what point in the structure of the "atheist" phase of the *Meditations*, and on what *ratio dubitandi*, does Descartes doubt mathematics? Only post-*cogito* in *Medit.* III, when he reintroduces the possibility of an omnipotent deceiver. Analogously, in the *Principles*, the doubt of mathematics enters only post-*cogito* with the reintroduction of a possibly deceiving creator in I, #13, to which resolution of that doubt in I, #30 makes reference (cf. footnote 8). If *Prin.* I, #5 where the atheist comparison recurs, implied doubt of mathematics, mathematics would be mentioned as dubitable in I, #7, and the absurdity would arise that the mathematical imply existence, by I, #10.

If he is not God, who is Descartes' Evil Genius? Is he some methodological fiction? Since he does not jeopardize mathematics or the principle of contradiction, we recognize that what he renders dubious is the same as the deceptive "teachings of nature" of *Medit.* III and VI (H-R I, 160-61, 188-89, 192-93; A-T VII, 38-40, 75-76, 80-81). The evil of the Genius is that of nature, and victory over the Evil Genius is "mastery of nature": the *Meditations* facilitates the novel goal of philosophy announced in *Discourse* VI. The finitude of the Evil Genius thus leads to the core of Cartesian philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. my "The 'Teaching of Nature' in Descartes' Soul Doctrine," *The Review of Metaphysics* (Sept. 1972).

## REJOINDER: THE CUNNING OF THE EVIL DEMON

BY HIRAM CATON

Prof. Kennington's vibrant certainty leads him into strange paths. I allegedly "acknowledge" that "no version of the *Meditations* imputes omnipotence to the Evil Genius," i.e., I grant the very point in contention. Actually I undertook to show that *summe potens* means *omnipotens*, as all commentators known to me have thought.

Kennington now concedes that the Burman text "implied omnipotence"; but dismisses it on the ground that I (allegedly) admit that the implication can be constructed only by appeal to Meditations III-V. Neither the text (cited above) nor my commentary will bear that interpretation. He further faults me for ignoring that the *genium*, as distinguished from God, is not said to be Descartes' creator. I do not know why I deserve this reprimand, since in note 10 I referred him to two passages in which the *genium* is said to be Descartes' creator.

The report of Burman is corroborated by Descartes' letter to the Curators of the University of Leyden. Critics had charged Descartes with blasphemy for identifying God with the demon; for "this deceiver," they argued, "is called *summe potentem*, but nothing exists such, except the true God."<sup>1</sup> Instead of challenging this conventional interpretation of a conventional expression, as Kennington's theory would predict, Descartes protests the "criminal blasphemy" ungenerously imputed to him when he does but "feign" a concept in order to refute the atheists.<sup>2</sup> The demon is a concept "per impossibile" because the attribute "most powerful" (*potentissimus*) is incompatible with deception.<sup>3</sup> This passage shows that the semantic distinctions upon which Kennington bases the argument of his paragraphs 1 & 5 were alien to Descartes and his contemporaries.

I marvel at the tenacity with which Kennington seeks to interpolate the *genium* into Meditations II, where it is not mentioned, and to expunge the *aliquis Deus*, which is. This effort seems to be occasioned by the belief that God is "withdrawn" from the doubt. But Descartes withdraws only the "optimum Deum, fontem veritatis," who was in fact transformed into the *deus deceptor* by the doubt of God's veracity.

Kennington objects that the *deus deceptor* is identified with the demon by appeal to the rhetoric of the doubt. Yet he asserts that the demon figures "the evil . . . of nature," apparently unaware that he owes some explanation as to why Descartes should have concealed his thought under so improbable a mask. Cartesian nature lacks intelligence and volition, whereas God, the *deus deceptor*, and the demon share these attributes; and I have shown that Descartes was aware of the "criminal blasphemy" latent in their identification. Kennington continues to uphold the reasonability of the demon doubt despite Descartes' admissions that the existence of the Demon is absurd, an assumption *per impossibile* in short, unreasonable. In this connection he urges that I misunderstand the point of the atheist doubt, which is, he says, that man is more likely to err if his cause is "blind nature than if nature is ruled by intelligence." Descartes' statement on nature as his author is a virtual paraphrase of Cicero's *De divinatione* I, 55, where the Stoic concept of natural necessity and determinism is advanced as the condition most favorable to the possibility of certainty. Descartes surely agreed with the atheists and the Stoics on this point: mechanistic nature is the condition of perfect certainty, not, as Kennington would have it, a threat to it. Nature is subtle, but nowhere does Descartes say that it is cunning—a thinking being. Preoccupied with distinctions of power, Kennington forgot the malevolent cunning of the demon.

<sup>1</sup>AT V, 8.<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*