

Seeing an Argument All At Once

Robert Pasnau

1. The privileged present

Among the many hard questions that the monks of Bec put to brother Anselm, perhaps the most philosophically intriguing concerned the fall of the devil. Right around halfway through Anselm's intricate dialogue on this subject, he has the teacher warn his student that they need to take a step back, and consider some more fundamental issues. He then remarks:

It's important for you not to be content merely to understand each of the things I say individually, but to gather them all up in your memory at the same time and see them in one glance, as it were (ch. 12).

The imperative Anselm expresses is a familiar one: we often feel the need to get a course of thought into our heads all at once, so that we can see the argument as a whole. It is, however, quite obscure what is involved in this sort of all-at-once grasp of an argument, and under what circumstances it is possible. It is also by no means clear what is lost when we fail to see the whole argument in what we might call a single Anselmian glance. My aim is to shed some light on these questions.

As a starting point, consider the even more familiar and much-discussed authority of the first-person perspective. If the question arises of what I believe or feel, it is obvious that I myself am the best source of information. Not that my perspective is unimpeachable – sometimes, for instance, my wife is quicker than I am to recognize that I am in a bad mood. Still, I have some sort of authority when it comes to my own mental states. In an analogous sort of way, though no doubt with less justification, I privilege my own perspective when it comes to many matters outside myself. *Look, a bear!*, my wife says, but although she is doubtless as reliable a witness as I am, I do not believe there's a bear until I see it myself. There is much for the epistemologist to wonder about in the way we each privilege our own first-person awareness, and I will come back to this issue, but for

now let us just mark the phenomenon.

Just as I give special weight to how things seem to me, so I give special weight to how things seem at the present time. Put slightly differently, I privilege not just the perspective that is right *here*, from where I am standing, but also the perspective that is right *now*, at the moment in question. I may have taught Anselm's great dialogue a few years back, and made careful and clear lecture notes, but I do not really trust those notes in the same way that I trust my current impressions of the text. I do not think that I am any smarter now, but still for whatever reason I cannot help but put greater trust in my present judgments. The existence of careful and clear notes is important to the example, because it shows that the main issue is not the reliability of memory. I do not doubt that I used to interpret the text in a certain way; the problem is that I do not wholly trust those old views. The analogy between the privileged present and the privileged self is again useful. My need to see the bear for myself is not brought on by any failure to trust the *sincerity* of my wife's report. I do not doubt that she takes herself to see a bear. (I can tell by the tone of her voice!) The problem is that I trust myself more than her, just as I trust my present judgments about the text more than my old judgments.

There is more than an analogy between these kinds of privilege; they are in fact mutually dependent. If my wife and I are comparing memories, I have little inclination to privilege mine rather than hers. It is only with respect to how things seem *now* that I favor my own perspective. Similarly, if a colleague offers me a choice between her old notes on Anselm and her current thoughts, freshly typed out, I will not have any immediate preference. Her present thoughts will seem more valuable only to the extent I think she is wiser now than before, and it is easy to imagine cases where I would rather have those older notes. In general, it is only with respect to how things seem to *me* that I privilege the present. Putting these two lines of thought together, we can say that what I privilege is the first-person present perspective – how things seem to *me* right *now*. Obviously,

this sort of privilege can be overcome, and frequently is, by the conflicting testimony of both other people and our own memories. But clearly part of what we are trying to do, when we seek to encompass some complex thought in a single Anselmian glance, is to achieve a certain privileged grasp of that subject. In what follows I attempt to sort out the character of this privilege, first by assessing whether it is even possible, and then by considering three different ways of accounting for the supposed privilege. Ultimately, I will contend that we should value the Anselmian glance not because it better *justifies* our conclusions, or makes those conclusions more *certain*, but because it permits a better *understanding* of the matter at hand.

2. *How much can we think at once?*

The phenomenon of trying to grasp an argument in a single glance is familiar enough, but it is not at all easy to explain what it involves. One might even doubt whether this sort of Anselmian glance is strictly possible. Tyler Burge, for instance, maintains that even the shortest of arguments rely on memory. As he puts it, “even one-step demonstrations could go bad if the reasoner’s short-term memory were defective enough” (1993: 463). This seems to be in accord with an older tradition in the philosophy of mind, according to which one can have only a single thought at a time. Thomas Aquinas articulates this thesis in some detail, devoting a whole article in his *Treatise on Human Nature* to the question of whether our intellect can think about more than one thing at the same time. His negative answer is grounded partly in the familiar experience of thinking, but he puts even greater weight on the metaphysical idea that the intellect thinks by taking on a certain sort of form, and that it can no more have two such forms at a single time than a body can have two shapes.

Reflection on this one-thought-at-a-time thesis leads immediately to the question of what counts as a single thought. Presumably I can have in my mind, all at once, a whole concept, even a rather complex concept. Can I have in mind a whole proposition? If so, how about a conditional

proposition? If so, why not a one-step demonstration, something Burge rules out? Aquinas discusses this issue in some detail. He thinks that one can consider a whole proposition at a single time, provided one considers it “as one.” Similarly, one can have in mind at once both some ultimate end and the means to achieving that end, “insofar as they are somehow one.” And although considering a premise and a conclusion individually requires two separate acts of thought, a single act of thought is capable of “assenting to the conclusion on account of the premises.”¹ The governing idea, for Aquinas, is that one can think at once only what can be the content of a single cognitive form (an *intelligible species*, in his jargon). So one cannot have, at the same time, discrete thoughts about premise and conclusion – that would require two forms. But one can have the single thought that *a follows from b*, or that *to obtain c I should do d*. Such a thought can be had all at once, provided one does not attempt, at the same time, to form a discrete thought about any of the ingredients. It would take a separate thought, at a separate time, to consider on its own the *a* on account of which *b* obtains, or the *c* on account of which I should do *d*.

I am not sure how much light these remarks shed on our topic. Part of the obscurity may come from a lack of clarity regarding what it means to think more than one thing “at once.” This might well suggest that a single thought must be wholly possessed instantaneously, giving rise to the question of just how much complexity can be grasped all at once, at an instant. It seems better, however, to think of thoughts as events that takes place over time. A view like Aquinas’s would then maintain that we can no more have multiple thoughts at once than we can speak multiple sentences at once. The Anselmian glance, in contrast, would seemingly require multiple thoughts unfolding concurrently in the mind.

¹ For a whole proposition, see *Quaestiones de veritate* 8.14c; for means and ends see *Summa theol.* 1a2ae 12.3c; for premises and conclusions, see *Summa theol.* 1a2ae 12.4c; his most extensive remarks, from the Treatise on Human Nature, occur at *Summa theol.* 1a 85.4.

So far as I can find, recent philosophers have not concerned themselves with these questions. But psychologists have done so in considerable detail, under the heading of *working memory*. ‘Working memory’ is the usual term for what used to be known more often as “short-term memory.” To understand the words of this paragraph, as they go rushing by, you must be able to hold a certain amount in your mind – otherwise, the individual words could not be processed as sentences. This is just one example of working memory at work. Considerable ingenuity has been put into studying how much information we can hold onto in this way. In a famous paper from 1956, George Miller suggested that the answer is seven, plus or minus two. More recent research by Nelson Cowan has arrived at the number four, plus or minus one. It is, however, not entirely clear what working memory is supposed to be. Alan Baddeley, the acknowledged leader in the field, begins his 2007 book with this definition: “working memory is assumed to be a temporary storage system under attentional control that underpins our capacity for complex thought” (p. 1). Compare that with this recent definition from Brad Postle: “Working memory refers to the retention of information in conscious awareness when this information is not present in the environment...” (2006, p. 23). Is working memory a matter of *storage*, or is it a matter of *conscious awareness*? It does not take much philosophical subtlety to see that these are two different things. Describing the phenomenon as a kind of *memory* suggests the first picture. But there is a tradition going back to William James of thinking that the contents of working memory just are the contents of consciousness. James offers this vivid account of the difference between true, long-term memory, and what he calls “primary memory”:

An object which is recollected, in the proper sense of that term, is one which has been absent from consciousness altogether, and now revives anew. It is brought back, recalled, fished up, so to speak, from a reservoir in which, with countless other objects, it lay buried and lost from view. But an object of primary memory is not thus brought back; it never was lost; its date was never cut off in consciousness from that of the immediately present moment (1890: I.646-7).

With this sort of picture in mind, one might appeal to working memory as an explanation of how it is possible for us to grasp a whole argument all at once, in a single Anselmian glance.

When Cowan argues that we can hold roughly four things in working memory at once, he explicitly indicates that he means this as an answer to the question “what is the limit on how much can be experienced at once or on how much we can be conscious of at once?” (2005, p. 3). This interpretation of the phenomenon strikes me as introspectively plausible. When I try to hold more than one thing in my head at once, it feels like what I am trying to do is, literally, keep thinking about all of them at once. Up to a point, it seems to me that I can do that. There may be still more things that I am not consciously thinking about right now, but which lie waiting in the wings, in some kind of ready storage, or short-term memory. But it seems to me that discussions of working memory are attempting to grapple with a phenomenon that is not strictly a sort of memory at all, but is rather the mind’s ability to think more than one thought at once.²

In reaching this conclusion, I mean to be rejecting views like those of Aquinas and Burge. Burge, remember, says that if short-term memory is faulty, then “even one-step demonstrations could go bad.” Elsewhere he writes that “preservation memory ... is epistemically necessary if we are to understand any argument as justifying beliefs through the steps of the argument” (1997: 37). No doubt memory is very often, even usually, required for an argument to have the sort of justificational force it is intended to have. But why suppose that memory is *always* required, for *every*

² Uncertainty about this issue pervades the literature. According to Andrade, “working memory refers to a system that enables temporary storage of the intermediate products of cognition...” (2001: 5). In contrast, Atkinson and Shiffrin (1971: 83) remark that they “tend to equate the short-term store with ‘consciousness,’ that is, the thoughts and information of which we are currently aware can be considered part of the contents of the short-term store.” Baars (1997) influentially compares the mind to a theater, and working memory to the stage, which is meant to correspond to consciousness, but to which he adds the further notion of a spotlight that singles out one actor/idea for special attention.

argument, over even the *briefest* interval of time? Why not think instead that we can hold a whole argument in our mind at once, in a single Anselmian glance? And why think of our so-called working memory as a kind of memory at all, rather than as an ability to think more than one thing at once? My suspicion is that these views share a tacit commitment to what Daniel Dennett mocked as the Cartesian Theater, “a central ... Theater where ‘it all comes together.’ ... a crucial finish line or boundary somewhere in the brain, ... *what happens* there is what you are conscious of” (1991: 107). The view is Cartesian because it is such a natural picture for someone, like Descartes or Aquinas, who takes the mind to be simple.³ It is easy even for a materialist, however, to suppose that the mind is structured in such a way that only one thought can be lit up by consciousness at once, leaving everything else to be either relegated to memory or lost entirely.

As soon as one sets aside the Cartesian Theater, it becomes plausible to think that conscious thoughts may occur in parallel. Since these parallel thoughts are conscious, we might well think of them the way Anselm suggests, as things gathered up and present to the mind in a single glance. Just as, with a single visual glance, we can take in a whole row of faces or a whole mountain range, so a single intellectual glance can take in a whole argument. To be sure, conscious attention may be focused more strongly on one or another aspect of the intellectual field, just as vision focuses selectively on some aspect of the visual field. But, so far as I can see, there is no good reason to insist that we can think only one thing at a time.

3. *Justificational force*

³ Natural, but by no means inevitable. After all, although dualists have historically treated the mind as simple, they have also historically recognized that it is capable of storing memories. That evidently requires *some* kind of complexity, and if the mind is capable of holding in storage more than one thought at once, it is not clear – pace Aquinas – why it could not also *think* more than one thought at once.

I would not wish to rest too much on such obscure questions about the character of consciousness. Let us, then, take for granted only what is most obvious: that we do in some way seek to get the details of an argument to the forefront of our minds, whatever that involves, and that we seek this because it is cognitively advantageous. Once we take for granted that we are in some way *capable* of the Anselmian glance, the question can be asked of just *why* it is advantageous. Here again recent work in philosophy is of no direct help, but we can derive some inspiration from older material. For there was, in the later Middle Ages, a very lively debate over the importance of grasping a whole argument all at once.

On the standard scholastic picture, the cognitive ideal for human beings is the acquisition of *scientia*, understood along the lines of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.⁴ Knowledge of this sort must be acquired on the basis of a syllogistic demonstration ultimately grounded in self-evident premises. For various fourteenth-century authors, the question arose of how one's grasp of the conclusion of the demonstration must be related to the grasp of the premises. Peter Auriol, lecturing on the *Sentences* in Paris circa 1316, held that *scientia* must yield "a simple intellection that reaches some truth on account of another prior truth."⁵ This by itself looks commonplace, but Auriol understands it in a way that bears interestingly on our discussion. His central idea is that when we assent to a proposition, we do so for some reason. The foundational premises of a demonstration are self-

⁴ For details see Pasnau (2010).

⁵ This is an extract from a fuller, five-part account of *scientia*: "*Scientia* is something [a] determining intellect to [b] a simple intellection that [c] reaches some truth on account of another prior truth, something [d] distinct from the demonstration retained by memory, and [e] embedded in intellect" (*Scriptum* proem §4, n. 41). It is not clear whether Auriol intends this as a definition of *scientia*. The usual Aristotelian definition of *scientia*, canonically formulated at *Post An.* 71b10, is invoked by Auriol himself in this very discussion (n. 44), as support for his own characterization of *scientia*. Hence one might think that he intends these five clauses as consistent with the usual Aristotelian definition, but as making an improvement upon them.

evident, which is to say that their truth can be grasped in their own right, without reference to anything else. The conclusion of a demonstration, however, is embraced because of the premises.

Auriol takes this to show that the conclusion must be grasped along with those premises.

It is impossible for the intellect to be drawn to the truth of a conclusion, judging it to be true, unless this happens through some cause of that truth existing outside that conclusion. This, however, is the truth of some principle. Therefore, it is necessary that the intellect reaches the truth of a conclusion only insofar as it simultaneously reaches the truth of the principle (ibid., n. 44).

Auriol insists here that conclusion and premises must be grasped “simultaneously.” He also goes on to argue that this must all be grasped in a “singular and simple” act of intellect (ibid., n. 45). It must be “numerically the same intellection” that reaches the truth of both a conclusion and its premises (ibid.), or there would be way to explain how “the intellect is drawn to the truth of a conclusion.”

As an analogy, Auriol considers desire. Just as the intellect grasps a conclusion on account of premises, so the will is drawn to one thing on account of being drawn to some further end. Ends are the sort of thing that are desired in their own right, and so one’s appetite for an end need not be explained by anything else. But when we desire something that is not an end in its own right – say, we want a donkey – that desire can arise only when accompanied by a desire for some end. Something similar holds for rational argument: “a conclusion has truth only from the truth of the premise, and the intellect is drawn toward it only to the extent it has been drawn to the truth of the premise” (ibid., n. 43). This analogy is liable to mislead, because it is obviously not the case that when one desires a thing one must constantly keep the end in mind as well. In the course of my search for a donkey whole stretches of time might pass during which I give not the slightest thought to why I want that donkey. Auriol can grant this, and can grant, similarly, that I can think about a conclusion without giving any thought to the premises that led me to that conclusion. His concern is with the act of thought that arises from genuine *scientia*. Any cognitive state deserving of that status must involve a grasp of both conclusion and premises. Otherwise it will not be the case that we

believe the conclusion *because of* the premises.

Although Auriol does not say much more than this, it seems to me we might understand his claim as concerning the *justificational force* of an argument. Part of what is supposed to be special about *scientia* – part of what makes it the human cognitive ideal – is that conclusions believed in this way are held on the basis of self-evident premises. The premises, in modern terms, are what justify the conclusion. Auriol is insisting that the premises can have such justificational force only if one grasps premises and conclusions all at once. This requirement holds, on his view, only with respect to the occurrent act of *scientia*. The long-term possession of *scientia* is another matter, given that *scientia* is itself a dispositional state, and so requires no occurrent act of thought at all. But to acquire *scientia* requires the Anselmian glance, and to retain *scientia* is to retain the disposition to active such an all-at-once glance. One might have knowledge in some weaker sense than that, but it would not count as true, ideal *scientia*.

For an interestingly different perspective we can turn to Francis of Marchia, lecturing in Paris circa 1319 – just a few years after Auriol and Ockham. Marchia argues, contrary to what Auriol and others had assumed, that the intellect cannot grasp a whole argument with a single act of intellect. That would be too many diverse objects to fit into one thought.⁶ Marchia, however, in contrast to the usual view, thinks that the intellect can have more than one occurrent thought at once.⁷ That leaves room for a version of the Anselmian glance: one might grasp a whole argument at once by simultaneously having discrete thoughts about its different parts.

At issue here, initially, is the rather aridly metaphysical question of how to individuate thoughts – how to know whether I am having a single complex thought or multiple simpler concurrent thoughts. But Marchia disagrees with Auriol in a less recondite way. For Marchia thinks

⁶ See *Commentarius in IV libros Sententiarum* I.1.1 nn. 18-23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, I.1.1 nn. 40, 44, 60.

that even though it is possible to grasp a whole argument all at once, through multiple concurrent thoughts, doing so does not yield *scientia* of the conclusion. He devotes an entire question to asking whether the intellect, in grasping the conclusion of a syllogism, also actually grasps the premises. The *opinio communis*, he says, is Yes,⁸ but he argues to the contrary that this sort of Anselmian glance of a whole argument cannot serve its intended purpose – that it will not yield the sort of justificational force that *scientia* requires. The whole point of the Anselmian glance, as we have been thinking of it, is to possess at once both a conclusion and the grounds for the conclusion. But Marchia argues that, although one might think about all this at once, one cannot think about both premises and conclusion when the premises are what motivate the conclusion.

Like Auriol, Marchia takes the central issue to be the question of what draws or moves us to some conclusion. For our assent to a conclusion to count as *scientia*, it must be based on a demonstration, which is to say that the premises of that demonstration must have brought us to that conclusion. But this does not happen all at once. For the intellect to be *moved* from premises to conclusion, a temporal element is required. Marchia contrasts grasping a whole argument with grasping a whole sentence, and argues that the cases are crucially disanalogous:

Our intellect does not run (*discurrit*) from a grasp of the terms to a complex grasp of the proposition. Instead, it understands both the proposition itself and each of its terms on its own (*per se*) and absolutely, rather than one from another, and so it is not moved from one understanding to another. Things are different for a conclusion and its premises, because our intellect understands the conclusion on the basis of its premises. Since it is moved from these actually cognized premises to the conclusion, and since it is impossible for the same thing at the same time to rest in something and be moved from it, our conclusion follows.⁹

⁸ Ibid., I.1.2 n. 8. Marchia does not explicitly indicate whether his discussion is aimed directly at Auriol, but the extent of Auriol's overall influence on Marchia makes a connection here probable.

⁹ Ibid., I.1.2 n. 65. An alternative e redaction of this disputation puts the same point a bit more vividly: "The intellect, in understanding multiple terms at once, is not moved from one term to another term, but rather understands each one

What follows is that the intellect cannot simultaneously grasp an argument's conclusion while grasping the premises on which that conclusion is based. Even though Marchia agrees with his opponents that one can have a whole argument in mind at once, that argument, grasped all at once, cannot be playing the sort of evidential role that is its whole purpose. If what we are after is the state of mind that involves grasping a conclusion on the basis of more evident premises, the best we can do is run through the temporally extended process of considering an argument's premises and letting those premises bring the mind to embrace a conclusion. This is, indeed, not just the best we can do, given our limited intellects, but it is the best any finite creature could do: even the angels, he says, must take time to grasp an argument.¹⁰

Marchia cites no authorities for his position, but it reflects one side of an older debate about the character of thought. On Marchia's side is Plato, who conceives of thought as diachronic in very much Marchia's sense. As Plato puts it in the *Theaetetus*,

It seems to me that the soul when it thinks is simply carrying on a discussion in which it asks itself questions and answers them itself, affirms and denies. And when it arrives at something definite, either by a gradual

on its own. So in such an act of understanding multiple terms, the intellect does not come to rest in one term, nor is it moved by another, because it is not moved from one term to another term. If this were the case, it could not apprehend multiple terms at once. But the situation is otherwise for principle and conclusion, because the intellect is moved from the principle to the conclusion, since the inference to the conclusion is a kind of motion of reason, instantaneously advancing from principle to conclusion. Hence it cannot understand both at once" (*Quodlibet cum quaestionibus selectis* pp. 310-11).

For an argument of the sort Marchia is responding to, see Ockham, *Ordinatio* I prol. q. 8 (*Opera theol.* I:218-9): "with respect to premises and conclusion there can be a single act, because a single act of understanding is no more contradictory in the case of a syllogism composed of many propositions than in the case of a proposition composed of many terms" Ockham unfortunately has little more than this to say about the matter, so far as I have found, though see note xx below.

¹⁰ *Commentarius in IV libros Sententiarum* I.1.2 n. 58.

process or a sudden leap, when it affirms one thing consistently and without divided counsel, we call this its judgment (190a).

Aristotle, however, took issue with this conception of thought as essentially involving motion, and defended instead a synchronic view much like Auriol's later position. He expressly rejected Plato's position with the remark that "reasoning is more like resting or dwelling upon something than like moving, and the same holds for a syllogism" (*De anima* I.3, 407a32-34).¹¹

At issue for our scholastic authors is how to define the venerable notion of *scientia*. The real interest of the debate, however, lies not in any lexicological dispute over how best to employ some philosophical term of art, whether that be *epistēmē*, *scientia*, *knowledge*, or *justification*. The more fundamental question is epistemic or normative: what should the goal of inquiry be? Should we pursue the Anselmian ideal of grasping a whole argument all at once, or does that fail to capture the diachronic structure of reasoning? If the Anselmian glance is worth having, why exactly is that? Is it required, as I understand Auriol to claim, in order for the premises of an argument to have the right sort of justificational force? One might try to split the difference here by contending that the diachronic picture holds for the acquisition of knowledge, and that the synchronic, all-at-once view holds for someone who has already gone through the *process* of syllogistic reasoning, and now is in a position to grasp all at once the whole chain of reasoning. For Auriol, however, someone in possession of *scientia* retains the enduring capacity to bring to mind the whole argument in a single glance. Marchia, in contrast, argues that the very character of justificational support requires movement from premises to conclusion. The value of the Anselmian glance, on his view, cannot be accounted for in terms of its justificational force, because justification is always diachronic.

¹¹ Ross insightfully glosses this passage with the remark that "even in a syllogism the connexion of the premisses with the conclusion is grasped in a single act of thought" (p. 191). Aristotle has in mind Plato's account of the world soul at *Timaeus* 34a-b. I have not found medieval Latin authors invoking either this passage from Aristotle or the *Timaeus*. They did not have access to the *Theaetetus*.

To my mind, neither side in this dispute seems entirely compelling. Auriol does not seem clearly right in insisting that the premises must be grasped along with their conclusion in order to have justificational force. If I ponderously work through a long argument, exercising maximal care in moving from one step to the next, then it seems to me I would be perfectly justified in embracing my ultimate conclusion, even if I have quite forgotten many of the intervening steps. Such a state would be far from cognitively ideal, in virtue of being so diffused over time, but such diffusion does not seem to make the state any less justified.¹² On the other hand, it also does not seem plausible to insist, as Marchia does, that grasping an argument all at once is incapable of yielding justification. A very simple argument that readily admits of the Anselmian glance does not for that reason seem any less justified. And what of self-evident propositions, which supposedly justify themselves in virtue of their own terms? In such a case there seems no way to grasp the principle apart from its supporting evidence – it must happen all at once.

These rival synchronic and diachronic conceptions of thought and justification mirror the disagreement of the previous section between two pictures of working memory, either possessed all at once in consciousness or else experienced *seriatim*, with thought after thought shifting back and forth from temporary storage into consciousness. Either picture might allow, more or less, something close to the Anselmian glance, depending on whether one holds that multiple thoughts must be strictly concurrent or else merely seamlessly connected in the more-or-less extended present

¹² Burge goes so far as to argue that someone “can be entitled to believe a theorem she believes because of a preservative memory even if she cannot remember the proof she gave long ago, and even if she cannot remember that she gave a proof” (1997: 38). Indeed, “most of what one is entitled to believe ... derives from sources and warrants that one has forgotten” (ibid.). Burge, however, distinguishes between entitlement and justification, and holds the latter to stricter, internalist standards. See also Malcolm: “If a man previously had grounds for being sure that p, and he now remembers that p, but does not remember what his grounds were, then he nonetheless has the same grounds he previously had” (1963: 230).

moment. In what follows I will remain neutral between these two pictures, and continue to focus on what is privileged about our present thoughts, and why we should want to get them into something like a single Anselmian glance. Inasmuch as the various arguments regarding justificational force seem inconclusive, we still lack a plausible answer to such questions.

4. *Cartesian certainty*

The argument from justificational force is essentially relational, in the sense that it claims we must occurrently have in mind the premises of an argument in order for them to justify the conclusion they entail. An alternative way to understand the significance of the Anselmian glance would be to suppose that we must hold all the premises in mind because only then can we remain completely certain of the truth of each of those premises. The present is privileged, on this line of thought, not because it allows for a certain kind of justificational relationship between beliefs, but because it permits, for each individual belief, certainty of the strongest kind.

A view of this kind can be found in René Descartes. According to his early *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, “for a complete *scientia*, every single thing relating to our undertaking must be illuminated in a continuous and wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought” (Rule 7, X:387).¹³ The *Principles of Philosophy* likewise distinguishes between the certainty of the privileged present and the worrisome fallibility of past judgments:

¹³ In a similar vein, the dedicatory letter to the *Meditations* cautions that “although the proofs I employ here are in my view as certain and evident as the proofs of geometry, if not more so, it will, I fear, be impossible for many people to achieve an adequate perception of them, because they are rather long and some depend on others...” (VII:4). A 1640 letter to Constantijn Huygens urges him to read the first five *Meditations* “all in one breath” (III:242). It is not always clear that Descartes has in mind the all-at-once Anselmian glance, as opposed to an uninterrupted sequential movement from premises to conclusion, as this passage from the *Rules* suggests, and which might better fit Marchia’s diachronic picture. As we will see, however, the overall weight of the texts points toward the all-at-once model.

The mind, then, knowing itself, but still in doubt about all other things, looks around in all directions in order to extend its cognition further. First of all, it finds within itself ideas of many things; and so long as it merely contemplates these ideas and does not affirm or deny the existence outside itself of anything resembling them, it cannot be mistaken. Next, it finds certain common notions and from these it constructs various demonstrations, and for as long as it attends to them it is completely convinced of their truth. ... Yet it cannot always attend to them. As a result, when it later recalls that it still lacks *scientia* regarding whether it may have been created with a nature such as to be mistaken even in matters that appear most evident, the mind sees that it has just cause to doubt such conclusions... (*Principles* I.13).

So long as we are working within the privileged present, we can build up from the *cogito*, adding introspective judgments and then *a priori* proofs based on self-evident principles. All of this will satisfy the highest standards for *scientia* – at least the highest humanly attainable standards¹⁴ – provided we can grasp it all in a single Anselmian glance.

Yet it takes enormous mental energy to get a whole argument in view and keep it there, and even the best of us can do it for only a short time. Eventually, the practical demands of life force us to let go, and even if we were to manage somehow to keep those demands at bay, there would be other arguments we would want to consider, each one crowding out the last. What then happens when we let go of an argument that we have so painstakingly gathered into our mind? Descartes was understandably preoccupied with this question, particularly in the *Meditations*. As he writes Meditation Five,

My nature is such that so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I cannot but believe it to be true. But my nature is also such that I cannot always fix my mental vision on the same thing so as to perceive it

¹⁴ On the distinction between the highest standards for human beings, and the highest standards *simpliciter*, see the Second Replies (VII:144-45), where Descartes holds that “a conviction so firm that it could in no way be removed ... is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty.” He then raises the question of whether such a belief might seem false to God or an angel, and hence be “false, absolutely speaking.” To this he replies: “What do we care about such absolute falsity, since we neither believe in it in any way nor have even the smallest suspicion of it?”

clearly. Often the memory of a previously made judgment comes back when I am no longer attending to the arguments on account of which I judged that things were so (VII:69).

Given the *Meditations*' aim of achieving stable and lasting *scientia*, this is potentially a disaster.

Descartes insists, however, that we can hold onto our privileged state of certainty so long as we hold onto the conclusion that there is a God who is no deceiver. Thus *Principles* I.13, quoted just above, concludes that "... the mind sees that it has just cause to doubt such conclusions and that it cannot have certain *scientia* until it has come to recognize the author of its being." The Fifth Meditation passage just quoted immediately continues:

Hence other arguments can arise that would easily undermine my opinion, if I were unaware (*ignorarem*) of God, and I should thus never have true and certain *scientia* about anything, but only shifting and changeable opinions. For example, when I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears completely evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend to the demonstration, I cannot but believe this to be true. But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the demonstration, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it with complete clarity, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth – if, that is, I were unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I am made by nature in such a way as to go wrong occasionally in matters that I take myself to perceive as evidently as can be – particularly since I remember that I have often held as true and certain many things that I have later, on the basis of other arguments, judged to be false.

Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver. From this I have drawn the conclusion that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, even if I am no longer attending to the arguments on account of which I have judged that this is true, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived, no counter-argument can be adduced to make me doubt. On the contrary, I have true and certain *scientia* of it. This is so not just for this conclusion, but for all the other conclusions that I remember ever having demonstrated, in geometry and similar domains (VII:69-70).

While still within the privileged present, our knowledge of geometry and other matters is as certain as possible. Indeed, for as long as we occurrently possess this sort of clear and distinct perception of

an argument, we are not even capable of doubting it: “so long as I attend to the demonstration, I cannot but believe this to be true.” Yet as soon as our grasp of the demonstration recedes into memory, room for doubt arises. Once that happens, “I can convince myself” of having possibly gone wrong.

The texts under consideration are considered most often in the context of the notorious Cartesian Circle. The long Meditation Five passage just quoted culminates with this conclusion: “Thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of all *scientia* depends on one cognition, of the true God, to such an extent that I could have perfect *scientia* about nothing else until I knew him” (VII:71).¹⁵ This looks obviously, painfully circular, inasmuch as it would seem Descartes cannot achieve a perfect grasp of God’s existence without already having reached a perfect grasp of much else. From our present vantage-point, however, we can see why Descartes sees no difficulty. In remarking that *scientia* requires knowledge of God, he is counting on his reader to have something like the Aristotelian understanding of *scientia* as a stable disposition lodged within the mind. Within the privileged present, the arguments of the first three meditations go through with perfect certainty, without our having to presuppose the truth of their ultimate conclusion, that God exists. That ultimate conclusion is required, however, in order for the clear and distinct perception to be preserved beyond the privileged present, as a stable, certain disposition within the mind.

Descartes himself makes it quite clear that this is how he avoids the alleged Circle. Mersenne had raised the circularity worry in the Second Objections (VII:124-25), and gotten this in reply:

¹⁵ Compare his remark, just before the long passage quoted from Meditation Five, that “the certainty of all other things so depends on this [the certainty of God’s existence] that without it there can never be perfect *scientia* of anything” (VII:69). And in Meditation Three he had already announced that “if I do not have *scientia* of God’s existence, then it seems I can never be quite certain about anything else” (VII:36). And in the Second Replies, the atheist “will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists” (VII:141).

When I said that we can have certain *scientia* of nothing until we have cognized that God exists, I expressly declared that I was speaking only of *scientia* of those conclusions whose memory can recur when we are no longer attending to the arguments through which we deduced them (VII:140).

Descartes's interview with Frans Burman makes the same point. Burman charges: "It seems there is a circle, since in the Third Meditation the author uses axioms to prove the existence of God, even though he has not yet established that he is not deceived about these" (V:148). To this Descartes is reported as responding: "He does prove this, and he knows (*scit*) that he is not deceived about the axioms, because he is attending to them. For as long as he does this, he is certain that he is not deceived, and he is compelled to assent to them" (V:148). This is almost exactly what we should expect Descartes to say.¹⁶ Moreover, Burman goes on to raise just the worry we might expect, that "our mind can conceive of only one thing at a time, whereas the proof in question is fairly long and is built up from multiple axioms" (V:148). Descartes responds:

First, it is not true that the mind can conceive of only one thing at a time. To be sure, it cannot conceive of *many* things at a time, but still it can conceive of more than one. For example, I am right now, at the same time, conceiving and thinking of my talking and of my eating. Second, it is false that thought occurs instantaneously, for all my acts occur in time, and I can be said to continue and carry on with the same thought over a period of

¹⁶ Admittedly, it would have been helpful for Descartes to flag the ambiguity between '*scire*' as used here for an occurrent grasp of a conclusion, and '*scientia*' as used for a stable disposition. A 1640 letter to Regius (III:64-65) draws much the same distinction between an occurrent grasp of a whole argument and a remembered conclusion, and does sharply distinguish between *scientia* and a mere *persuasio* not grounded in the knowledge of God.

A later passage from the conversation with Burman is also relevant: "If we were unaware that all truth has its origin in God, then however clear our ideas were, we would not have *scientia* that they were true, or that we were not mistaken – I mean, of course, when we were not paying attention to them, and when we merely remembered that we had clearly and distinctly perceived them. For on other occasions, when we do pay attention to the truths themselves, even if we do not have *scientia* that God exists, we cannot be in any doubt about them. For otherwise, we could not prove that God exists" (V:178).

time.¹⁷ ... Therefore, since our thought is able to grasp more than one item in this way, and since it does not occur instantaneously, it is clear that we can grasp the entire demonstration about God. For as long as we do this, we are certain that we are not deceived, and thus every difficulty is removed (V:148-49).

What has appeared to generations of readers as a circle is in fact a consequence of Descartes's distinguishing between the privileged status of an all-at-once Anselmian glance, and the shakier epistemic status of evidence retained over time.¹⁸

5. *Certainty over time*

For Descartes, the present is epistemically privileged because it can, in the special circumstances of a clear and distinct perception, yield certainty. Yet he also thinks the certainty of *scientia* can be retained over time, outside the privileged duration of the Anselmian glance, provided one recognizes that God exists and is no deceiver. How exactly does this help? Let us, for a moment, set aside the various historical texts I have been relying on for inspiration, and try to think through the issues directly. There are obviously a range of cases that fall more or less farther from the Anselmian ideal. Here are some of them:

- A. Having the whole argument in mind at once.
- B. Retaining the conclusion and being able to produce the supporting argument at will.
- C. Retaining the conclusion and being able to produce the supporting argument with effort.
- D. Retaining the conclusion and remembering once having grasped the supporting argument, but no longer being able to produce the argument, even with effort.

¹⁷ This second remark responds to Burman's further assumption that thought is instantaneous. As remarked in §2, the all-at-once character of the Anselmian glance should not be understood as precluding the temporally extended, event-like character of thought.

¹⁸ Recent scholarship seems to be coalescing around something like this understanding of the alleged Circle. See, for instance, Van Cleve (1979), Cottingham (1986) 66-73, Della Rocca (2005), Carriero (2009) 337-58.

E. Retaining the conclusion without any memory of its evidential basis.

F. Having forgotten both the conclusion and its supporting argument.

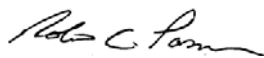
Grade A of course describes the Anselmian glance. Grade F, at the opposite extreme, represents the case of complete loss, and here there is not much to say. Since there would remain not even a dispositional belief in the conclusion, we are not even in the domain of knowledge, however imperfect. We can, then, focus on the middle four grades. As before, let us eschew the familiar philosophical game of assigning labels like ‘knowledge’ and ‘understanding’ to the different grades. Suffice it to say that each of the above grades is better than the one beneath it, and that we should, all else being equal, desire to maintain the highest grade possible.

But of course we must make choices. I once knew how to prove the soundness and completeness of first-order logic, but I couldn’t do that now. I’m at grade D, and not ashamed to admit it, because this isn’t information I feel any obligation to have retained. But there are other matters where grade D would be embarrassing – matters relating more closely to my professional work, and matters of such import that all educated people ought to be able to justify themselves. It would, for instance, be a serious intellectual deficiency to be unable to account for one’s political or religious views – I do not of course mean to provide a sound *proof*, but at least to say something cogent about the reasons that incline one in a certain direction. To be sure, a great many people are sadly deficient in this regard, but the point is just that there *is* something sad about that state of affairs. In certain domains, then, we think it important to maintain grade B or at least C. That in turn requires that we spend some time at grade A, or close to it, getting in our head the whole course of argument, and understanding why we believe what we do.

In the very most important sorts of cases, then, the question arises of what we can do to maintain ourselves in a state as close as possible to grade A. For the sake of concreteness, let us concentrate on a falling off from grade A to B. Descartes, for one, saw quite a sharp decline even

here. He supposed that the certainty of the privileged present is left quite behind when the moment passes – unless we hold firmly in mind certain facts about God. To assess this thought, we need to get clear about why the present is supposed to be epistemically privileged in this way, and why the mere memory of having grasped an argument puts us in a significantly less good epistemic position. The most obvious thing to say about such a case is that, outside of the privileged present, one must indeed rely on *memory*, with its obvious risk of error. This is no doubt part of the story, but it seems only a small part, and far from what is most interesting here. After all, we could reduce the risk of memory error to an absolute minimum by writing down a precise account of our thoughts within the privileged present. This might take the form of a signed affidavit:

I, Robert Pasnau, being of sound mind and feeling particularly clear-headed, do at this very instant, on Wednesday March 7th, 2012, at 10:31am, grasp a sound argument for God's existence. The argument runs as follows....



Provided I do not lose this rather valuable piece of paper, I will have taken the vagaries of memory largely off the table. Not entirely off the table, admittedly, since it would be desirable to remember having written down this statement. Inevitably, too, my written account of the argument will fail to be wholly precise about some of the details, and it will be useful to have some memory of the event to guide my future interpretation. Still, in view of a document such as this, combined let us suppose with a vivid apparent memory of the event, it would take quite a remote and dubious skeptical hypothesis to cast doubt on the fact that I did in fact take myself to have in mind a sound argument for God's existence. Such far-fetched skeptical doubts about memory are not what is of interest here. For even once we take for granted the accuracy of memory, a gap still remains between my epistemic status at the moment of grasping an argument, and my subsequent epistemic status, relying only on my memory of having once seen that the argument is sound. In a case where I am

seeing, right now, that an argument is sound, I regard myself as having the very strongest reasons possible for embracing the conclusion. Once that privileged moment has fallen into the past, I may still feel justified in my belief, but the strength of my evidence feels diminished, and subject to doubt. The force of the privileged present does not depend on doubts about the reliability of memory.¹⁹

Once we grant the reliability of memory, we are left with the task of explaining a disparity between our attitudes at different times toward the very same belief-generating process. At the moment the process is taking place within us, we have the strongest possible reasons for accepting its reliability. Retrospectively, however, we have some good reason to doubt the process. Does this make any sense? If I will have good reason for doubt retrospectively, then should I not, even from within the privileged present, providently anticipate those reasons and commence to doubt, even while the argument is vividly in front of me? Conversely, if I am right to privilege my present grasp of the argument, then should not that attitude remain in place even after the moment has passed? What does the passing of time change?

To try to get a grip on this phenomenon, we might compare our epistemic attitudes toward our past selves with our epistemic attitudes toward others. If you tell me that you have grasped a demonstration of some momentous claim – showing me your signed affidavit or, even better, insisting that you have the whole thing in mind right now – I will be interested but skeptical. If I

¹⁹ Nor was this Descartes's focus. The long passage from Meditation Five quoted earlier is prepared to grant the reliability of memory: "as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the demonstration, then *in spite of still remembering that I perceived it with complete clarity*, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth" (VII:70). Pressed by Burman to address its reliability, he is reported as having remarked: "I can say nothing about memory, since each of us should each test ourselves as to whether we are good at remembering. If one has any doubts on that score, then he should make use of written notes and so forth to help him" (V:148). For these sorts of reasons, the so-called "Memory Gambit" has long and rightly been rejected as a solution to the Circle; see Frankfurt (1962).

antecedently hold you in sufficient respect, I may take the time to work through your argument, and try to get it within the field of my own Anselmian glance. Or, if it is a claim that lies outside my own competence, I might seek confirmation that you are to be trusted in this domain. The point is that, one way or another, it would be reasonable for me to seek supporting evidence before accepting your claims, at least in cases of great import.²⁰ In effect, this is how we treat our past selves. If I remember having reached some important conclusion some time ago, I am likely to respect my past-self enough to take the memory seriously, but I may not trust myself enough simply to accept that verdict without further investigation. I may well need to get it all in front of my mind again, just as I would if some trusted colleague had told me of the result. The parallel seems to show that we demand evidence of the reliability of our past selves in much the same way we demand evidence of the reliability of others.

Michael Dummett has suggested, along similar lines, that “memory may be said to be the testimony of one’s past self” (1994: 412). But this way of describing the situation does not fully illuminate the phenomenon. To trust one’s memories is indeed analogous, in a certain way, to trusting the testimony of another. But in trusting my memory what I trust is that my memory is accurately conveying how something seemed to me in the past. The analogous case for testimony would be to trust that someone is accurately reporting how it seems to her. Although that can of course be at issue when it comes to accepting testimony, it is not the central issue. We generally take for granted that our interlocutors are speaking accurately and sincerely, and we focus on whether how it seems to them is in fact how it is. The analogous first-person situation is to take for granted that our memories are accurate, and focus on whether how it seemed to us is in fact how it is. The

²⁰ In less significant cases, or in cases like perceptual observation where there is less antecedent reason for skepticism, it may be reasonable to accept your testimony without any supporting evidence. These are contentious issues within the literature on testimony.

proper first-person analog to testimony, therefore, is only obliquely concerned with memory, and more centrally concerned with the disparity between the privileged present and the underprivileged past. Just as we may ask, then, about what justifies our belief in the testimony of others, we may ask what justifies our belief in the testimony, via memory, of our past selves.

With this in mind, consider again Descartes. He contends that we can have confidence in the reliability of past clear-and-distinct perceptions, provided we bear in mind the nature of God. His reasoning is that if God is no deceiver then God would not have made us so as to be fallible in these most favorable cases. That we might be fallible, even in clear-and-distinct judgments, is a worry it becomes possible to have when looking retrospectively at our past thoughts. We can rule out such doubts, however, provided we bear in mind that God exists and is no deceiver. Appealing to God is simply Descartes's way of mounting an argument for the reliability of our cognitive faculties. One might attempt much the same thing today in terms, for instance, of evolutionary theory. The general idea is to produce an argument for the reliability of our cognitive faculties, at least under certain favorable conditions, and then to wield that argument whenever retrospective doubts about the outputs of those faculties arise. Let us call such an argument a Reliability Proof.

Reflection on Descartes's strategy naturally gravitates toward the question of whether his Reliability Proof is sound, which in turn pushes the focus of the discussion back onto the status of clear and distinct perceptions, and onto the character of his proofs for the existence of God. For our purposes, however, three less obvious considerations are more immediately relevant. First, for a Reliability Proof to assuage our doubts over the remembered dictates of past reasoning, that Proof must itself not be part of the remembered past, but must instead be lodged in the privileged present. This is not something that Descartes himself makes entirely clear,²¹ but the logic of his position

²¹ Indeed, one might think that Descartes says just the opposite, in that above-quoted Fifth Meditation passage: "Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends

requires it. Given that the whole point of the Reliability Proof is to yield a justification for beliefs whose evidence has fallen into the remembered past, that Proof itself will have evidential force only if it itself is retained in the privileged present. This is not to say that the quest for *scientia* requires its devotees to retain a monomaniacal obsession with the Reliability Proof for the remainder of their lives, never letting it out of their minds. What Descartes's system requires of mere mortals like us is just that the Proof remain at Grade B, ever ready to be brought up to Grade A, should doubts arise.

Second, if the Reliability Proof works for me, in a first-person way, then the logic of Descartes's position requires that it should work for others. By this I mean not just that it should work for others in a first-person way, but that it should also work interpersonally, so that I, with the Reliability Proof in mind, can be possessed of "true and certain *scientia*" (VII:70) not just in virtue of remembering my own past clear and distinct perceptions, but also in virtue of your testimony about your own clear and distinct perceptions. To be sure, not everyone is equally reliable when it comes to identifying clear and distinct perceptions. But there is no reason in principle for me to privilege my own past perceptions. I am doubtless more reliable than some people, but others are presumably more reliable than me. So although it would be foolish to accept indiscriminately others' testimony regarding their clear and distinct perceptions, there will surely be many cases where I have just as

on him, and that he is no deceiver. From this I have drawn the conclusion that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true. Accordingly, *even if I am no longer attending to the arguments on account of which I have judged that this is true*, as long as I remember that I clearly and distinctly perceived, no counter-argument can be adduced to make me doubt. On the contrary, I have true and certain *scientia* of it" (VII:70). The key interpretive question concerns what the highlighted word 'this' refers to, within the italicized phrase. If its referents include the thesis of reliability, then Descartes is saying the opposite of my assertion in the main text. But I take the referent to be *other things* that Descartes remembers having proved. One can have "true and certain *scientia*" of these things, perhaps even if one falls all the way to Grade D, provided one retains the Reliability Proof at Grade B, and elevates it to Grade A whenever some "counter-argument" is "adduced." shorten this note?

much reason to embrace the reports of others as I do to embrace the testimony of my own memory. If I have in hand a Reliability Proof that applies to all clear and distinct perceptions, for any of God's creatures, then I should count myself in possession of knowledge of a very elevated sort *whenever* I get a trustworthy report of some proposition's having been clearly and distinctly perceived.²²

Third, and most fundamentally, Descartes's strategy depends on according special status to the privileged present and the Anselmian glance. There cannot be a Reliability Proof for everything, unless we are to supply proof beyond proof *ad infinitum*, or else go round in a circle. Descartes's strategy for avoiding these familiar bad options is to rest everything on the epistemic privileges of the present moment. If our present clear and distinct perceptions are ideally justified – at least according to the human ideal – then there is no possibility of shoring them up with any further evidence or argument, nor any possibility of knocking them down with doubts. Hence a Reliability Proof grasped in the privileged present requires no further proof; it is the solid foundation of which epistemologists dream at night. Provided we are able to keep this Proof in mind, or at least within ready reach, it can serve to justify the many other beliefs that were once privileged but now have fallen into the underprivileged past. Crucial to the strategy, then, is that we be capable of grasping a whole argument all at once. If we cannot do that, then the whole strategy collapses, because we would then have only some worthless fragment of a sound argument within the scope of the privileged present. The Anselmian glance thus proves to be crucial to Cartesian foundationalism.

²² But is there not still an asymmetry here, inasmuch as I am utterly certain of my own existence, in virtue of the *cogito*, whereas my knowledge of other minds is less certain? No, because the *cogito* only works within the privileged present. When it comes to my past existence, I am in much the same position that I am with respect to the existence of others.

6. *Against present bias*

Descartes's approach represents a form of limited dogmatism. The approach is dogmatic, in that it accords default justification to certain beliefs that are thereby able to rebut skeptical attacks. Beliefs that fall into this class *begin* by being justified, and do not require any further marshaling of evidence. But Descartes is not dogmatic in an unrestricted way; he does not think that all of our beliefs deserve this sort of default justification.²³ His approach is dogmatic only with regard to the privileged present, and only with regard to a certain class of perceptions, those that are clear and distinct. If we can construct, while on this privileged island, a Reliability Proof – an engine that we can wield in justifying the rest of what we believe – then we will have refuted the skeptic in a way that is much more satisfying than simply embracing unrestricted dogmatism. We will not have declared victory over the skeptic by mere fiat, but instead have claimed only a small moment of epistemic privilege, and thence forward earned our victory.

My own view, however, is that Descartes's approach rests on a mistake, inasmuch as the privilege we accord to our present mental states is an indefensible cognitive bias. What is certainly correct, as a descriptive matter, is that we *do* privilege our present judgments. When I introduced the phenomenon at the start of the paper, I described how I give special weight to my latest thoughts about some philosophical matter. Nothing at all has been said, however, about whether I *ought* to exhibit such bias. Descartes similarly seems to rest his case on how in fact we are prone to reason. He remarks, as quoted already, that “so long as I perceive something very clearly and distinctly I *cannot but* believe it to be true” (VII:69). This is how things are in the privileged present. In contrast, “as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the demonstration, ... I *can easily* fall into doubt about its truth” (VII:70). Such remarks are merely descriptive rather than normative. Descartes is pointing to the psychological fact that we are unable to doubt things that we presently grasp with complete

²³ For various examples of an unrestricted sort of dogmatism, see Harman (1986), Huemer (2001), and Pryor (2000).

clarity, whereas we can doubt those same things once our clear and distinct perceptions have passed. Even if this is true, it does not show that the justificational status of such beliefs is unassailable. And even if we are prone to doubt such perceptions once they slip into the pass, this does not show that their justificational status is any less.

When pressed to defend the privilege he accords to our present judgments, Descartes makes the move characteristic of dogmatists everywhere: he threatens his opponent with skepticism. His conservative critic Voetius, for instance, charged that Descartes's method would inevitably lead to skepticism, on the grounds that no truths could meet Descartes's high standard of indubitability. To this Descartes invokes the privileged present, and charges that in fact Voetius is the skeptic:

If you are referring here to the very time at which an act of faith or some natural cognition arises, it is *you* who are destroying all faith and human *scientia*, and *you* who are in fact a skeptic, since you maintain that no cognition free from doubt can ever be had. But if we are talking about different times – for someone who at one time has true faith or evident *scientia* of some natural thing may at another time not have it – this merely shows the weakness of human nature, which does not always remain fixed on the same thoughts, and it does not follow that there should be any doubt in the *scientia* itself. Hence you prove nothing against me, for I was speaking not of any certainty that would endure through an entire human life, but merely of the kind of certainty that is achieved at the moment when some *scientia* is acquired (VIII B:170).

Let us grant the principal dogmatic thesis that, to avoid skepticism, *some* beliefs must be treated as *prima facie* justified. The question before us is whether, having taken that step, we have any good reason to insist on the limited form of dogmatism that gives preferential treatment to our first-person present judgment. So far as I can see, Descartes offers no good reason for this bias. To avoid skepticism, we perhaps must treat some beliefs as justified by default. But as for why I should take that attitude toward today's beliefs rather than yesterday's, or toward my beliefs rather than yours – here the only thing Descartes has to say is that this is how we are naturally inclined to think.

Rather than according some kind of default epistemic privilege our present self, we should

be impartial between present and past, treating the judgments of our past self as, *prima facie*, just as reliable as our present judgments. Of course, special considerations may tilt the scales in one direction or another, toward either our older, wiser present selves or our younger, keener youth. We may also, of course, have reason to doubt that we accurately remember how things used to seem. But in cases where we can be reasonably confident of our past judgments, we should, *prima facie*, give those judgments the same weight that we give our present judgments. In taking this position I am disagreeing with Richard Foley. He argues that in cases of conflict between present and past views, our present views should be given special weight, because of “the banal truth that at the current moment, if I am to have opinions at all, they will be current opinions.” Accordingly, “it cannot be a demand of rationality that I shed my current perspective and adopt a vantage point from which I treat all of my temporal selves and their opinions identically” (2001: 149). We should distinguish, though, between the truly banal claim that, necessarily, what I now believe is what I now believe, and the substantial claim that my present opinions must give special weight to how things seem to me now, in preference to how they seemed to me at some earlier time. The first claim is trivial, but the second describes a contingent doxastic practice. You might decide to adhere, in every case, to how things seem to you now. But this is likely to be a bad general policy. It may seem to you, for instance, that something you’ve written is a brilliant piece of philosophy, but if your dissertation director says otherwise, it is probably rational for you to abandon that self-confident belief, even if the paper still *seems* brilliant. Similarly, a certain complex thesis may no longer seem right to you. But if you have previously considered the matter carefully, and found it to be true, then it may make sense to continue believing it, even if it does not presently seem right. Rationality does not require that your beliefs track how things intellectually seem to you, no more than your perceptual beliefs must track how things visually appear. (I do not *believe* that the stick is bent, despite its *looking* that way.) To be sure, what you believe will always be what you believe. But it is possible, and sometimes

desirable, to distinguish what you believe from how things appear. Of course, your present self makes the decision regarding what to believe. But this does not entail that your present self must give special weight to how things seem to you now.

In calling for an even-handed policy with regard to the credibility of present and past selves, I am agreeing with John Locke. He likewise confronted the problem of what to say about cases that fall away from the ideal grade-A state of having a whole argument in mind at once. His conclusion, however, is that we should trust our past judgments just as we trust our present ones:

I confess, in the opinions men have and firmly stick to in the world, their assent is not always from an actual view of the reasons that at first prevailed with them: It being in many cases almost impossible, and in most very hard, even for those who have very admirable memories, to retain all the proofs which upon a due examination made them embrace that side of the question. It suffices that they have once with care and fairness sifted the matter as far as they could; ... and thus having once found on which side the probability appeared to them, after as full and exact an enquiry as they can make, they lay up the conclusion in their memories, as a truth they have discovered; and for the future they remain satisfied with the testimony of their memories, that this is the opinion that by the proofs they have once seen of it deserves such a degree of their assent as they afford it
(*Essay* IV.16.1).²⁴

Locke shares the worry we have seen in Descartes and earlier scholastics about the status of beliefs that have become detached from their supporting grounds. Unlike Descartes, however, he sees no need for any special measures to be taken to shore up such beliefs. A proposition that has once had evidential support should be judged equally probable even once the details of that support have been forgotten. Provided one remembers having once seen such proofs, one's "degree of assent" should remain the same.

²⁴ Compare *Essay* IV.2.4 and IV.2.7, which contrast the "intuitive certainty" of grasping the immediate connection of ideas, with the lesser certainty of demonstrations, which often involve many steps that must be retained in memory. Locke's view is not necessarily inconsistent with Foley's, since Foley argues for the privileged present only in cases of disagreement. So far as I find, Locke does not speak to that particular case.

As I have been stressing from the start, there is a close connection between the privileged present and self-privilege. And, indeed, just as striking as Descartes's commitment to the first is his commitment to the second. His *Discourse on Method* describes how, "as soon as I was old enough to emerge from the control of my teachers, I entirely abandoned the study of letters, resolving to seek no knowledge other than that which could be found in myself or else in the great book of the world ... " (VI:9). At the start of the *Meditations* he declares that "I am here all alone." The very idea of doing philosophy by meditation is worlds away from the interactive methods characteristic of the ancient academies, or of scholastic university disputations. Admittedly, Descartes did take the extraordinary step of publishing seven sets of Objections along with the *Meditations*, but those many pages of criticism yielded few substantive reversals to his own views. The Objections are useful, from Descartes's point of view, mainly insofar as they illuminate how others might misread his work.²⁵

The considerations that tell in favor of unprivileging the present also suggest how we might unprivilege ourselves. Just as it would make good epistemic sense, *prima facie*, to cast aside our biased preference for our present judgments over our past judgments, so it would make sense to cast aside our self-biases, and treat others as, *prima facie*, just as likely to get things right as we ourselves are. Descartes is right that we must put our trust *somewhere* if we are to avoid the grip of skepticism, but there is no good epistemic reason to judge our present selves more reliable than our past selves are, or than others are. It certainly is true that we find it psychologically difficult to give up these biases. But there is no reason to suppose that self-trust is more likely to yield true belief. Even if wish to follow Descartes in according special weight what is clear and distinct, there should be nothing

²⁵ One should not overstate the extent of Descartes's isolation. He did enlarge and clarify many of his positions in response to correspondence with others, and occasionally he asked for corrections to be made to his work. For a detailed discussion, see Ariew (2006).

epistemically privileged, for me, about *my* clear and distinct perceptions *now*. Insofar, then, as the Anselmian glance is founded on the alleged certainty of our present first-person judgments, it is not really worth having.²⁶

8. *Understanding all at once*

I began with the idea that there is something valuable about gathering up a whole course of argument in our minds all at once, and suggested that this is somehow tied to the way we privilege our present judgments. But I have subsequently cast doubt on two ways of understanding the value of this sort of Anselmian glance. Its value does not come from its justificational force, I have briefly suggested, inasmuch as we can be fully justified in embracing a conclusion without having that justificational support presently in mind. Its value also does not lie in the allegedly infallible certainty of our present judgments. Although we may be right to trust certain kinds of judgments, made in certain conditions, there is nothing epistemically privileged about the first-person present. We would do just as well to trust our memories, or our notes, or the reports of others.

Still, I believe there is something valuable about the Anselmian glance, something we might articulate in terms of the way it helps us to *understand* what we believe. To develop this idea, I will for one last time follow the lead of an historical figure, here Adam Wodeham. His discussion of whether demonstrative knowledge requires grasping the whole argument at once dates from circa 1330, and

²⁶ The irrationality of self-trust has been explored in considerable detail in the recent literature on disagreement. Influential statements of the view I am setting out can be found, e.g., in Christensen (2007) and Elga (2007). Elga also makes some interesting remarks on the question of trusting one's future self. My own view is that a policy of equal weight between present and past, self and others, should be defended strictly as a matter of epistemic rationality – as what is most conducive to achieving a high proportion of true beliefs. I am not persuaded, however, that such epistemic aims are the only important doxastic values. Hence there may be other good reasons for favoring a policy of self-trust, or privileging the present. I hope to address such issues elsewhere.

draws extensively on Peter Auriol's earlier discussion.²⁷ After reciting some of Auriol's arguments for the affirmative, and then offering some countervailing arguments, Wodeham begins to set out his own view. To this end, he distinguishes two ways of thinking about the act of knowledge:

First, I make a distinction regarding the act of knowledge (*de actu sciendi*), which can be taken in one way for an evident judgment such that, when it is posited in the soul with everything really distinct set aside, it is a contradiction for the soul not to assent evidently that things are as the conclusion signifies. In another way it can be taken for every act by which the soul assents firmly and without hesitation that things are as the conclusion signifies, but in such a way that that assent either is evident or has an evident act attached to it regarding that same conclusion (§14, p. 348).

Among the necessary conditions on an act of knowledge, for Wodeham, are that it involve assenting “firmly and without hesitation” to some conclusion, and that the assent be “evident.” Here he draws a distinction between two standards for knowledge. According to the first, stricter standard, the act of assent all by itself, “with everything really distinct set aside,” must be not just firm and unhesitating but also evident. On the second, looser standard, the assent must be firm and unhesitating, but its evidentness may come from some other act that is “attached” to the act of knowledge.

Whether an argument must be grasped all at once turns, for Wodeham, on a choice between these two standard for knowledge. When we apply the first, stricter standard, then an act of demonstrative knowledge must grasp both the conclusion and the premises. If not, then that assent would not be evident all by itself, apart from everything else. Its evidentness would instead depend on some prior grasp of the premises. But, if one applies the second, looser standard, then an act of demonstrative knowledge need grasp only the conclusion, without the premises. Here is how Wodeham characterizes this second sort of assent:

²⁷ *Lectura secunda*, dist. 1 q. 1 art. 2. Unlike the texts discussed in §3, this treatise has been translated, in Pasnau (2002) ch. 12. References are to this translation.

Such an act will not be evident; rather, the soul having that act will assent evidently at the same time, assuming that the premises are evident. Thus the evidentness will not come from that act formally, but the firmness of its adherence will, whereas its being evident comes from the premises, or from an act of knowledge that is evident in the first way. Therefore it will not be evident through any intrinsic evidentness but through extrinsic denomination, because with other things set aside, although the firmness of its adherence would remain, it would do so without being evident (§14 p. 350).

The key idea of this difficult passage is that one's grasp of the conclusion alone may well be *firm*, all by itself, but it will not all by itself be *evident*. Given that we are supposing this act of assent to count as *scientia*, it must count as evident somehow. It will not be evident intrinsically, however, but only "through extrinsic denomination," inasmuch as there are other facts about the soul in virtue of which the conclusion is evident. Wodeham is not very clear about what those other "extrinsic" facts are. Perhaps it would be enough for the soul to have previously grasped the premises, or perhaps the soul must have a present non-occurrent but dispositional grasp of the premises, or perhaps he has in mind some other simultaneously occurrent act of grasping the premise. In any case, when knowledge is given this looser construal, it is possible for an act of knowledge to be aimed only at the conclusion of an argument, without also having the premises in mind.

On Wodeham's account, then, one can fail to have the premises in mind when one grasps a conclusion, and still be highly confident of that conclusion. This is what Wodeham calls firmness, and it seems much the same as what we have seen Locke describe as the "degree of assent," which in turn is closely related to the modern notion of partial belief or credence. Wodeham therefore seems in agreement with Locke's view that one can be entitled to believe firmly in a proposition without grasping the premises of the argument. Locke goes farther in this regard: the passage quoted earlier makes it clear that Locke would allow knowledge all the way down to a grade-D remembering of the mere fact that one once had a strong argument. Wodeham is perhaps not so bold. He asserts only that one need not grasp the premises in the very same act of knowledge in which one grasps

the conclusion. But the two are in agreement that the Anselmian glance is not a requirement on knowledge.

At the same time, Wodeham agrees with Auriol, and with Descartes, that knowledge of this kind is in a certain way deficient, inasmuch as it lacks intrinsic evidentness. It is far from clear, however, exactly what such evidentness consists in, or why we should want it. There is no sign of the Cartesian idea that our present occurrent thoughts admit of greater certainty. It may be that evidentness should be construed as something like justification, and that Wodeham is distinguishing between a weaker sort of extrinsic justification and a stronger sort of intrinsic justification that comes with the Anselmian glance. But then our question becomes why it should make a difference whether such evidentness, conceived of as justification, should be intrinsic or extrinsic to the act of knowledge.

I take Wodeham's point to concern something in the neighborhood of *understanding*. The reason there are these different conceptions of knowledge – intrinsic and extrinsic – is that someone who grasps a conclusion and the reasons for it, in a single act of thought, is in a position not just to affirm the conclusion but also to understand that conclusion in a fuller way. Someone who plods slowly and carefully through a complex argument is, as I have argued, fully justified in maintaining the argument's ultimate conclusion, and may hold that conclusion with just as much certainty as someone capable of grasping the whole argument at once. But seeing the whole argument in a single Anselmian glance permits an understanding of why the conclusion holds in a way that would be impossible for someone unable to see the whole thing at once. On its usual construal, to understand a thing is to grasp that thing in its larger context.²⁸ One can do this with or without the benefit of the

²⁸ See, e.g., Kvanvig (2003), p. 192: "Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question." His

Anselmian glance, but to be able to do it all at once is to achieve understanding *par excellence*.

Conceiving of the Anselmian glance in this way is perhaps obvious enough, but it goes against the grain of our usual modern categories. We naturally think of epistemic progress as involving some advance either in knowledge or its constituents – belief, truth, and justification. I have argued that the Anselmian glance involves none of these things, but that we should value it nevertheless. Its value falls along another dimension, depth of understanding. This is perhaps what Wodeham was after when he distinguished between evidentness that is intrinsic and extrinsic. Extrinsic evidentness is enough to justify a high level of credence in some proposition, and so enough for it to count as knowledge. It is something better still, though, when that evidentness is intrinsic to the belief itself, just because that is a better sort of evidentness. Should we say that we *know* a proposition better when we have the whole process of reasoning in mind all at once? Let us not quibble over words – call it a superior form of knowledge, or call it understanding, or perhaps even call it wisdom.²⁹ The point is just that this is another significant dimension of epistemic appraisal.

The sort of understanding at issue here is similar to the understanding that comes from knowing not just *that* a thing is the case, but further knowing *why* it is the case. To borrow Aristotle's example, we seek to know not just that an eclipse of the moon has occurred, but also why it has occurred; Aristotle argued that this is an essential characteristic of the epistemic ideal described in the *Posterior Analytics* (what he called *epistēmē*, and which came to be known in Latin as *scientia*).

subsequent discussion argues for the value of such a cognitive state, and these remarks might be applied *a fortiori* to the Anselmian glance.

²⁹ This was Ockham's suggestion. He held that we can have *scientia* of a conclusion without having the premises occurrently in mind. To grasp the conclusion all at once with the premises is to have *sapientia* (*Ordinatio* I prol. q 8 [*Opera theol.* I:222]).

Grasping the premises along with the conclusion is not, as Auriol argued, essential to our entitlement to reach a conclusion, but it is essential if we are to fully understand why the conclusion obtains. As an analogy, imagine being able to judge a large painting only detail by detail, without ever gaining a perspective on the whole. Even the most careful investigation of the details is no substitute for a single, all-at-once grasp of the entire canvass.

What we lose, when the Anselmian glance fades away, is not the sort of thing that we can recapture in Cartesian style, by assuring ourselves that God is no deceiver. Whether or not we have this or any other method of establishing the reliability of our faculties, no such guarantee can take the place of actually seeing a whole argument all at once. On Descartes's scheme, the privileged certainty of the present can be carried over into the past, provided we hold onto some present reason for trusting those past judgments. Depth of understanding does not work like that. This is a privilege of the present that cannot be obtained in any other way. Presumably there are various practical advantages to this sort of Anselmian glance. It may be, for instance, that seeing an argument all at once allows us to see more of an argument's further consequences. Such corollaries might not be evident to someone who's grasp of an argument is more piecemeal. But the Anselmian glance is also something of intrinsic value. Just as we seek knowledge for its own sake, so we seek understanding for its own sake, and one aspect of understanding is the extent of what we can comprehend in an instant. Those who achieves that state might reasonably be said to have obtained everything they could want, by way of cognitively grasping some state of affairs.

There is something fitting in conceiving of the Anselmian glance as fundamentally a matter of understanding, since this, famously, was Anselm's own aspiration: *faith seeking understanding*.³⁰ Faith

³⁰ This was the title he initially gave his famous *Proslogion*. The preface to that work seems to invoke tacitly the ideal of the Anselmian glance. It explains that the inspiration for the ontological argument came from his desire to replace the "chain of many arguments" offered in the *Monologion* with "a single argument" that might, all by itself, establish God's

does not lack for certainty, and it has its own sort of justification. It is unclear whether or not it should count as knowledge. But what faith decidedly lacks is understanding. When Anselm asks his student to pull together all the threads of the argument, and try to see them all at once, he wants to make sure that his student understands why the conclusion obtains. The student might instead simply trust his teacher, following step by step, and seeing the truth of each step without seeing how it all fits together. This sort of progress toward a conclusion is like following detailed step by step directions from point A to point B – go left, then left, then right, then left. When carefully followed, this can be a perfectly reliable method for arriving at one’s destination. But it is better also to have a map of the route, so as to be able to visualize the whole path all at once. That sort of perspective on an argument is not easy, but for beings like us, it is part of the cognitive ideal.³¹

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existence and perfection.

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