

Philosophy 168
Lectures on *Meditation Three*
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The sub-title of Meditation Three (M3) is simply, “The Existence of God,” though that is not the only topic covered. M3 is the crucial Meditation for the task of restoring beliefs about things other than the “I,” a task that begins with the proof of God's existence in M3 and culminates in M6 with the proof of the existence of extended things.

In the Synopsis, Descartes describes the main result of M3 as “my principal argument for proving the existence of God” (AT VII 14, CSM II 10). He acknowledges that “it may be that many obscurities remain” in the proof, because it is divorced from the senses and uses no analogies with bodily things. This makes the main premise in his proof appear to be unsupported. (The main premise is a somewhat complex causal principle.) The remedy to this difficulty is supposed to be found in the Replies, through the use of an analogy. We will describe this analogy when we consider the proof and its main premise.

There are two key conclusions drawn in the Meditation. The first is that it is the clarity and distinctness of his perceptions that accounts for the certainty Descartes achieved in M2. The second is that the existence of God can be proved by arguments whose premises are sanctioned by the “natural light.” It will turn out in M6 that the existence of God who created him and is no deceiver is the basis of his judgments about the existence of things other than the self and God.

The Rule of Truth

The Meditation begins with a summary of the result of M2, which is that Descartes is certain that he is a thinking thing that thinks in various ways. With this result in hand, Descartes ventures out “to see whether there may be other things within me which I have not noticed.” That he is a thinking thing is said to be his “first item of all knowledge” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). It is commonly held that it is the proposition that he exists, or that he is thinking (the *Cogito*) which plays the role of first principle in Descartes’s metaphysics, but that is not what he appears to be stating at the beginning of M3. He then asks whether he does “not therefore also know what is required for my being certain of anything” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). That is, he would not be in a position to affirm that he is certain about some particular thing unless he were already to know under what conditions he is certain.

It is crucial to understand what Descartes means when he uses the word ‘certain.’ It is striking that in most places in the *Meditations*, the word ‘certain’ is conjoined with another word: ‘evident,’ ‘indubitable,’ ‘unshakable,’ ‘true,’ even ‘easy.’ This consistent conjunctive usage suggests that to be certain is something distinct from being evident, being indubitable, etc., since the conjoined terms are certainly not equivalent.

Several properties of certainty can be inferred from Descartes's use of 'certain' and 'certainty.' First, certainty is relative to a subject and a time. Something can be certain for one person but not for another, or for one subject at one time but not at another time. The first kind of relativity is illustrated by the fact that a geometer who has completed a proof is certain of its conclusion, while someone unfamiliar with mathematics is not. An example from M3 of the second kind of relativity is the report that "I previously accepted as wholly certain and evident many things which I afterwards realized were doubtful" (AT VII 35, CSM II 24).

Another crucial property of certainty is that it comes in degrees. In many places Descartes compares the certainty of a subject with respect to one thing with that of another. In M2, for example, Descartes states that his awareness of himself is "more true and more certain" than is his awareness of the wax.

The object of certainty is most properly described as being a proposition (or perhaps judgment), though Descartes sometimes describes things (himself, the piece of wax) and arguments as being certain. Our goal at this point, then, is to arrive at necessary and sufficient conditions for the following state:

S is certain to degree *n* at time *t* with respect to proposition *p*.

Let us consider first the degrees of certainty. The highest degree of certainty is described in two ways. On the one hand, *S* is most certain at *n* that *p* when *S* is unable to doubt the truth of *p* at *n*. Thus the expression 'certain and indubitable' which appears in M1 would be one way of describing the greatest certainty (AT VII 18, CSM II 13; AT VII 20, CSM II 14). The second way is to describe the certainty as being "unshakable" (AT VII 24, CSM II 16). Unshakability is a degree of conviction, such as that described in M3, where Descartes declares that when he thinks he perceives things very clearly, even the thought of deception cannot overturn his convictions about them.

There is powerful textual evidence that Descartes equated the highest degree of certainty with unshakability. This is found in the Second Replies. "For the supposition which we are making is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed, and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty" (AT VII 145, CSM II 103). Thus we arrive at the following equivalence:

S is certain to degree *n* at time *t* with respect to proposition *p* if and only if *S* is convinced with firmness *m* of the truth of *p*.

If certainty is a matter of the firmness of conviction, and the firmest conviction is unshakable, how does indubitability fit in to the picture? One obvious way would be to consider dubitability to be simply lack of firmness of conviction. The more doubtful one is, the less convinced he is, and *vice-versa*. Then to say that one's belief cannot be shaken is to say that one is unable to doubt it.

If we take this route, we must acknowledge that indubitability is understood merely descriptively. Clearly there is also a normative sense of indubitability as something which cannot *properly* be doubted or which cannot *rationally* be doubted. The normative sense of indubitability are independent of each other. One may be convinced of something that should be doubted, while one may be unconvinced of what should not be doubted. This is a central interpretive issue in Descartes: was he trying to establish “certainty and indubitability” in the descriptive sense, the normative sense, or both?

It seems that Descartes was to some extent aware of this distinction. It appears from the discussion in M1 that what is certain and indubitable is that about which there is no “suspicion of being false” (AT VII 20, CSM II 14), or that “about which a doubt may not be properly raised” (AT VII 21, CSM II 14-15). (Perhaps an example of a doubt raised improperly is one according to which I am insane.) In M1, Descartes states his goal as of trying to establish something “in the sciences that was stable and likely to last” (AT VII 17, CSM II 12). To do this, he will withhold his assent “from opinions that are not completely certain and indubitable” (AT VII 18, CSM II 17). If Descartes is concerned only with descriptive indubitability, there is the risk that he will become improperly convinced of the truth of something that is not stable and not likely to last.

Now we return to the thread of the Third Meditation. There remains the question of how Descartes is able to recognize indubitable certainties as what they are. The only thing he can find in this recognition is the clarity and distinctness of his perceptions of what he is certain about. (In this case, the proposition in question is *that I am a thinking thing*.) If we take indubitability in the descriptive sense, the claim here is that the clarity and distinctness of his perception of himself as a thinking thing is sufficient to instill in him an unshakable conviction that he is a thinking thing.

However, Descartes goes on to claim that, “this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). Here, Descartes seems to be making the strong claim that while clear and distinct perception is sufficient for certainty, it would not be make him certain if clear and distinct perception could turn out to be false perception.

Whether clear and distinct perceptions could turn out to be false is a metaphysical question which seems independent of the unshakability of belief. Perhaps what Descartes intended is the weaker claim that he could not be certain if he were aware that it could turn out that clear and distinct perceptions are false. Or it may be that he has the normative sense of certainty in mind, such that if it could turn out that clear and distinct perceptions are false, then he has proper grounds for doubting the truth of any matter.

From this claim he sets out his rule for recognizing truth: “I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). Note the qualifier ‘seem’ here, as it will turn out that the “general rule” will get

more backing later on in the *Meditations*.

This passage is arguably the most important in the whole of the *Meditations*, because Descartes uses his newly-found rule as the basis for many of his further claims about what is true. Moreover, he frequently mobilizes it as a weapon against claims to truth with which he disagrees. He especially targets judgments based on sense-perception, which he thinks is never clear and distinct. In M4, he uses the rule to explain how we can avoid error in making judgments.

Let us look a little more closely at how Descartes arrives at his rule of truth. We must explain why the great clarity and distinctness of his perception of himself as a thinking thing “would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false” (AT VII 35, CSM II 24). A reason for this claim, suggested above, is that if it could turn out to be false, then whatever would make it false would be a proper reason for doubting that it is true, in which case Descartes would not be certain, in the normative sense, about its truth.

The reason Descartes can lay down what seems to be a general rule, that whatever he very clearly and distinctly perceives is true, lies in the fact that the consequent of the conditional quoted in the last paragraph is perfectly general. He has arrived at that general condition that whatever is very clearly and distinctly perceived is true through the consideration of a particular case, in which he is certain that perception of himself as a thinking thing is true. Since he finds nothing in that perception except its great clarity and distinctness, he concludes that his certainty is based on that. In the Second Replies, Descartes states explicitly that it is the consideration of particular cases that leads us to make general claims. “It is in the nature of our minds to construct general propositions on the basis of our knowledge of particular ones” (AT VII 141, CSM II 100).

It will turn out to be very important to note that the “general rule” here must be indexed to time. That is, at this point in the *Meditations*, Descartes is certain of the truth of whatever he is *at present* perceiving very clearly and distinctly. Later, Descartes will have to find a basis for certainty with respect to what is not at present being perceived very clearly and distinctly.

One of the overall goals of the *Meditations* is to defeat skepticism by instilling certainty by proving that there is no proper basis for doubting a number of metaphysical propositions. Thus, when I am not presently perceiving something very clearly and distinctly, even if I once did so, doubts may creep into my mind, rendering me uncertain. This point is made by Descartes in the Second Replies, when he claims that even if an atheist has a clear awareness that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, this act of awareness “can be rendered doubtful” if the atheist or someone else raises the possibility that he is being deceived in matters that are most clear to him (AT VII 141, CSM II 101).

Descartes is now able to recognize that his previous opinions that some things were “certain and evident” were not based on the clarity and distinctness of perception, but only on their

merely apparent clarity and distinctness. The beliefs in question were that “there were things outside me which were the sources of my ideas and which resembled them in all respects” (AT VII 35, CSM II 25). The beliefs may be true, but if they are, it is not by virtue of the clarity and distinctness of their perception, but rather as a matter of luck.

Descartes’s previous beliefs included the “very simple and straightforward” matters in arithmetic and geometry, and these seem to be different from beliefs about external objects — they are seen clearly enough for their truth to be affirmed in accordance with the general rule.

Yet there remains an uneliminated possibility which might instill doubt in these beliefs. when I do not have “the things themselves” before my mind at a time when “my preconceived belief in the supreme power of God comes to mind” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). Such a God “could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in these matters.” This leads me to entertain some slight doubt at that time, and so I would be subjectively uncertain at that time.

Contrast this with circumstances in which I have the things themselves before my mind when my preconceived belief in God’s power comes to mind. When I am attending to the things themselves, the clarity and distinctness of my perception of them leads to conviction: “I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). This is surely a strong statement of descriptive indubitability, but does the spontaneous declaration have a normative basis? If not, then it is not clear how useful this firm conviction is for the completion of his overall project.

So, at this point in the *Meditations*, the only basis for doubt is the supposition of a God, and this induces doubt only at the times when I am not attending to the things themselves. This doubt is slight and metaphysical, and it prevents me from being “quite certain about anything else” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). It seems that not to be “quite certain” is to have a belief which is capable of being shaken under certain conditions, so that the certainty here is not of the highest possible degree.

Removing this doubt requires the proof that God exists and that he is no deceiver. “For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain about anything else” (AT VII 36, CSM II 25). This claim is the basis of a very powerful charge against Descartes that his arguments are circular, the so-called “Cartesian Circle.” In the terms of our discussion thus far, it seems that knowledge of God requires normative certainty of God’s existence, but normative certainty of God’s existence can be attained only if one has already established the existence of God. This charge will be examined in the notes to Meditation Five.

In the meantime, we will look at a more immediate objection. Introducing the possibility of deception in matters that are most clear to a person seemed to Mersenne to raise a problem, which he communicated to Descartes in the Second Objections. “How can you establish with certainty that you are not deceived, or capable of being deceived, in matters which you think

you know clearly and distinctly” (AT VII 126, CSM II 90). Human deception might have a cause of which one is wholly unaware, and people who think “their knowledge was as clear as the sunlight” turn out to be deceived. “Your principle of clear and distinct knowledge thus requires a clear and distinct explanation, in such a way as to rule out the possibility that anyone of sound mind may be deceived on matters which he thinks he knows clearly and distinctly” (AT VII 126, CSM II 90).

Descartes devotes quite a bit of space to his answer to this objection. Part of the response is an account of “the basis on which it seems to me that all human certainty can be founded” (AT VII 144, CSM II 103). The passage containing the explanation is worth quoting fully.

As soon as we think that we correctly perceive something, we are spontaneously convinced that it is true. Now if this conviction is so firm that it is impossible for us ever to have any reason for doubting what we are convinced of, then there are no further questions for us to ask: we have everything that we could reasonably want. (AT VII 144, CSM II 103).

In particular, although it is conceivable that what we are convinced of in this way “may appear false to God or an angel,” in which case it is false “absolutely speaking,” this should not bother us. Such a fact would be inaccessible to us, and we have not the slightest grounds even to suspect it. (In modern terminology of epistemology, such a possibility would be deemed “irrelevant” to whether we know.) The kind of conviction Descartes has in mind in M3 is “so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty” (AT VII 145, CSM II 103).

The passage suggests a way of bridging the gap between descriptive and normative indubitability. The firm conviction (descriptive indubitability) makes it impossible for us to have a reason for doubting that of which we are so firmly convinced (normative indubitability). Thus a certain kind of spontaneous conviction is sufficient for us not ever to have a reason for doubting. If this is Descartes’s view, it is certainly surprising, since normative indubitability seems to rest on rationally defeating any reason for doubt, while this view suggests that potential reasons for doubting (e.g., that God is a deceiver) are dispelled simply on the bases of the strength of one’s conviction. On the other hand, this view does seem to head off any circularity, since no proof that he is not made defectively is needed in order for him to have “everything we could reasonably want.”

This kind of certainty cannot be had where there is any obscurity (the contrary of clarity) or confusion (the contrary of distinctness). Obscurity induces doubt, and the senses always introduce obscurity. “Accordingly, if there is any certainty to be had, the only remaining alternative is that it occurs in the clear perception of the intellect and nowhere else” (AT VII 145, CSM II 104).

Then Descartes reiterates the theme that some perceptions compel belief. “Now some of these perceptions are so transparently clear and at the same time so simple that we cannot ever think of them without believing them to be true” (AT VII 145, CSM II 104). Two examples are given: that I exist as long as I am thinking, and that what is done cannot be undone. “For

we cannot doubt them unless we think of them; but we cannot think of them without at the same time believing that they are true” (AT VII 146, CSM II 104). From this it follows that “we cannot doubt them without at the same time believing they are true; that is, we can never doubt them” (AT VII 146, CSM II 104).

The only reason people go wrong when they think that they perceive something very clearly is that they have not been making use of the pure intellect. Descartes returns to the alleged possibility that what is apparent to the pure intellect appears false to God or an angel. “The evident clarity of our perceptions does not allow us to listen to anyone who makes up this kind of story” (AT VII 146, CSM II 104).

Ideas

It remains for Descartes to prove that God exists, in order to remove the slight and metaphysical doubt that he has been made in such a way as to be deceived in what he perceives very clearly and distinctly. But he does not offer the proof right away. Instead, he cites “considerations of proper order” and turns to a classification of his thoughts into “definite kinds,” in order to examine which ones can be bearers of truth or falsehood.

Here, he classifies some of his thoughts as “ideas,” which “as it were are images of things.” One has an idea when one thinks of an object, such as “a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God” (AT VII 37, CSM II 25). They are not necessarily images of existing things, nor need they be images at all (as in the case of an idea of an angel or of God), as Descartes states in many places. Later in M3, Descartes describes ideas as modes of thought, or, as described in the French translation, “a manner or way of thinking” (AT VII 41, CSM II 28). In that place, Descartes also describes ideas as “containing” something, which “exists in” the thinking intellect. Also in the French translation, it is said that what exists in the idea exists there “representatively.”

In the First Replies, Descartes states that there is a way in which objects, such as the sun, are “normally” in the intellect, and that existing in the intellect is a “mode of being” less perfect than existence outside the intellect (AT VII 102, CSM II 174-175).

In the Second Replies, Descartes gives a series of definitions of his key notions. The first definition is that of ‘thought,’ which is “everything that is within us in such a way that we are immediately aware of it” (AT VII 159, CSM II 113). This is followed by a formal definition of ‘idea’ as “the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought” (AT VII 160, CSM II 113).

In reply to Hobbes in the Third Objections and Replies, Descartes claims that he has made his meaning quite clear in many places, that ‘idea’ refers to “whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (AT VII 181, CSM II 127). Later he describes ideas as “whatever is the form of a given perception” (AT VII 188, CSM II 132).

Putting this all together, we might say that an idea is (1) a way in which we think (a “mode” or “form” of thinking, which (2) represents an existent or non-existent object, which object (3) “exists in” the thought, and of which object existing in the thought (4) we are immediately aware. We might say that an idea of x (where x need not exist outside my thought) is the thinking of x as being a certain way. For example, I am now thinking of the sun, which exists in my thoughts in the way objects normally do, and I am immediately aware of this representation of the sun. Through this idea, I think the sun as a small, very bright circle in two dimensions.

The ‘idea’ was most commonly associated with Platonic “forms,” or universals, existing in the mind of God. As Descartes describes it, “it was the standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the divine mind” (AT VII 181, CSM II 127). But we can find a usage of the term as applied to the human mind in Thomas Aquinas:

I call the idea or mental image that which the mind conceives within itself of the thing understood. With us this is neither the thing itself nor the substance of the mind, but a certain likeness conceived in the mind from the thing understood and signified by external speech, whence it is called the inner word. (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book IV, Chapter 11)

Descartes’s use of ‘idea’ to apply to a way in which humans represent objects was to catch on among philosophers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially after it was appropriated by John Locke in his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. These philosophers took very seriously the possibility that the object “contained in” the intellect might not exist at all, as Descartes himself recognized in the First Meditation.

Ideas, in the strict sense, are contrasted with other thoughts (in the wide sense in which Descartes is a thinking thing): willing (volitions), fearing (emotions), affirming (judgments). In each case, “my thought includes something more than the likeness of the thing” (AT VII 37, CSM II 26). However, in the Third Objections with Replies, is willing to extend the term “to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (AT VII 181, CSM II 127). For example, if I want something, “I simultaneously perceive that I want, . . . and this is why I count volition . . . among my ideas” (AT VII 181, CSM II 127). So even though wanting contains something more than the likeness of the thing wanted, as a mental act, it is immediately perceived, and hence it is an idea.

There is no truth or falsehood in ideas considered in themselves, as they are only like images, and there is no truth or falsehood in volitions and emotions. (The claim that there is no truth or falsehood in ideas themselves is later modified, when Descartes allows at AT VII 43, CSM II 30 that ideas may be “materially false,” a notion to be described below.) The thoughts which do present the possibility of falsehood are judgments. The most common error in judgment is “my judging that the ideas which are in me resemble, or conform to, things located outside me” (AT VII 37, CSM II 26). Given his description of ideas, Descartes must mean by ‘idea’ here the representation of the object as it “exists in” or is “contained in” the thought of it. This “image, as it were,” may fail to represent what we judge it to represent, in which case there is what Descartes will call “formal falsity,” or “falsity in the strict sense” in

which the form of the representation of the object does not conform that of the object itself (AT VII 43, CSM II 30).

Now that ideas have been isolated from other thoughts, they are classified into three possible types:

- innate
- adventitious
- invented

Innate ideas seem “to derive simply from my own nature,” as when I understand what a thing, or truth, or thought is. (Innate ideas are discussed more fully in the notes to *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*.) Adventitious ideas seem to come from objects other than myself. Invented ideas may be of non-existent things, such as sirens or hippogriffs. Since Descartes has not yet discovered the origins of his ideas, they may indeed all belong to any one of the three types.

Now we return to the question of the truth or falsity of my judgments that apparently adventitious ideas I have of things outside myself resemble the things themselves. I believe that there is a resemblance because I have apparently been “taught by nature” to believe that they do. Because the ideas occur often against my will, I conclude that they are likenesses of bodies that have been transmitted by the bodies themselves. This was in fact the prevailing account of sense-perception: that bodies transmit images or “species” that are then grasped by the mind.

To say that I am taught by nature to believe in the resemblance of ideas and things means only “that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it” (AT VII 38, CSM II 26-27). Descartes now begins an extended argument to show that this “blind impulse” is the only reason he has believed “that there exist things distinct from myself which transmit to me ideas or images of themselves through the sense organs or in some other way” (AT VII 38, CSM II 27). Moreover, there is no reliable judgment that can be made to confirm this.

The first move is to distinguish this natural, spontaneous, blind impulse from something that is utterly reliable, i.e., the “natural light” which reveals truths to him. Among the things revealed by the natural light are “from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on” (AT VII 38, CSM II 27). What is revealed by the natural light “cannot in any way be open to doubt.” The reason is that the natural light is the highest authority he has on which to base his judgments. “There cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true” (AT VII 38-39, CSM II 27). Descartes will appeal to the natural light at many points in the rest of the *Meditations*, but he says little about it here. (For a more detailed discussion of the natural light, see the notes for the Fourth Meditation.)

By contrast, natural impulses are not trustworthy. When they govern behavior, they often

direct a person away from the good, “and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters” (AT VII 39, CSM II 27).

Now it must be shown that there is no way to judge reliably that our ideas resemble objects outside us. Descartes considers two possible bases for judgment. The first is that the ideas occur against my will. But even if they do, they may be the product of “some other faculty not fully known to me, which produces these ideas without any assistance from external things” (AT VII 39, CSM II 27). This seems to be what happens in fact in dreaming.

The second basis for judgments is that the ideas are produced by the objects they represent. But production of the ideas by their objects does not imply that the ideas resemble the objects. For example, we have an idea of the sun through sense-perception, which is “a prime example of an idea which I reckon to come from an external source” (AT VII 39, CSM II 27). The sun is represented by this idea as being very small. Yet there is another idea, derived from astronomical reasoning, according to which the sun is very large. It is not the case that both ideas resemble the sun, “and reason persuades me that the idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all” (AT VII 40, CSM II 27).

Proof of the Existence of God

Having defined ‘ideas’ as a thoughts which “as it were are images of things,” Descartes considers the “images” themselves. There is a wide difference, he claims, between ideas which represent different things through their “images.” This difference is to be found in the kinds of things that are represented by the idea. To distinguish these possible kinds of objects of ideas, Descartes for the first time introduces the metaphysical notion of “substances,” and he claims that ideas which represent them “amount to something more” than ideas that represent “modes or accidents.”

Although it is not stated here, the reason ideas of substances “amount to something more” than ideas of modes or accidents is that modes or accidents depend entirely on substances, and a substance may exist without having any particular mode or accident. Similarly, an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance.

Insofar as a substance and a mode “exist in” the intellect, they are said now to have “objective reality,” or reality as objects of the intellect. In M3, Descartes refers only to degrees of objective reality. “Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substance to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents” (AT VII 40, CSM II 28).

In the Second Replies, Descartes spells out an “axiom” or “common notion” which bases the distinction of degrees of objective reality that the objects of our ideas have on the degrees of reality that actually existing objects have:

There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than an

accident or a mode; and infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance. Hence there is more objective reality in the idea of a substance than in the idea of an accident; and there is more objective reality in the idea of an infinite substance than in the idea of a finite substance. (AT VII 165-6, CSM II 117).

So metaphysical degrees of reality are what explain the degrees of objective reality of what is in the intellect.

In the First Objections, Caterus asks a question that might be asked by a modern student, “What is ‘objective being in the intellect’?” (AT VII 92). After rejecting Caterus’s account of objective reality or “being” in the intellect (the account which Caterus had been taught), Descartes states that objective being in the intellect is the way the objects of the intellect normally are in the intellect. For example when we have an idea of the sun, which is then an object of the intellect, the sun itself exists, or has objective being, in the intellect.

In the Second Replies, Descartes offers a definition of ‘objective reality of an idea.’

By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, insofar as this exists in the idea. In the same way we can talk of ‘objective perfection,’ ‘objective intricacy’ and so on. For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves. (AT VII 161, CSM II 113-114)

So if the being of the sun is represented in a literal mental image, the small size, yellow color, round shape, etc. of the sun (i.e., the modes of the sun) exist objectively in the idea that represents the sun. The view, then, is that there is a gradation of ideas according to what they represent, so that if idea A represents something with more reality than what idea B represents, idea A contains more “objective reality” than idea B contains.

After comparing the objective reality of ideas of substances versus ideas of modes or accidents, Descartes compares ideas of kinds of substances. Just as an infinite substance would have more reality than a finite substance, the idea of an infinite substance has more objective reality than the idea of a finite substance. The infinite substance that has objective reality in Descartes’s intellect is God, “eternal, infinite, <immutable>, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him” (AT VII 40, CSM II 28). Just as there is a metaphysical hierarchy of accident, finite substance and infinite substance, there is a hierarchy in objective reality of idea of accident, idea of finite substance, and idea of infinite substance.

As Gassendi rightly observes, “Here you move on at a great pace” (AT VII 285, CSM II 199). Descartes immediately lays down a generic causal principle known by the “natural light” which makes it “manifest”:

There must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. (AT VII 40, CSM II 28).

The principle apparently is not self-evident, because Descartes gives an argument to back it up. First, there is nothing but the efficient and total cause to give reality to the effect, and

second, the efficient and total cause can give reality to its effect only if the cause already has that reality. Here, Descartes seems to be trading on the meaning of the terms ‘cause’ and ‘effect.’ To be a total cause just is to be that which gives the effect whatever reality it has. (A partial cause would not be sufficient to give the effect all of its reality.)

So, for example, my parents might be thought to be the efficient causes of my existence, while the total cause would include my ancestors and whatever is responsible for their existence. But there is no more reality in me than there is in all of these causes taken together.

Descartes then claims that there are two corollaries of the causal principle:

- Something cannot arise from nothing.
- What is more perfect (what contains more reality) cannot arise from what is less perfect (what contains less reality).

In our running examples, a substance or mode cannot come to be from nothing, and a substance cannot arise from an accident, and an infinite substance cannot arise from a finite substance.

We might try to reconstruct an argument for the first corollary as follows. Suppose something could arise from nothing. Then it would have some reality that is not the result of any cause. In that case, we have an “effect” which has more reality than its “cause,” which is “nothing.”

But as David Hume pointed out in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, this argument is question-begging (Book I, Part III, Section 3). If something did indeed arise from nothing, then it has no cause, rather than having “nothing” as a cause. If it has no cause, then the causal principle is irrelevant, because it is not an effect of any cause.

It seems that, contrary to the order given by Descartes, the causal principle depends on the alleged corollary that something cannot arise from nothing. There must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect because if there were not, there would be a reality in the effect which did not come from the total cause, in which case it would have to come from nothing, which by supposition is impossible.

The most basic causal principle seems to be the one stated in the First Replies. Here it is claimed that the light of nature establishes that “if anything exists we must always ask why it exists; that is, we may inquire into its efficient cause, or if it does not have one, we may demand why it does not have one” (AT VII 108, CSM II 78).

The second of the two corollaries of the generic causal principle seems to be merely a re-statement of it, only in terms of “perfection” in addition to “degree of reality.”

The key move made by Descartes at this point is to apply the causal principle and its corollaries not only to “formal” reality, but also to the “objective reality” of the content of

ideas, thus producing in effect a new causal principle. The cause of the objective reality of the content of an idea must contain at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in what the idea contains.

In order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea. (AT VII 41, CSM II 28-29).

This principle is not a straightforward corollary of any of the earlier principles, and it does not seem to be “transparently clear” on the face of it. So we will have to try to see whether it can be supported by any further considerations.

There is a related principle that is quite plausible. Suppose I have the idea of a stone, and that this idea has a certain degree of objective reality (say, that of a finite substance). When I conceive of the cause of this stone (perhaps some geological process), this cause itself has as much objective reality as the stone (i.e., it must have at least the objective reality of a substance). So I cannot conceive of the cause as being an accident of the stone (or anything else), such as its being hard.

Now consider the application of the original causal principle to the having of the idea itself, to the idea as a “mode of thought” rather than as a representation of an object. The mode of thought itself has formal reality of the lowest degree, since it is a mode of myself as a thinking thing. So its cause must have as much formal reality as a mode has, in which case it is at least a mode.

These two applications of the original causal principle have in common that they compare the degrees of reality of things of the same type. In the first case it is the objective reality of ideas taken as “images,” and in the second case it is the formal reality of ideas taken as “modes of thought.”

The new principle Descartes has advanced connects the degree of reality in the “image” with that of the formal cause of the “mode of thought” which contains the “image.” Thus, my idea of a stone has a formal reality as a mode of thought and the stone has an objective reality as being represented by the idea. The claim is that the formal reality which gives rise to the idea of the stone as a mode of my thought is at least as great as the objective reality of the stone, the reality of the stone as object of my intellect. Thus, if the stone is a finite substance, then the cause of the idea of a stone must itself have at least as much reality as a finite substance.

As already noted, this principle is supposed to be “transparently true,” but perhaps it becomes so only after a great deal of meditation (which in fact is Descartes’s typical prescription for those who fail to recognize the truths that he claims to have discovered). At any rate, Descartes proposes a rather complex argument to back it up.

First, we must note that the idea of, say, a stone, has a formal reality as a mode of thought, and the stone has an objective reality insofar as it is represented by the idea. The cause of the mode of thought is said to be thought itself: “The nature of an idea is such that of itself it

requires no formal reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode” (AT VII 41, CSM II 28). The reality of thought itself is at least as great as the reality of a mode of thought.

But we must assign a cause to the objective reality (of the stone) contained in the idea. What kind of cause must it be? It seems that there are two possibilities. One is that the cause is something with formal reality, and the other is that it is something with merely objective reality. The second alternative is rejected.

And although the reality which I am considering in my ideas is merely objective reality, I must not on that account suppose that the same reality need not exist formally in the causes of my ideas, but that it is enough for it to be present in them objectively. (AT VII 40-41, CSM II 28)

Suppose I have the idea of a piece of sandstone. It might be thought that to have an idea with the degree of reality of a finite substance, all I need is another idea with the degree of reality of a finite substance, say that of many grains of sand. But if the cause of the objective reality of my idea of a stone is the objective reality of some other idea, then a regress threatens. There must be some further idea that is the cause of my idea of the grains of sand, etc. But “there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea” (AT VII 42, CSM II 29).

By eliminating some other objective reality as being the ultimate cause of my idea, and hence of the degree of reality of my idea, Descartes is forced to turn to some formal reality to explain the objective reality of my idea. The simplest way intuitively to look at the situation is that any “image” needs an “original” or “archetype” of which it is an image. If there is a representation, there must be something that is represented.

But even if there must be an original of which my idea is some kind of copy, it remains unclear why the original must have at least as much reality as is contained in the idea which copies it. There is a salient historical example of how an idea might have more objective reality than its cause has formal reality.

According to scholastic philosophy, the ideas we have of substances are caused by the perception of the accidents of the substances. For example, Suárez endorses the view that “the senses are not impressed with the forms of a substance, but only with its accidents; and therefore accidents are what first of all impinge on the intellect, and hence are conceived of by the intellect before the substance” (*Metaphysical Disputations*, Disputation 38, Section 2, §§ 8-9). Thus, we have an idea of substance which is caused by something (accidents) with less reality than substance. We will not pursue the matter further here, except to say that Descartes rejected the fundamental scholastic claim that substance is known through sense-perception.

Descartes concludes, by means of the natural light, that ideas in him are like images that can

fall short of, but cannot exceed, the perfection of their originals. The truth of the claims made above is more clearly and distinctly recognized “the longer and more carefully I examine all these points” (AT VII 42, CSM II 29).

As noted above, in the Synopsis Descartes recognizes that for the uninitiated, the claims he has made are not easily comprehended. He states that he can make it more comprehensible by the use of an analogy. This analogy is presented in the First Replies.

Consider an engineer who has in his mind “the idea of a machine of a highly intricate design” (AT VII 103, CSM II 75). We can properly inquire about the cause of his having the idea. How did the engineer conceive it? One possible answer is that it was wholly the product of the engineer’s intellect, since the intellect “is the cause of its own operations.” What needs to be accounted for is not the brute production of an idea, but rather of an idea with this particular content, the intricate design.

The cause might be some other machine the engineer has seen, and which the current idea copies to some extent. It might also be “an extensive knowledge of mechanics in the intellect of the person concerned.” It could even be “a very subtle intelligence which enabled him to invent the idea without any previous knowledge.” Whatever turns out to be the cause, this cause must itself have in it “all the intricacy” that is found in the idea.

If someone possesses the idea of a machine, and contained in the idea is every imaginable intricacy of design, then the correct inference is plainly that this idea originally came from some cause in which every imaginable intricacy really did exist, even though the intricacy now has only objective existence in the idea. (AT VII 105, CSM II 76)

This is a puzzling analogy, since it relies on a structural notion of intricacy of design. It seems that design features are the result of human creativity, which seems to allow for the design of structures with an intricacy that has never been experienced by the designer.

An objection to Descartes’s causal principle was lodged by Caterus in the First Objections. There, he questioned whether the objective reality in an idea requires a cause at all. The first reason he advances for this claim is that that “objective reality” is merely an extraneous label that is attached to really existing objects. To say that a stone has objective reality is merely to say that it is an object of thought. Thus objective reality is not something existing that requires a cause to explain its existence.

In response, Descartes agrees that if we focus our attention on the object which is thought but exists externally to the intellect (e.g., the sun), “objective reality” is an extraneous label, and no cause is needed to explain it. However, “I was speaking of the idea, which is never outside the intellect” (AT VII 102, CSM II 74). When we form an idea, the object of our thought is in the intellect: the sun itself exists in the intellect, albeit in a less perfect way than it exists outside the intellect. This “being in the intellect” is not nothing, and since it is not nothing, it requires a cause in order to explain why it is in the intellect. We might add that this reply becomes more clear if we think of what is in the intellect as an “image, as it were.” The

existence of the image is something that requires explanation.

Caterus recognized that the fact that ideas contain objective reality must be explained, even if (as he claimed) the objective reality itself need not have a cause. Here he tries to turn Descartes against himself by citing an example that Descartes had used in another context (Fifth Meditation, AT VII 44, CSM II 65). I have an idea of a (perfect) triangle even if no such object formally exists, because it has a “true and immutable nature.” But the true and immutable nature of a triangle has no causal powers and hence does not cause the objective reality of my idea of a triangle.

Descartes responds that even if the nature of a triangle (or other such object of thought) has no causal powers, the idea of a triangle is something, and there must be an explanation of why the representation of a triangle is in the intellect. “Even if the nature of the triangle is immutable and eternal, it is still no less appropriate to ask why there is an idea of it within us” (AT VII 104, CSM II 76). Caterus’s attempt to explain this fact, that our intellect is imperfect, is seen by Descartes to be an admission that there is no adequate alternative to Descartes’s explanation.

Now let us return to the thread of M3. Descartes sees a strategy for proving the existence of “some other thing that is the cause” of an idea whose objective reality is so great that he could not be the cause in it. “It will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the universe” (AT VII 42, CSM II 29). This is the only kind of argument he can find, and if it fails, he will have no argument to convince him of the existence of anything else.

So he surveys the ideas he has (other than the idea of himself). He finds among them “ideas which variously represent God, corporeal and inanimate things, angels, animals and finally other men like myself” (AT VII 43, CSM II 29). He then proceeds to whittle down the list so as to be left with an idea which could only be caused to exist by another being.

The first target is finite animate beings: other men, animals, angels. He has the materials to put them together, namely ideas of himself, corporeal things, and God.

Next, he moves on to corporeal things. He thinks that their perfection (greatness, excellence) is not so high that he could not himself have been the author of the ideas of them. The recipe for so doing is to begin with what he discovered while meditating on the wax in M2: “size, or extension in length, breadth and depth; shape, which is a function of the boundaries of this extension; position, which is a relation between various items possessing shape; and motion, or change of position” (AT VII 43, CSM II 30). All these are perceived clearly and distinctly. And they will be the qualities he eventually attributes to bodies in M6. The further things he attributes to bodies are not peculiar to body: substance, duration, number.

At this point, Descartes excludes from the clearly and distinctly perceived constituents of bodies such sensible qualities as light, colors, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold. He confesses not to know whether they “are ideas of real things or of non-things” (AT VII 43,

CSM II 30).

Then Descartes introduces a new notion, that of “material falsity,” which is the representation of non-things as things. This is to be distinguished from “formal falsity,” or “falsity in the strict sense,” which applies only to judgments. An example is the ideas of heat and cold. The unclarity in these ideas lies in the fact that “they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat, or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither” (AT VII 44, CSM II, 30). Suppose, then, that cold is the absence of heat. Since the idea of cold represents it “as something real and positive” would have to be called materially false under this supposition.

Unclear ideas could be caused by myself. If they are materially false, they arise from nothing, since they represent non-things. This is said to be known by the light of nature. “They are in me only because of a deficiency and lack of perfection in my nature” (AT VII 44, CSM II, 30). On the other hand, if they are true, then they may as well originate from myself, since their reality would be “so extremely slight that I cannot distinguish it from a non-thing” (AT VII 44, CSM II, 30).

We are left with “the clear and distinct elements in my ideas of corporeal things” (AT VII 44, CSM II 30). All of these could have been borrowed from himself. The obvious cases are those that he shares with would-be corporeal things: substance, number, and duration. I and a stone both fall under the classification ‘substance.’ Ideas of duration and number are treated similarly: I have existed for some time, so I can “transfer” my idea of duration to other things.

This leaves only the other attributes of bodies, extension, shape, etc. These are not contained in myself formally, in the sense that I am not (for all I know, anyway) extended, shaped, etc. However they are “merely modes of substance,” and I am a substance. So I can have an idea of modes. Modes are less real than substances (which I am), “so it seems possible that they are contained in me eminently” (AT VII 45, CSM II 31). If they are contained in me eminently, then I can fashion ideas of them from myself.

To say that something A is contained in some other thing B eminently is to say that there is in B something C which is a “higher form” of A. So there may be something in me that is not literally (“formally”) extension, but is a “higher form” than extension. The only reason Descartes has for asserting this is the fact that he is a substance and extension is a mode.

It is not clear from the context why one would even form a notion of eminent containment. Here we must return again to scholastic philosophy. We can begin with the notion of eminence of being. God is the most eminent being, and God’s perfections are therefore contained in God eminently. They are eminent perfections. God must contain his perfections “in a more eminent manner than that found in created beings” (Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations*, Disputation 30, Section 9, §§ 9-12).

However, what is of interest here is not a comparison of perfection, but a relation of

containment between one being and another. I may contain extension eminently, according to Descartes. Suárez notes that this is disputed. Thomas Aquinas proposed that in God there is a “creative essence” which contains eminently all the perfections of what is created. In this way, eminent containment is understood causally. But it is difficult to transpose this account to the present case, since we are not God, and it is not clear what kind of creative essence we might have. In some sense, Descartes must say that there might be in us a higher form of extension, which in some way shares in the reality of corporeal extension.

In the later correspondence (to Henry More), Descartes discusses the notion of “extension of power” that might be attributed to God and other spiritual beings. The reason is that God is said to be everywhere, yet God is not an extended substance as body is. The power of extension is the ability to act on extended things without being extended. An analogy is given: fire is in a white-hot iron, without being iron. (AT V 270, CSM III 361-362). Later he writes, “I said that God is extended in virtue of his power, because that power manifests itself, or can manifest itself, in extended being” (AT V 403, CSM III 381).

This leaves only the idea of God as one that I might not have manufactured from my own materials, so to speak. God is defined as earlier: “a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists” (AT VII 45, CSM II 31). The more he considers these attributes, the less possible it seems that they have originated from him. “So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists” (AT VII 45, CSM II 31).

Descartes goes on to consider and reject some alternative explanations of the presence in him of an idea of a supremely perfect being. The first explanation is that because he has the formal reality of a substance, he could produce the idea of God, who is also a substance. But while he can draw the idea of substance from himself, it is not clear that he can fabricate an idea of infinite substance. There would have to be an infinite substance to cause him to have this idea.

It might be thought that he could reach a conception of the infinite merely by negating his conception of the finite, as he can get an idea of rest by negating that of motion, or of darkness by negating his idea of light. Because of his clear perception that an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance, his perception “of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself” (AT VII 45, CSM II 31).

It might be asked whether he really does have a perception of this ontological priority. The response is that he had a conception of what is lacking, due to the fact that he doubts and has desires. Thus he perceived that he was not wholly perfect. And he would have to have “some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison” (AT VII 46, CSM II 31). (But note that having an idea of a *more* perfect being does not seem to require an idea of a perfect being *simpliciter*.)

Another way to try to undermine the claim that God exists in order for him to have an idea of God is by considering “that this idea of God is perhaps materially false and so could have come from nothing” or been in him due to his imperfection. It might be like the idea of cold, which might really be only that of an absence of heat. The problem with these ideas was that they are not clear and distinct, while the idea of God is “utterly clear and distinct” (AT VII 46, CSM II 31). Descartes reiterates that this clear and distinct idea “contains in itself more objective reality than any other idea” (AT VII 46, CSM II 31). So no idea is less prone to material falsehood. Even if one imagines that a perfect being does not exist, the idea of this being cannot represent anything unreal, as with the idea of cold.

Descartes reiterates that the idea is utterly clear and distinct, and whatever has any perfection is contained in it. Then he admits that he cannot grasp the infinite, while at the same time asserting that he can understand it, enough to say that all perfections are contained in God, either formally or eminently. “This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas” (AT VII 46, CSM II 32).

The next possibility Descartes must rule out is that he himself has, potentially, the perfections that he has attributed to God, being “something greater than I myself understand.” There are some positive reasons for thinking this is the case. One is that his knowledge is increasing, and it seems to have no limit. Another is that with his increased knowledge, he might be able to achieve the other perfections of God. If he has the potentiality for these perfections, this might be enough to allow him to “generate the idea of such perfections” (AT VII 47, CSM II 32).

After raising this apparent possibility, Descartes goes on to deny it. The first point is that having potentialities is inconsistent with the idea of God, “which contains absolutely nothing that is potential” (AT VII 47, CSM II 32). Ironically, the gradual increase of his knowledge is “the surest sign” of his imperfection. A further consideration is that no increase in his knowledge will reach actual infinity, “since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of a further increase” (AT VII 47, CSM II 32). Yet the idea of God is that of an actual infinite, “so that nothing can be added to his perfection” (AT VII 47, CSM II 32). The final reason that it is impossible that he be God is that only “actual or formal being” can only produce the objective being of an idea. A potential being cannot do this, because it “strictly speaking is nothing” (AT VII 47, CSM II 32).

Because his strong hold on these truths diminishes when he relaxes his concentration, and the images of the senses creep back in and obscure his mental vision, he has a hard time remembering “why the idea of a being more perfect than myself must necessarily proceed from some being that is in reality more perfect” (AT VII 47-48, CSM II 32-33). So Descartes turns to a new question, this one about whether his own existence (which is certain) is possible without the existence of God.

Descartes now seems to be offering a second proof, which is directed at the source of himself as a being that has the idea of God. However, in the First Replies, he maintains that his

“purpose here was not to produce a different proof from the preceding one, but rather to take the same proof and provide a more thorough explanation of it” (AT VII 106, CSM II 77). The argument presented here is still causal in nature. Descartes produces a list of the possible originators of his existence: himself, his parents, or some other beings whose perfection is less than that of God (since nothing as perfect as God can be “thought of or imagined”).

He first considers the possibility that he obtained his existence from himself. If this were the case, he would not be doubting, wanting, or lacking anything. If he produced himself, he would have given himself as much as it is possible to have, i.e., all the perfections. But if he could do that, he would himself be God. It is a much more difficult task to make himself exist from nothing than to give himself all the knowledge there is, since knowledge is merely an accident of his being, and accidents are inferior to substances. If he had managed to do the harder thing, he would not have deprived himself of knowledge, since perfect knowledge seems to be no harder to get than any of the other perfections of God. And if any were harder to achieve, he would have noticed this limitation of his power in himself.

An objection to this line of reasoning is that it supposes that he created himself. Another possibility is that he has “always existed as I do now” (AT VII 48, CSM II 33). The lack of a beginning does not solve the problem. The reason is that prior existence does not guarantee future existence. There must always be a cause that preserves the existence of any thing, since each part of a life-span (which can be infinitely divided) is independent of each other part. This is supposed to follow from “the nature of time.” There is a merely conceptual distinction between creation and preservation. “And this is one of the things that are evident by the natural light” (AT VII 49, CSM II 33).

In the First Replies, Descartes elaborates some on this argument. “Now I regard the divisions of time as being separate from each other, so that the fact that I now exist does not imply that I shall continue to exist in a little while unless there is a cause which, as it were, creates me afresh at each moment of time” (AT VII 109, CSM II 78-79).

So now the question is whether he has the power to preserve his own existence. Since he is considering himself only as a thinking thing, he claims that if he had this power he would “undoubtedly be aware of it” (AT VII 49, CSM II 34). But he is not aware of such a power of self-preservation, and he therefore is aware of the dependence of his continued existence on some other thing. In the First Replies, Descartes explains why he emphasized preservation, rather than causation: “In this way I aimed to escape the whole issue of the succession of causes” (AT VII 107, CSM II 77). His own intellect’s existence does not depend on a chain of causes, as do the objects of the senses. Arguments like those of Thomas Aquinas which end in the positing of a first cause are not sound, since our inability to comprehend an infinite chain of causes does not imply that there must be a first cause. “All that follows is that my intellect, which is finite, does not encompass the infinite” (AT VII 106-7, CSM II 77).

God as *causa sui* (cause of itself) can also be understood through preservation. If God eternally preserves his own existence, then he can be considered cause of himself, since the

notion of a cause of itself can be understood atemporally and in terms of preservation (AT VII 109, CSM II 78). Descartes does not commit himself to the claim that God is the “efficient” cause of himself, though he argues that it is possible for something to be the efficient cause of itself if the concept of “efficient cause” is given a suitably loose definition.

Descartes concludes that he must have been created by some other thing, and he goes on to argue that he cannot have been produced by some other thing (his parents or some being less perfect than God). To establish this point he invokes the generic causal principle that there must be at least as much reality in the cause as there is in the effect. He is a thinking thing that has an idea of God, so he must have been produced by a thinking thing that has an idea of God. Of this being, he can ask whether it produces itself or is produced by some other being. In the former case, it is God, “since if has the power of existing through its own might, then it undoubtedly has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea — that is, all the perfections which I conceive to be in God” (AT VII 50, CSM II 34). On the opposite assumption, that it is produced by some other being, the original question can be asked, and eventually “the ultimate cause will be reached, and this will be God” (AT VII 50, CSM II 34).

The conclusion might be escaped if an infinite regress of causes were allowed, but this is “impossible.” The reason is that he needs to appeal to the cause that preserves him in the present moment, rather than merely asking what produced him in the past.

Another possibility is that he was produced by a number of partial causes, or that his idea of God came from various different sources, “the supposition here being that all the perfections are to be found somewhere in the universe but not joined together in a single being” (AT VII 50, CSM II 34). But this contradicts one of the key aspects of the idea of God, which is his fundamental unity, which is “one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have” (AT VII 50, CSM II 34). If this idea of the unity of God came from a being, it would not have come from a being which had fewer than all the perfections. “For no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and inseparability of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they were” (AT VII 50, CSM II 34).

The final explanation of his origin is that he was caused to exist by his parents. Even if he were, he is not preserved in his existence by them. Further, he is a thinking thing, and his parents are not responsible for that, except that they “merely placed certain dispositions in the matter which I have always regarded as containing me, or rather my mind, for that is all I now take myself to be” (AT VII 50-51, CSM II 35).

The final conclusion is that his existence with an idea of a perfect being “provides a very clear proof that God indeed exists” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35).

The last point to examine is “how I received this idea from God” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35). Several alternatives are ruled out. (1) The idea of God was given through the senses. What we receive in this way usually comes unexpectedly, as when objects really or apparently are

presented to the sense organs. (2) The idea of God arose in me through my own invention. “For I am plainly unable either to take away anything from it or to add anything to it,” which I ought to be able to do to what I invent. This leaves the only possibility, that “it is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35).

Descartes claims that it is “no surprise” that God placed the idea of himself in Descartes, in the way that a craftsman places his mark on his work. However, he adds that the mark need not be “anything distinct from the work itself” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35).

He goes on to make a stronger connection between himself and God, claiming that “the mere fact that God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness” (AT VII 51, CSM II 34). A further consequence he draws from his having been created by God is that the faculty that allows him to perceive himself is the same one that allows him to perceive the idea of God and its likeness to him. He understands that he is an incomplete and dependent being, and that he “aspires without limit to even better and greater things” (AT VII 51, CSM II 35). Moreover, he finds all these things in the being upon whom he is dependent. He has these things actually and infinitely, and not merely potentially. So, this being is God.

He states that “the whole force of the argument” is that if God did not really exist, it would be impossible for him to exist with the kind of nature he has and to have the idea of God within him. God is the being of whom he has an idea as the “possessor of all perfections,” which perfections he cannot “grasp” but only “somehow reach in my thoughts” (AT VII 52, CSM II 35). This being contains no defects, and so he cannot be a deceiver, “since it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect” (AT VII 52, CSM II 35). This claim will be crucial to some of the central arguments in the rest of the *Meditations*, including the claim that God guarantees the truth of all clear and distinct perceptions, and that extended bodies exist.

Here one might note the possibility that God might deceive Descartes for his own good, just as we humans often deceive for someone’s benefit, without thereby being defective. Descartes himself admits in M4 that God might allow error for the greater good of creation, though we would have no way of knowing why. Similar considerations might apply to systematic deception.

This objection was in fact raised by Mersenne in the Second Objections: “Cannot God treat men as a doctor treats the sick, or a father treats his children? In both these cases there is frequent deception though it is always employed beneficially and with wisdom” (AT VII 126, CSM II 90). Mersenne also cited some Biblical passages in which it seems that God is deceptive.

In response, Descartes professes to be “in agreement with all metaphysicians and theologians past and future” (AT VII 142, CSM II 102). The Biblical passages are ways of speaking of God that are understandable to ordinary people and “contain some truth, albeit truth which is

relative to human beings.” Descartes distinguishes from relative truth the “naked truth—truth which is not relative to human beings,” which is appropriate for philosophers and was sought in the *Meditations*. (At this point in M3, Descartes was in doubt whether there are other human beings or even whether he has a body).

He goes on to say that he was concerned with “malice in the formal sense, the internal malice which is involved in deception” (AT VII 143, CSM II 102) rather than with the verbal expression of lie. Doctors verbally express lies, but not from internal malice. He then proceeds to explain the Biblical passages cited by Mersenne, pointing out that these do not even contain verbal expressions of lies.

Descartes ends M3 by contemplating God, so far as he can. Experience tells him that this is the greatest joy in life, even as faith tells him that it is supreme happiness in the next life.

[Note on citations. Citations from Descartes are given first with the volume and page from the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes’s works (*OEuvres*), which are given in the margins of the Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch translations, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. The citation ‘CSM’ with volume and page numbers are to that work. The citation from Suárez is taken from *Descartes’ Meditations: Background and Source Materials*, edited by Ariew, Cottingham and Sorell.]