

Descartes's Critique of the Atheist Geometer

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Descartes's philosophy is famously, if not uncontroversially, theistic. Probed by Objectors and correspondents, condemned by church authorities, and more recently reconsidered from Straussian and post-Heideggerian perspectives, Descartes's recourse to God is an incontrovertible and provocative feature of his philosophy. The conclusion of the Fifth Meditation depicts God as the ground of "certitude and truth":

And thus I see plainly that the certitude and truth of all knowledge [*scientia*] depends uniquely on cognition of the true God, to such an extent that, before I knew him, I could have known nothing perfectly about any other thing. But now innumerable things, both of God himself and of other intellectual things, as well as of all of that corporeal nature, which is the subject of pure *mathesis*, can be fully known and certain to me (Med. 5, CSM 2:49/AT 7:71).¹

Theism, according to Descartes, is the foundation for real, systematic, and complete knowing, which he terms *scientia*. On the Cartesian account, genuine or perfect *scientia* is reserved exclusively to theists precisely because God is the source of truth and certainty. The idea of God (*idea dei*), divinely instilled in the human intellect, is the means by which this relation is discovered, such that achieving true and certain knowledge is secured via the proofs of God's existence.

My goal in this article is to clarify the meaning of Descartes's claim for the foundational position of knowledge of God with respect to perfect knowledge of everything else. My starting point is a counterexample brought by the authors of the Second Set of Objections to the *Meditations*. The Second

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Objectors, whom we know as a group of “theologians and philosophers,”² introduce an atheist geometer as a foil for the Cartesian meditator. The Objectors use the atheist geometer to engage Descartes on the status of the cogito and the viability of the Fifth Meditation God proof. The same atheist geometer is given a brief reprise in the Sixth Objections, clearly for the purpose of resolving difficulties stemming from the Second Objections. Atheist geometers are interesting because they combine evident cognitive success with a rejection of Descartes’s claim that the idea of God is the most clear and distinct, the most true (Med. 3, CSM 2:31/AT 7:46), and therefore, presumably, cognitively irresistible. The existence of atheist geometers would seem to show that we can know, and know without God. Competent in mathematics but refractory in religion, the atheist tests Cartesian claims for God and provides an exemplary occasion to study the relationships between truth and certainty, knowing and being, and human knowers and God.

My argument falls into two major parts: (1) consideration of the situation of the atheist; (2) consideration of Descartes’s etiology of atheism. Part 1 examines Descartes’s strategy, and the curious consequences, of differentiating the epistemic and metaphysical circumstances of atheism. For Descartes, atheism is compatible with knowing but not with certainty; the atheist may know, but only accidentally, and never with the certainty that accrues to cognition grounded in God. Atheistic cognition is therefore rational opinion, not knowledge *sensu stricto*. Part 2 considers Descartes’s account of the etiology of atheism. Descartes echoes familiar sixteenth and early seventeenth century condemnations of atheism: atheism is culpable ignorance, the result of willful denial of the naturally self-evident reality of God’s existence. Descartes does not, however, repeat the standard charges about atheism and libertinage, perhaps because he generally seeks to avoid moral philosophy and theology.³ For us, the important issue is that the case of atheism underlines the dominance of the will over the intellect, with the result that Descartes’s refutation of atheism is ultimately a moral argument.

1. Descartes on the Advantages of Theism

The atheist geometer makes a first appearance in the third section of the Second Objections to the *Meditations*. The context is Descartes’s account of the relationship between the cogito and God, and the discussion raises fundamental questions about the structure and strategy of Descartes’s argumentation, particularly the relationship of the Second and Third Meditations on the one hand to the Fifth and Sixth Meditations on the other.

The connection between the cogito and the Atheist Geometer is the objectors’ focus on Descartes’s insistence that

epistemic character reflects metaphysical status.⁴ This claim, asserted more or less overtly at different points in the text, is the axis on which both Descartes's view of the cogito and his answer to atheism turn. The essence of the atheist's position is a refusal to move from claims about epistemic status or priority to the foundationalist and creationist claims of Cartesian metaphysics. The atheist, in fact, might embrace nominalism or perhaps a materialism, Aristotelian or otherwise. Alternatively, the atheist might eschew metaphysical speculation altogether; possible reasons for such a position might include indifference toward or renunciation of the Cartesian project of real knowledge. Introducing the atheist geometer thus serves to highlight the question of what Descartes considers essential for genuine knowing. Similarly, the atheist forces us to consider the self-evidence of moving from the cogito to the God proofs, particularly to the claims of perfect knowledge made in the Fifth Meditation's recapitulation of the cogito. The atheist might affirm the cogito but not proceed from self-awareness to awareness of God.

Seen in conjunction with the atheist geometer, the Objectors' opening critique of the cogito clearly anticipates an argument for atheism. The Objection also anticipates Antoine Arnauld's more famous formulation of the Cartesian circle. The Objection runs as follows:

Third, you are not yet certain of the existence of God, and you say that you are not yet certain of anything, and cannot know anything clearly and distinctly until you have achieved clear and certain knowledge of the existence of God. It follows from this that you do not clearly and distinctly know that you are a thinking thing, since, on your own admission, that knowledge depends on the clear knowledge of an existing God; and this you have not yet proved in the passage where you draw the conclusion that you clearly know what you are. (Obj. 2, CSM 2:89/AT 7:124–125)

The Objectors ask whether, given the partial self-knowledge Descartes achieves in the Second Meditation, he can use the cogito to establish the existence of God. If, as the Fifth Meditation claims, "nothing could ever be known perfectly [*perfecte sciri*]" without knowledge of God (Med. 5, CSM 2:48/AT 7:69), such that perfect knowledge and certainty regarding even the cogito presuppose God's existence, how can the cogito be used to ascertain God's existence? By implication, the God proofs of the Third Meditation could never begin, and so the objection is potentially fatal to the progress of the *Meditations*.

According to Descartes, the Objectors' attack on the cogito collapses the process of the *Meditations*, conflating claims from the Second, Third, and Fifth Meditations and thereby obscuring

the central problematic of discerning the ground and status of intuitions. Descartes therefore moves to restrict the claim about *scientia* to the Fifth Meditation. The main issue, though, is the existential and ontological character of the cogito as a starting point for knowing:

Where I said that “we can know [*scire*] nothing for certain until we first recognize that God exists,” I expressly declared that I was speaking only of knowledge of those conclusions “that can be recalled when we are no longer attending to the arguments from which we deduced them.” Knowledge [*notitia*] of first principles is not normally called *scientia* by dialecticians. When we attend to [the fact that] we exist [as] thinking things, it is a primary notion that is not derived through any syllogism; neither when someone says, “I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist,” does he deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but rather he recognizes it as [being like] a self-evident thing by means of a simple intuition of the mind [*sed tanquam rem per se notam simplici mentis intuitu agnoscit*]. (Resp. 2, CSM 2:100/AT 7:140)

In saying that the cogito functions like the first principles recognized by dialecticians, Descartes is saying that it is known *per se*, that is, without prior premises. Knowledge proper, namely *scientia*, on the other hand, turns out to involve the elaboration of arguments, which in turn depends on a kind of movement in thinking. The discursive movements of thinking (e.g., synthesis and comparison) involve memory, and they therefore require the divine epistemological guarantees that restore memory in the Fifth Meditation. In sum, while the cogito can be intuited when we are uncertain about God’s existence, the derivation of subsequent knowledge depends on God. Moreover, the cogito itself is known more fully after God is known, because it can be apprehended as a dependent creature. Such knowledge is secured at the end of the *Meditations*, but it is not required in order to inaugurate the *Meditations*.

Descartes’s differentiation of the episodic certainty of the cogito and the extension of thinking over time concisely recapitulates the opening of the Third Meditation. There, Descartes narrates the meditator’s experience of oscillating between the stable present tense of intellectual intuition and the doubts induced by time’s passage and the use of memory (Med. 3, CSM 2:24–25/AT 7:35–36).⁵ Readers of the *Meditations* would naturally link the Third Meditation text with its Fifth Meditation pericope (Med. 5, CSM 2:47–49/AT 7:69–70), which announces the theistic solution to these very problems. The Fifth Meditation passage evokes the mental vicissitudes narrated in the Third, then concludes that such movements need not worry the theist, for “even when I am no longer paying

attention" to the reasons for a proposition, I can rest assured in recollection of past clear and distinct perceptions. Once I know that the veracious God exists, I am entitled to rely on memory; my doubts are assuaged because the temporality of my thinking is rendered unproblematic in principle. Knowledge of God, in other words, sustains discursive, systematic thinking and lends it certainty. The stability and consistency of *scientia* replaces "vague and changeable opinions about everything" (Med. 5, CSM 2:48/AT 7:69).

The intrinsic interest of the psychology of doubt and intellection notwithstanding, the crucial issue here is the metaphysics underlying the narratives of the *Meditations*. Descartes's invocation of the dialecticians points the way. His reference is disingenuous, for the Cartesian cogito provides a real intuition, not simply an epistemic first principle, as any dialectician would suppose. Descartes's addition of the connection between one's own thinking and existence to the customary list of principles known per se (e.g., the principle of noncontradiction and the principle that wholes are greater than parts) transposes the traditional understanding of the epistemic priority of first principles into metaphysical terms. Descartes himself, a sophisticated reader of Scholastic texts, acknowledges just this transposition in a 1646 letter to Clerselier, the French translator of the *Principles of Philosophy*. Descartes contrasts the existential valence of the cogito with abstract laws, such as the principle of noncontradiction, which he takes to be propositions derived from the experience of the cogito. The cogito is useful for philosophizing not because everything can be grounded in it, but rather because it exhibits the connection between thinking and being (To Clerselier, June or July 1646, CSM 3:290/AT 4:444). In the Second Replies, Descartes's equivocal, or, better, new usage of the phrase "per se notam" is perhaps signaled by the adverb "tanquam," meaning "like" or "as" in the sense of "as if." For Descartes, the cogito functions as a real principle not because human thinking brings anything into being, or produces a connection, but because thinking reveals being as its ground: the cogito is knowable because it (already) exists, and so it can function as the ground from which principles can be articulated.⁶ Certainty, for Descartes, will be a matter of knowing this relation between truth and being, and the character of both terms will be determined with reference to creation.

Descartes's Reply to the Second Objectors' inquiry about atheist geometers exhibits the same movement from epistemic to metaphysical claims; less charitably, we might say that it exhibits the same Cartesian sleight of hand or conflation. The Objectors introduce the atheist with a challenge to Descartes to clarify whether affirmation of the existence of God is necessary or superfluous for geometry. Presumably, the example of the

atheist is designed to defuse the Fifth Meditation God proof and so complete the refutation of Descartes's proofs begun with the critique of the cogito. In so doing, the Objectors force Descartes to clarify the relationship between epistemic and metaphysical claims:

[A]n atheist is clearly and distinctly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles; but so far is he from supposing the existence of God that he completely denies it. (Obj. 2, CSM 2:89/AT 7:125)

If the Objectors first contended that the cogito could not lead to God, here they adopt a second line of attack. In suggesting that God is irrelevant to geometry, the Objectors exploit a natural reading of the structure of the Fifth Meditation, turning Descartes's own precedent to their advantage. Descartes's announced strategy in the Fifth Meditation is to move from the persuasive force of mathematical cognition to evidence of the existence of God, in order to model, as if by analogy or example, the immediacy of intuitive connections. Descartes argues that the divine attributes are, at a minimum, as evident as the truths of geometry, and hence that at least the necessity perceived in the definitions of geometrical objects must be admitted in the case of God. Descartes's argument is as follows:

Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. Nor do I understand less clearly and distinctly that it pertains to his nature that he always exists than that what I demonstrate of some shape or number also pertains to the nature of the shape or number. And hence even if not all the things about which I have meditated in these previous days are true, the existence of God must be within my reach, at a minimum, in the same degree of certainty as mathematical truths have been thus far. (Med. 5, CSM 2:45/AT 7:65).

Someone who grants that the sum of the three angles of a triangle equals the sum of two right angles must, Descartes says, concede that God exists: "the existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than it can be separated from the essence of a triangle than that the magnitude of its three angles is equal to two right ones" (Med. 5, CSM 2:45/AT 7:66). Once we know God, we are entitled to extend knowing to bodies. We do so by apprehending extension as the essence of material things and the separation of the human mind and body. But how, the Objectors ask, and we may ask as well, can we move from a claim about intramental mathematical entities to God's actual existence? Further, how can we have a clear and distinct idea of God's nature so as to enable this movement?

Examining the first question will prepare the way for considering the second.

The structure of the Fifth Meditation argument implies that the exemplarity of mathematics must obtain irrespective of the pivotal theses of Cartesian philosophy, namely, theism and dualism. Dualism is, it happens, the easier case, and Descartes grants the requisite independence, pronouncing materialist views compatible with an affirmation of the epistemic privilege of mathematics. Even for one committed to the priority of sensation, the abstract mathematical function paradigmatically: "I remember that even before this time [sc. before meditating], when I was completely attached to the objects of the senses, I always recognized as most certain of all truths of this mode, namely of shapes or numbers or other things pertaining to arithmetic or geometry or to pure and abstract *mathesis* in general" (Med. 5, CSM 2:45/AT 7:65). In the Sixth Replies, Descartes explicitly concedes that adherence to a dualist ontology is not a prerequisite for mathematics: "Before freeing myself from the preconceived opinions acquired from the senses, I did perceive correctly that two and three make five and that if equals are taken from equals the remainders are equal, and many other things of this kind; and yet I did not think that the soul of man is distinct from his body" (Resp. 6, CSM 2:299–300/AT 7:445). Equally, if an analogy to mathematics is to provide an argument for God's existence, we should find Descartes acknowledging, at least indirectly, the independence of mathematics from theism. This, we shall see, Descartes will grant in only a limited way, drawing a line of doubt around an atheistic mathematics; without the grounding in God, mathematics will lack certainty. Thus, the strategy of the Fifth Meditation, which would move from the widely-accepted epistemic privilege of mathematics to a recognition of God, will prove to be illusory, if not quite deceptive. This is the principal lesson of the atheist geometer.

The apparent irrelevance of such main themes of Cartesian philosophy as the separation of mind and body and the existence of God for mathematical cognition reflects two aspects of the entities of mathematics.⁷ First, the mathematical exist intramentally and so may be thought without reference to actual external existents, be those existents material or incorporeal. In the First Meditation, Descartes describes the mathematicians as indifferent with respect to the question of whether the entities of mathematics exist only intramentally. The mathematicians are said "not, or barely, to care whether their objects [*res*] are in the nature of things or not" (Med. 1, CSM 2:14/AT 7:20). Second, considered with respect to actual existents, mathematics, particularly geometry, exhibits an accord between sensation and intellection. Geometry is a natural form of cognition, or natural language, for both intellect

and body, and this double naturalness gives rise to epistemic privilege; mathematics is most evident to the mind and provides a language for understanding body.

For Descartes himself, these epistemic features of mathematics must be seen as reflective of fundamental metaphysical structures. With respect to the intramentality of the mathematical, Descartes argues: “Although [the mathematical] would in a certain way be cogitated by me by choice, they are still not invented by me, but rather have their own true and immutable natures” (Med. 5, CSM 2:44/AT 7:64). Thus, in the Fifth Meditation, where Descartes affirms that the notion of a triangle would exist even if no triangular objects were to be found outside the mind, what is at issue is God’s creation of the mathematical (Med. 5, CSM 2:45/AT 7:64). In other words, the intramentality of mathematics does not for Descartes imply a human origin for mathematics. At the same time, however, that very intramentality may mask the divine origin. For Descartes, all possibility is created, real possibility, and intramental objects such as the mathematical require God’s efficient causation.⁸ The ground of the agreement of thinking and its objects is the veracious God who is the creator of the eternal truths, and the epistemic status of the mathematical ensues from their place as created eternal truths.

Similarly, the relation between intelligibility and sensibility is guaranteed by the single origin of both orders in creation.⁹ Descartes specifically denies a sensible origin for the mathematical and takes an Augustinian approach (Med. 5, CSM 2:45/AT 7:64). Descartes’s argument, in a nutshell, is that thinking would be impossible without an actual intellect, and it is because the entities of geometry are “already in us” that images of material beings may be recognized in thinking (Resp. 5, CSM 2:262/AT 7:381–382). At the same time, geometry, Descartes observes, is in accord with the structure of material substance. Unlike the beings addressed by metaphysics, cognition of which requires that we abjure the corporeal faculties, the concepts and entities of geometry agree with our senses: “the [primary] notions that are presupposed for demonstrating geometrical things, because they agree with the use of the senses, are easily admitted” (Resp. 2, CSM 2:110–111/AT 7:156–157).¹⁰ Geometry is ideal precisely as *mathesis* because it represents the concurrence of what is experientially prior, namely sense experience, with what is ontologically prior, namely innate ideas. As natural, this operation occurs irrespective of the knower’s reflective awareness of God or dualism. Indeed, as natural, the mathematical appear in thinking with such clear epistemic privilege that they generally put off inquiries into these otherwise provocative matters. Such deferral, however, is not the Cartesian approach, which demands certainty about cognition. Descartes is seeking a

metaphysical legitimation of mathematics as the language of nature.

In view of these considerations, Descartes's most cogent Reply to the Objectors is to draw a line between what atheists can do by nature and what atheists can do with certainty, that is, knowingly. For Descartes, in essence, it is not enough to know; we must in addition know that we know and know why. The effect of his position is to reduce atheistic knowledge to accidental cognition and atheistic "certainty" to mere opinion or prejudice. The contrast is drawn in terms of *cognitio* and *scientia*:

That "An atheist *could* clearly cognize that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles" I do not deny; but I affirm that this mere awareness of his is not true knowledge [*vera scientia*], because no cognition that can be rendered doubtful is seen to be called knowledge [*scientia*]; and since it is supposed that he is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not deceived about those [things] which seem to him most evident, as I fully explained. (Resp. 2, CSM 2:101/AT 7:141, emphasis added)

In this passage, *cognitio* functions as a general term for cognitive activity, and Descartes's subjunctive "could" refers to the atheist's natural potential for knowing. Like the theist, the atheist could have geometrical intuitions and could grasp the entailments of primary principles, perhaps even carry out proofs; the entities and laws of mathematics—matters such as the definition of a triangle, the rules of addition, the rules of inference, etc.—are fully available to the atheist in virtue of having an intellect. *Scientia*, knowledge proper, in contrast, refers specifically to cognition which is not only true but certain. Descartes denies this cognition to the atheist, contending that the atheist can never decisively eliminate the hypothesis of systematic deception.

What Descartes does, in other words, is distinguish between the atheist's metaphysical situation and the atheist's epistemic situation. Viewed in terms of the metaphysics of knowing, the atheist's geometry manifests the intelligibility of creation and so cannot be called fortuitous; atheists apprehend truth because their intellects are structured by the same innate ideas that structure theists' intellects. Viewed in terms of epistemology, however, Descartes claims that the atheist has a merely accidental relation to the truths of mathematics. In virtue of atheism, that is, by denying God, atheists fail to apprehend the source of mathematical knowledge and so do not know that they know. While this may not in fact impede atheist geometers from going about their proofs or even using their results in applied mathematical disciplines such as engineering or architecture, for Descartes, it constitutes a problem.¹¹ This analysis is

encapsulated in Descartes's insistence on differentiating the atheist's *cognitio* and the theist's *scientia* in terms of the perceived role and status of those things that seem "most evident," namely, intellectual intuitions. Descartes's model of knowledge is foundationalist: intuitions grasped in light of their metaphysical significance become the basis for true and certain science. This is as true of the mathematical as it is true of the cogito. Certainty, moreover, hinges on this metaphysical legitimation.

Although Descartes does not specify the consequences of atheism with regard to the temporal extension of thinking, as occurs in compounding propositions to construct a science, or with regard to the relation of thinking to extended substance, as is required in the applied mathematical disciplines, the import of his remarks is not difficult to discern. Following out the implications of Descartes's focus on temporality in connection with the cogito and the divine guarantee of knowing, it is clear that not only can atheists not fully recognize truths as truths, but atheists cannot persist in affirming those propositions which they take at some moment to be true. While atheists could know their own existence at any instant, they have no basis on which to establish the continuity of time, with the result that memory and recollection are disabled. With respect to knowledge of body, if the most evident things are rendered doubtful, a fortiori, the least evident things, such as sense-perceptions, whose veridical character both Cartesians and atheistic skeptics can and do doubt, would be that much more compromised.¹²

Within the Cartesian corpus, ancient geometers represent the predicament attributed by Descartes to mathematicians in the absence of God. Because these geometers do not stand accused of rejecting God, their case is not entirely parallel to that of the atheist, but even this approximate and "best case" for mathematics without God is revealing. Responding in the Fifth Replies to Gassendi's protestations about the irrelevance of God to mathematics, Descartes acknowledges the successes of the ancient mathematicians Diagoras, Theodorus, Pythagoras, and others, but sets against them the ancient skeptics' success in generating doubts: "I insist that they [the skeptics] could not have done so [caused doubts] had they known the true nature of God" (Resp. 5, CSM 2:263/AT 7:384). Descartes unfortunately does not specify these doubts, but the key point here is that, rather than reclassifying ancient mathematics as mere imaginative speculation, Descartes interprets the ancients' achievements as evidence of the natural power of the intellect to express itself irrespective of adverse training, incomplete investigation, or sheer bias.¹³ Descartes disputes the certainty, not the truth, of ancient geometry. Truth, as Descartes presents it here, must be essentially connected to how the world is and to

the actuality of the intellect, and cannot be merely a matter of statements. Were truth propositional rather than ontological, Descartes would be guilty of a "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" fallacy. As uncertain, the accomplishments of the ancients represent incomplete appropriations of the natural power, that is, the natural truth, of the intellect. Lacking knowledge of God, the geometer may fortuitously happen on a correct arrangement of materials, but, as the depredations of skepticism reveal, a nontheistic geometer is unable to rest in this success. Certainty, in other words, is lacking.

Absent God, then, what we have is a kind of pragmatism *avant la lettre*, and Descartes pronounces it unsatisfactory. Without a metaphysical ground, the atheist is forced to accept what Descartes would characterize as empirical, descriptive certainty. Nontheistic geometry can never amount to more than a collection of reasoned opinions. Such a collection amounts to mere convention, and it barely attenuates skepticism: "No skeptic nowadays has any doubt in practice about whether he has a head, or whether two and three make five, and so on. What the skeptics say is that they merely treat such claims as true because they appear to be so, but they do not accept them as certain, because no reliable arguments require them to do so" (Resp. 7, CSM 2:375/AT 7:549). Atheists' bridges and buildings either stand or fall, but atheists cannot ultimately explain why. Taken most radically, Descartes's analysis implies that the atheist does not know actual beings as actual. It is not simply that the atheist lacks the measure afforded by an infinite being, but that the character of being is opaque to the atheist, with the result that cognitive constructions may diverge from being. If to know a thing is to know its causes, the atheist, lacking knowledge of the source of existence, does not truly apprehend the being of things, for to know something as actual is to know it as a creature, that is, as deriving its being from the act of the creator. Further, because, according to Descartes, all the divine perfections are unified, the atheist's refusal of real knowledge of being also affects predications of truth, goodness, order, and similar categories. As a consequence, the atheist's predications of goodness show no determinate relation to the actual order of the world. As Descartes puts matters in the Sixth Replies, restating emphatically the implications of the Second Replies: "If anyone attends to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever that does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every reason for anything's being good or true" (Resp. 6, CSM 2:294–295/AT 7:435).

2. Rejecting God

Clearly, since the atheist's intellect functions naturally in geometry, Descartes cannot claim, on pain of assigning atheists

most unusual and indeed unnatural intellects, that atheism originates in the intellect. Further, a defective intellect would render the atheist incapable of apprehending Descartes's rational arguments, which are supposed to refute atheism. The *idea dei*, on which all of Descartes's argument rests, is apprehended exclusively through the intellect and must be distinguished from all imaginative representations. Descartes in fact diagnoses the atheist's problem as ensuing from the will's resistance to the intellect and its enthusiasm for opinion. Descartes refers derisively to the atheist's misapprehension of the usage of the word "infinite" (Resp. 2, CSM 2:101/AT 7:141) and mocks the atheist's "imaginary infinite" (Resp. 2, CSM 2:101/AT 7:142). Atheism, it seems, arises from using language without regard for understanding and from relying on imagination rather than the intellect.¹⁴ Descartes's ultimate contention is that the atheist prefers things bodily to things intellectual, things human to things divine. How, then, does the atheist refuse the most self-evident idea? By refusing to see and by choosing to avoid it. This amounts to disorder in the soul. As a result, while atheists may achieve significant success in mathematics, certainty, the final perfection of knowing, eludes them.

While attributing atheism to the will instead of the intellect safeguards the relationship of the intellect to truth, it is nonetheless a problematic explanation. Attributing atheism to the will underscores inherent difficulties in the Cartesian division of cognitive labor between the intellect's perception and the will's action. While a complete elucidation of these difficulties would lead to the complex debates surrounding freedom and indifference in Descartes's theory of the will and so extend well beyond the scope of the present inquiry, it is possible to state the central issue fairly concisely. Descartes's theory of rationality involves a tension between the ontological actuality of the intellect and the efficient causation of the will. Paradoxically, the Cartesian intellect, because it is constituted by the innate ideas or powers of thinking,¹⁵ is actual from the outset, but this actuality is not necessarily translated into genuine knowing. As much as the divinely-endowed innate ideas constitute determinate or structured potentialities for true understanding, the will's efficient agency, expressed through judgment and through the motions of pursuit and avoidance, governs the discovery and expression of the intellect's ideas. The intellect is by its very nature attuned to truth and necessity and so perceives them inevitably; but the will is free and, in its freedom, holds sway over the intellect.

In other words, the will's decision to meditate, that is, to suspend assent to habitual beliefs and longstanding opinions in favor of a journey toward pure intellectual understanding, determines the expression of the intellect. As much as the case

of the Cartesian meditator suggests that the will is responsive to the intellect, and even that the will may experience a kind of restlessness that leads it away from opinion and toward intellectual knowledge, the case of atheism demonstrates that the will's affirmation of and adherence to opinions can obscure the natural light of the intellect. By choosing images and opinions over true ideas, the will obscures the intellect; by repudiating images and opinions, the will would permit the intellect to emerge and in turn become the object of assent. Meditation, for Descartes, is a kind of cognitive therapy. By attenuating the attraction of the will to the body and focusing the will's attention on the intellect, meditation ultimately turns the knower toward God. To make God's existence appear in its self-evidence, "the reader, by attending diligently to what I wrote, should free himself from prejudices that cover over his natural light, and should accustom himself to believe the primary notions, which are evident and true as can be, more than the obscure and false opinions, though they are fixed in the mind by long use" (Resp. 2, CSM 2:97/AT 7:135). Atheism represents just the opposite process.

Descartes thus positions the will between the intellect and the body. In so doing, he reiterates a classical position. Descartes's depiction of tension between the will's involvement with, on the one hand, the intellect and, on the other, the corporeal faculties, points to an anthropology and psychology rooted in the Augustinian theology of Original Sin.¹⁶ For Augustine, the Fall sundered the harmonious relations of the rational faculties of intellect and will, which constitute the rational soul, and between the rational soul and the body.¹⁷ The will's choice between intellectual and corporeal objects reflects its nature as the faculty of rational appetite. As rational, the will is connected to the intellect; as appetitive, it is connected to the body. Descartes's position, in assuming this tradition, is that strengthening the will's desire for the intellect and restricting it within intellectually-apprehended limits enables us to know with certainty and to avoid sin (Med. 4, CSM 2:41/AT 7:58).

Descartes's most radical account of atheism focuses, however, not on the problem of attraction to the body but on the other possibility latent in the close connection of the will and intellect. This is the will's rational character, in virtue of which it may come to function as a sort of ersatz intellect. Atheism exemplifies, on this account, the will's usurpation of the intellect. In atheism,

the functions of the intellect and the will are confused; it is not the function of the will to understand, but only to will; and although we will nothing of which we do not understand something in some way, as I agreed before, experience shows sufficiently that we can will more about a given thing than we

can cognize. The false can never be apprehended under the aspect of the true; nor do those who deny that the idea of God is in us apprehend this itself, even though they perhaps affirm, believe, and argue. As I remarked before, people's judgments often dissent from their perception or apprehension. (To Hyperaspistes, August 1641, CSM 3:195/AT 4:432)¹⁸

When the will predominates in the soul, the functions of affirmation, belief, and argumentation continue, but without the grounding in necessity afforded by intellectual perception. Only the will's prior orientation to intellect could ensure proper regard for intellectual apprehension and the necessary separation of powers. Defined concisely, then, atheism is both overextension of the will beyond clear and distinct perception and into imaginary objects and the substitution of volition for understanding.

If we ask about the causes of the will's overextension, Descartes's answer is explicitly theological, not philosophical:

The sin that Turks and other infidels commit by refusing to embrace the Christian religion does not arise from their unwillingness to assent to obscure matters (for obscure indeed they are), but from their resistance to the impulses of divine grace within them, or from the fact that they make themselves unworthy of grace by their other sins. (Resp. 2, AT 7:148/CSM 2:106)

The question of how this account of assent to "obscure matters" coheres with Descartes's claim that the *idea dei* is clear and distinct is no doubt to be resolved by a distinction between natural or philosophical theology and *sacra doctrina*, revealed truth. That distinction would invite us to examine Descartes's list of divine attributes and might well return us to a Thomistic critique of Cartesian philosophy. Descartes's main claim here is that theism is mediated by grace. Atheism, he claims, is culpable either as result of the sin of resistance or as a result of previous sins that result in resistance. If atheism is to be classified as a kind of ignorance, it is willful ignorance. Thus Cartesian philosophy is profoundly intertwined with theology on the essential matters of human anthropology and the theory of knowing. The questions of how grace and justice operate to produce theism or atheism, as well as choice and responsibility, are best left to theology proper.

3. Conclusion

Theologically, Descartes's analysis of the causes of atheism is orthodox, but his arguments fail to show in any terms other than those of moral preference the superiority of theism. But

moral arguments presuppose the positing of a first principle, and that is precisely where the theist and the atheist begin to disagree. The Cartesian posits God and, beginning from the idea of creation, derives ideas of the good, providence, etc. The atheist simply does without these ideas. In terms of knowing, Descartes's analysis offers little to persuade an atheist indifferent to the Cartesian desire for real truth and the elimination of doubts pertaining to disconnections between the mind and body. A nominalist Aristotelian, for example, who views truth as an epistemic rather than a metaphysical category, would disown the realist agenda and resist the articulation of doubts presupposing dualism. As Descartes himself notes in the First Meditation, there are those who find the hypothesis of an omnipotent deceiving God unbearable (Med. 1, CSM 2:14/AT 7:21). The atheist goes one step further, finding no reason to entertain the doubts entailed by such a divinity.

In sum, the world of Descartes's concerns and the world of the atheist present decidedly different horizons and problems for philosophy. Descartes's encounter with the Objectors' atheist geometer is best summed up as the articulation of alternative world-views. Cartesian doubts do not disturb atheists, and Cartesian desires do not animate them. As much as the doubts of the First Meditation evince a kind of natural dissatisfaction in the absence of proper recognition of the primacy of the intellect, the persistence of atheism, not to mention the successes of atheist geometers, suggests that this dissatisfaction is in fact neither so inevitable nor so powerful as to compel the abandonment of atheism. Despite his claim to refute the atheists, Descartes thus offers no absolutely compelling philosophical reason why atheists should depart from atheism.

Notes

¹ Quotations from Descartes come from *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, nouvelle presentation par Bernard Rochot et Pierre Costabel (Paris: J. Vrin/C.N.R.S., 1964–1974), 11 vols.; hereafter AT volume: page. Translations are those of John Cottingham et al., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986–91), 3 vols, which I have modified extensively; hereafter CSM volume:page. I have also consulted George Heffernan's translation and edition, *Meditationes de prima philosophia/Meditations on First Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

² On the authorship of the Second and Sixth Objections, which are closely connected, see Daniel Garber, "J.-B. Morin and the Second Objections," in *Descartes and His Contemporaries. Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, ed. Roger Ariew and Marjorie Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 63–82.

³ On the history of responses to atheists, among whom might be numbered, heretics, Lutherans, Calvinists, non-Christians, libertines, etc., see Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, vol. 1.,

The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Kors offers an overview of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century meanings of atheism.

⁴ In saying that Descartes holds that epistemic status follows from metaphysical status (irrespective, in fact, of a given knower's recognition of this relationship), I am here leaving open the ultimate issue of whether Cartesian metaphysics (and, more generally, later medieval and early modern metaphysics) can properly be said to achieve any independence from, or critical relation to, epistemological concerns. Following Martin Heidegger's interpretation of Descartes, Jean-Luc Marion has argued that Cartesian philosophizing fundamentally circumscribes metaphysics within the limits of epistemic possibility by taking the cogito as an exemplary being. On Marion's reading, Cartesian philosophy exemplifies an epistemological metaphysics, not a metaphysical epistemology. See especially Marion's *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986).

⁵ On the close relation of temporality and doubt and the impossibility of extending knowledge from the cogito to external things, see Martial Gueroult, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of the Reasons*, tr. Roger Ariew. 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984–1985), vol. 1, 103–106.

⁶ This is perhaps a reason for Descartes's grammatically prolix formulations "ego sum, ego existo" and "ego cogito, ergo sum." The pronoun "ego" marks not only individuation but the priority of substantial existence over the attributes and modes.

⁷ Straussian-inspired readers of Descartes will object here that what I interpret as the epistemic status of the mathematical requires no further explanation to bring it into line with creationist metaphysics. Descartes, for Straussians, is largely indifferent to theological and theologically-determined metaphysical issues, such that discussion of them is best regarded as window-dressing for his real commitments. Such arguments (e.g., David Rapport Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry* [New York: Routledge, 1989]) cannot be absolutely dismissed, but I view Descartes as a very problematic theist, not a self-camouflaging atheist.

⁸ On Descartes's account of real, created possibility, see Norman J. Wells, "Objective Reality of Ideas in Descartes, Caterus, and Suarez," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28 (January 1990): 33–61, especially pp. 57–61 and Wells's citations from E. J. Ashworth in note 136. It cannot be overemphasized that Descartes rejects both the claim that mathematics is grounded in the human mind and the later Scholastic development of an order of intelligibility that is independent of God. Descartes's embrace of a metaphysics of creation is the source of his consistently stated view that careful inspection reveals the difference between immutable, true essences and those fabricated by us.

⁹ As Descartes later explains to Frans Burman, the *Meditations* is concerned with "the total cause, the cause of being itself" (CB, CSM 3:340/AT 5:156).

¹⁰ The Letter to the Sorbonne uses similar language (AT 7:5). Descartes's letter to Elizabeth of 28 June 1643 is perhaps the best expression of the double and intermediate status of mathematics:

"The soul is conceived only by the pure intellect; body, that is, extension, shapes, and motions, can likewise be known by the intellect alone, but much better by the intellect aided by the imagination ..." (CSM 3:227/AT 3:691).

¹¹ In the Seventh Replies, Descartes remarks that it is "deluded" to think that "a person who is skilled in architecture must employ a reflexive act to ponder on the fact that he has this skill before he can be an architect" (Resp. 7, CSM 2:372/AT 7:545). From a Cartesian perspective, this architect's success is merely accidental, as the architect cannot give an account of the truth of architecture. Such an account would ground, for example, the quantitative relationships and their application to actual materials.

¹² For Descartes, the First Meditation's doubts regarding sensible cognition demonstrate the inadequacy of Aristotelian-inspired theories of knowing. For an Aristotelian, in contrast, they constitute occasions for epistemic caution, not devastating indictments. Certainty is a distinctively Cartesian desideratum.

¹³ Similarly, in the Geometrical Exposition of the Second Replies, Descartes differentiates genuine mathematicians from mere historians or epigones, going so far even as to imply that the ancient mathematicians practiced something like the Cartesian method (Resp. 2, CSM 2:111/AT 7:156). A subtext here is Descartes's claim that his method reflects and sustains the natural cognitive order of the human soul.

¹⁴ I hope in a subsequent article to explore Descartes's account of the relationship between intellectual understanding and language. The target of his attack on imaginatively-derived concepts is nominalist Aristotelianism.

¹⁵ This is the language of the "Comments on a Certain Broadsheet" (CSM 1:303/AT 8B:357–358).

¹⁶ On Descartes's Augustinianism, see Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ See, for example, Book 11 of the *City of God*. The precise character of Descartes's commitments remains a subject of debate.

¹⁸ Cf. Resp. 5, CSM 2:260/AT 7:378, which is the prompt for the pseudonymous Hyperaspistes' letter (CSM 3:188–197/AT 3:422–435). Both Hyperaspistes and Gassendi himself appear sympathetic to the kinds of epistemic psychology and nominalism rejected by Descartes.