**Causal Power and Perfection**

***Descartes’ Second A Posteriori Argument for the Existence of God[[1]](#footnote-1)\****

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*Abstract*

The third Meditation is typically understood to contain two *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. I focus on the second argument, where Descartes proves the existence of God partly in virtue of proving that Descartes cannot be the cause of himself. To establish this, Descartes argues that if he were the cause of himself, then he would endow himself with any conceivable perfection. The justification for this claim is that bringing about a substance is more difficult than creating an attribute, so anything that can do the former can do the latter. While current explanations of this justification are either implausible or inadequate, I argue that this principle derives support from a Scholastic distinction between being-as-such and determinate being. With this distinction in view, we can make sense of Descartes’ argument without appealing to ambiguous or inadequate notions.

Keywords: Descartes; Aquinas; causation; creation *ex nihilo*; *Meditations*

**I**

The third Meditation is typically understood to contain two *a posteriori* arguments for the existence of God. In the *Meditations*, Descartes does not place much emphasis on the second argument, sometimes calling it “merely explanatory.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Accordingly, the first argument receives the lion’s share of attention among scholars.[[3]](#footnote-3) While understandable, this is also surprising, as Descartes regularly falls back on the second argument when pressed by objections to the first in the *Objections and Replies*.[[4]](#footnote-4) In this essay, I explore this second argument in more detail.[[5]](#footnote-5) In particular, I look at an ambiguous premise of the argument to show that it presupposes a distinction between being-as-such and determinate being. With this distinction, Descartes’ argument goes through at the expense of a thicker metaphysical framework than is typically identified in the *Meditations*.

**II**

The third Meditation aims to prove the existence of God as a source of truth. These considerations inform Descartes’ subsequent account of human cognitive faculties and how knowledge might be acquired through the senses.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The *idea* of God plays a central role in the argument of the third Meditation. Descartes is concerned to show that God alone can bring about a substance that has the idea of God. From there, Descartes can prove that God exists because he has the idea of God:

I should therefore like to go further and inquire whether I myself, who have this idea, could exist if no such being existed. From whom, in that case, would I derive my existence? From myself presumably, or from my parents, or from some other beings less perfect than God; for nothing more perfect than God, or even as perfect, can be thought of or imagined.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Descartes’ strategy for proving God’s existence is to list mutually exclusive causal candidates for the idea of God and eliminate the possibility of all non-God candidates. Descartes’ list consists of himself, some other being less perfect than God, and God:

Yet if I derived my existence from myself, then I should neither doubt nor want, nor lack anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have any idea, and thus I should myself be God. I must not suppose that the items I lack would be more difficult to acquire than those I now have. On the contrary, it is clear that, since I am a thinking thing or substance, it would have been far more difficult for me to emerge out of nothing than merely to acquire knowledge of the many things of which I am ignorant—such knowledge being merely an accident of that substance. And if I had derived my existence from myself, which is a greater achievement, I should certainly not have denied myself the knowledge in question, which is something much easier to acquire, or indeed any of the attributes that I perceive to be contained in the idea of God; for none of them seem any harder to achieve. And if any of them were harder to achieve, they would certainly appear so to me, if I had indeed got all my other attributes from myself, since I should experience a limitation of my power in this respect.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Descartes eliminates the possibility of self-causation first. If he were self-caused, he would have all perfections of which he could conceive. Since he can conceive of some perfections in the idea of God that he lacks, Descartes concludes that he is not self-caused. Two crucial premises support this conclusion. The first is that: “I must not suppose that the items I lack would be more difficult to acquire than those I now have.” The second is that: “If I had derived my existence from myself, which is a greater achievement, I should certainly not have denied myself the knowledge in question.” The second principle is that causing oneself to exist is harder than acquiring any of the attributes perceived in the concept of God. Thus, since the causative act is more difficult, we have reason to believe that a self-caused individual can perform less difficult tasks (like giving oneself perfections). Insofar as Descartes lacks any perfection perceived in God, Descartes can infer that he did not cause himself to exist.

**III**

The argument for denying self-causation can be summarized as follows[[9]](#footnote-9):

1. I exist as a thinking thing or substance and possess an idea of God as a supremely perfect being.
2. The cause of my existence is either myself, or God, or some other being less perfect than God.
3. If I am the cause of myself, then I can create a substance.
4. If I can create a substance, then I can create any attribute (perfection) that is conceivable to me.[[10]](#footnote-10)
5. If I can conceive of some perfection, then I would give myself that perfection.
6. I conceive of perfections such as omniscience, which, insofar as I doubt, I do not have.
7. I am not the cause of my existence.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The two most controversial premises in this portion of the argument are (4) and (5). Premise (5) certainly has its share of difficulties, as any case of *akrasia* makes clear. I will bypass these difficulties, however, to focus on premise (4), or what I will hereafter refer to as the Perfection Claim. At times, Descartes seems to think the Perfection Claim is evident by the natural light.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, Descartes also provides arguments for the Perfection Claim.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes argues that self-creation is harder than endowing oneself with any conceivable attribute. In the *Replies*, Descartes invokes a stronger principle to support the Perfection Claim: “Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can also bring about a lesser thing” and “It is a greater thing to create or preserve a substance than to create or preserve the attributes or properties of that substance.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Thus, any being capable of producing any substance from nothing can produce in that substance any perfection whatever. This entails—but is not entailed by—the weaker principle in the *Meditations* that any being capable of giving *itself* existence can give *itself* any conceivable perfection. Nevertheless, some have noted that the stronger principle is plainly obvious: “…it is harder to cause something’s existing *ex nihilo* than it is to add some further perfection”[[14]](#footnote-14) or “It certainly requires more power or perfection to produce a substance from nothing than to provide any attributes whatsoever.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

We can thus reconstruct the following argument for the Perfection Claim:

A) If I can create some Y and it is more difficult to create Y than it is to create some Z, then I can create Z.

B) Substance-creation is more difficult than attribute-creation.

4) If I can create some substance, then I can create any attribute that is conceivable to me.

The first principle seems susceptible to some obvious counterexamples.[[16]](#footnote-16) Spinoza, for example, mentions that people would have great difficulty weaving a spider’s web, though the powers of human beings vastly outstrip those of spiders.[[17]](#footnote-17) Descartes, however, clearly intends to index the principle to individuals. There is no objective standard of difficulty whereby we can arrange the powers of any organism relative to all others. The principle should then be read as stating: ‘If I can create something (Y), and it is more difficult *for me* to create Y than it is *for me* to create Z, then I can create Z’. Descartes considered this principle to be a “common notion,” a self-evident principle with similar epistemic credentials to ‘the whole is greater than any of its parts’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Spinoza also raises problems with Premise B about the notion of difficulty in the *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*:

Now if, of things that can be effected by the same cause, he calls those difficult that need great effort and those easy that need less…then surely the axiom is not absolutely true…For when he says, ‘If I had the force to preserve myself, I should also have the force to give myself all the perfections that I lack’ (because this latter does not require as much power), I would grant him that the strength that I expend on preserving myself could effect many other things far more easily had I not needed it to preserve myself, but I deny that, as long as I am using it to preserve myself, I can direct it to effecting other things however much easier.[[19]](#footnote-19)

This exposes some ambiguities in Descartes’ argument for the Perfection Claim. Spinoza claims that difficulty should be understood in terms of effort exertion. But effort might be a depletable resource, such that one’s effort is exhausted after creating a substance and nothing is left to create attributes. If this is true, then it would not follow that someone could create a substance *and then* endow that substance with any conceivable attribute.

To this, Descartes might reply that the ability to create a substance consists in a special, inexhaustible power: “I do readily admit that there can exist something which possesses such great and inexhaustible power that it never required the assistance of anything else in order to exist in the first place.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This, in effect, is to flatly deny that substance-creation taps a depletable resource.

While fine, this seems to miss the spirit of the objection. In saying that the principle is “not absolutely true,” Spinoza indicates that the notion of difficulty is crucially ambiguous. Evaluating the argument—and the Perfection Claim—turns on understanding what makes substance-creation more difficult than attribute-creation. Further, the account must be consistent with the claim that creating one substance is more difficult than creating every conceivable attribute. That is, the answer cannot raise the question of whether creating one substance is more difficult than creating 100 attributes. Descartes does not discuss how to interpret difficulty, which makes it unclear how the Perfection Claim follows from the relative difficulty of substance-creation.

In §4, I argue that a Scholastic principle about the relationship between the abilities to bring about being-as-such and determinate being supplies an adequate interpretation of difficulty. Moreover, Descartes might have been familiar with this distinction (see §5). I discuss the principle as it appears in the work of Aquinas, one of the principle’s most influential proponents.

**IV**

The principle in question emerges within medieval debates about the nature of God’s causal role in the world. To provide some context, I outline the intellectual backdrop of the principle.

God’s causal activity came to be one of the central problems of Medieval Scholasticism. In general, views ranged across a spectrum that stretched from occasionalism (God is the only being that possesses genuine causal powers)[[21]](#footnote-21) to conservationism (God plays no direct causal role in the world but simply sustains the world through time).[[22]](#footnote-22) Most scholastics opted for something in the middle: concurrentism.[[23]](#footnote-23) On a concurrentist view, any non-miraculous event in nature occurs by way of a cooperative causal activity issuing from both God and the creature. There were several different varieties of concurrentism developed during scholasticism, but these differences are unimportant for the Cartesian argument under discussion. Thus, I will focus on Aquinas’ concurrentist proposal.

According to Aquinas, all causation in the created world is either a direct act of God in nature or a cooperative causal venture between God and some creature. In *De potentia Dei* q. 3, a. 7, he discusses creaturely causation and God's role in it. Here Aquinas catalogues at least four senses in which God is a concurring cause of a creature’s action. First, God endows the creature with its causal powers. Second, God conserves the creature, as well as the creature’s powers, in existence. These are both senses in which God is a cause of creaturely action.

Third, Aquinas describes creatures as instruments channeling divine power. This sense merits extra attention, as it ends up being relevant to Descartes’ argument for the Perfection Claim:

One thing causes the action of another, as a principal agent causes the action of its instrument: and in this way we must say that God causes every action of natural things. . . For being is the most common first effect and more intimate than all other effects: wherefore it is an effect which it belongs to God alone to produce by his own power: and for this reason an intelligence does not give being, except the divine power be therein. Therefore God is the cause of every action, inasmuch as every agent is an instrument of the divine power operating.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The Thomistic notion of a proper effect plays a key role in this passage, though it is not mentioned explicitly. When God and the creature concur in the production of a certain effect, each acts so as to bring about their proper effect. We can distinguish the causal contribution that God makes to natural effects and the causal contribution made to that same effect by the creature. Specifically, God’s proper effect is ‘being’ or ‘being-as-such’ whereas the contribution of the creature is ‘such-being’ or ‘determinate being’.

Scholastics often explain this relation by way of an analogy to the relation between the sun and terrestrial life. The sun, so the analogy goes, provides a general causal influence, e.g., heat and light, which can then be channeled by the various terrestrial organisms into a multitude of different effects. The tomato plant directs the heat and light given by the sun into tomato fruits while a potato plant directs the same influence into production of tubers. Likewise, in the case of divine concurrence with the action of creatures, God’s role is to provide the being-as-such of the effect, while the creature provides determinate being or the channeling of the divine being-as-such to a particular effect.[[25]](#footnote-25) As a result, creatures can be viewed as instrumental causes of the effect.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Underlying this discussion of divine concurrence is Aquinas’ adherence to the Aristotelian maxim that “whatever is moved is moved by another” and “whatever moves from potency to act requires something already in act.” These maxims express a denial of absolute self-motion. In Aquinas, the maxim expands to the principle that any perfection that a creature possesses must be possessed by some other entity which: (a) has that perfection in the most eminent way, and; (b) is ultimately causally responsible for the creature’s possession of that perfection. So, in the Fourth Way, Aquinas says:

Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like. But "more" and "less" are predicated of different things according as they resemble in their different ways something which is the maximum, as a thing is said to be hotter according as it most nearly resembles that which is hottest; so that there is something which is truest, something best…Now the maximum in any genus is the cause of all in that genus…Therefore, there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The distinction between being-as-such and determinate being implies that any created substance expresses its being determinately. The oak tree for example, has being, but the expression of it is limited and made determinate through the form of an oak tree. Each creature receives being-as-such, then, but in such a way that it is expressed and made determinate through some form.

When we combine the prohibition against absolute self-motion with the claim that every creature is limited to expressions of determinate being, we can derive the claim that no creature could be causally responsible for the being-as-such of an effect. Only God has being in the maximal way, i.e., infinitely and essentially, and thus God bestows all being-as-such on creatures and created effects. In the *Summa* *theologiae* Aquinas states:

For the more universal effects must be reduced to the more universal and prior causes. Now among all effects the most universal is being-as-such: and hence it must be the proper effect of the first and most universal cause, and that is God.[[28]](#footnote-28)

From this, Aquinas argued that the ability to cause being-as-such entails the ability to bring about substances *ex nihilo* (that is, to go from something's not-being to its being):

each [natural thing] has an act confined to one genus and one species, so that none has an activity extending to being-as-such…and confined to this or that species: for an agent produces its like. Wherefore a natural agent produces a being not simply, but determines a pre-existent being to this or that species…Wherefore that natural agent…requires matter as a subject of change or movement and thus it cannot make a thing out of nothing. On the other hand, God is all act…wherefore by his action he produces the whole subsistent being without anything having existed before…For this reason he can make a thing from nothing…[[29]](#footnote-29)

This highlights two facets of Aquinas’ account of what it is to give being-as-such.[[30]](#footnote-30) First, as he makes clear in the above passage, only being which is ‘pure actuality’ can give being-as-such since any being which is not pure actuality must be composed of a perfecting element and the element to be perfected.[[31]](#footnote-31) According to Aquinas, any such composed beings can only be a cause of perfections in subjects with like constitutions, i.e., other entities composed of perfecting and perfectible elements. As Alfred Freddoso puts it: “Only an agent that is itself lacking in any perfectible element can produce effects outside itself without presupposing an already existent subject to act upon.”[[32]](#footnote-32) And for Aquinas, of course, God is the only such being.

But there is a second facet of the power to give being-as-such, as Freddoso notes:

…to say that an agent gives [being-as-such] is to imply that it is not confined to causing just one or another limited range of perfections. That is, even though we might be able to conceive or imagine an agent that is capable of giving [being-as-such] from the bottom up just to, say, quarks or pigs and nothing else, it is, according to St. Thomas, metaphysically impossible that there should be such an agent. It follows that an agent which gives [being-as-such] must itself be, in the idiom of neo-Platonism, “unparticipated [being-as-such]” and hence capable of giving [being-as-such] to any possible participated being.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Having the power to give being-as-such entails that its bearer can bring about any sort of determinate being whatsoever.[[34]](#footnote-34) One might wonder why this is so, since Aquinas does not argue for this directly. The answer appears to be this. Because God is pure actuality, God is the only being that can give being-as-such to created entities. But since God, as pure actuality, exemplifies the summing up of all metaphysical perfections, God can bring about any of these perfections in the limited way in which they can be instanced by created beings which can exemplify, at most, *participated* perfections. The Thomistic principle that any perfection actualized in an effect must first be in act in the cause combined with divine omnipotence entails that God can bring about any possible participated perfection, since God, as pure actuality, exemplifies all possible perfections in the most eminent, and thus unparticipated, way.[[35]](#footnote-35)

God, then, has as a proper effect the bringing about of being-as-such. It is this ability that distinguishes God from creatures and explains how God can effect creation *ex nihilo* unlike any created being. And this power further entails the ability to bring about the existence of any possible participated being.

**V**

We can now return to Descartes’ argument and apply Aquinas’ causal principle to it. Recall that the relevant portion of the argument concerns the justification of the Perfection Claim:

A) If I can create some Y and it is more difficult to create Y than it is to create some Z, then I can create Z.

B) Substance-creation is more difficult than attribute-creation.

4) If I can create some substance, then I can create any attribute that is conceivable to me.

Recall that it is unclear what explains the relative difficulty of substance-creation. This calls the justification of (B) into question.

The Thomistic principles provides a disambiguation. Substance-creation is more difficult than attribute-creation because the former requires greater causal power. The ability to bring about being-as-such is greater because it encompasses the ability to bring about any conceivable determinate being (i.e., having the former entails having the latter). As a result, this bit of scholastic metaphysics provides the resources needed to justify the Perfection Claim.[[36]](#footnote-36)

This accords with Descartes’ own way of ranking powers. For Descartes, the power to (A & B) is greater than either the power to A or the power to B.[[37]](#footnote-37) The ability to bring about being-as-such, and creation *ex nihilo*, entails the ability to bring about participated being. Thus, for Descartes, the power to bring about being-as-such (substance-creation) is greater than the power to bring about determinate being (attribute-creation). We can thereby explain why substance-creation is more difficult than attribute-creation in a way that straightforwardly accounts for the Perfection Claim: substance-creation requires a greater causal power the possession of which entails the power to create attributes.

Moreover, this interpretation explains why Descartes finds the appeal to difficulty satisfying as a response to objections raised against the Perfection Claim.[[38]](#footnote-38) Admittedly, Descartes does not discuss the Perfection Claim or its grounds much throughout the *Meditations* and the *Objections and Replies*. The most explicit mention of the Perfection Claim occurs in the *Second Replies*, where Descartes attempts to put some of the arguments of the *Meditations* into geometrical form.

To prove the Perfection Claim, Descartes appeals to the following axiom:

VIII. Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can bring about a lesser thing.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The appeal to difficulty makes sense against the background of Aquinas’ causal principle. The ability to bring about being-as-such entails the ability to bring about determinate being. The former ability is a greater ability in that it distinguishes God from creatures. And this distinction makes sense of the idea that exercising the ability to bring about being-as-such is more difficult than exercising the ability to bring about determinate being. The ability to bring about being-as-such is difficult in the sense that having (and exercising) the ability requires greater causal powers than having (and exercising) the ability to bring about determinate being. So, situated against this Scholastic background, we can see how Descartes would think that the Perfection Claim could be justified in terms of the difficulty of substance-creation relative to attribute-creation.

One strange feature of the Perfection Claim is that it seems unnecessary for establishing the impossibility of self-creation. Rather than discussing the lack of conceivable perfections, Descartes might instead have insisted that causes are temporally prior to their effects. Insofar as creating oneself implies existing prior to oneself, it seems impossible that anyone can be the cause of their existence. Arnauld presses Descartes in this direction in the *Fourth Objections*:

I propose to establish the same result as our author [against the possibility of creating myself], but by a completely different route, as follows. In order to derive existence from myself, I should have to derive my existence from myself positively and, as it were, causally. Therefore it is impossible that I derive my existence from myself.[[40]](#footnote-40)

However, Descartes is clear that the natural light does not establish that efficient causes have temporal priority over their effects, thereby rendering the minor premise false.[[41]](#footnote-41) Thus, it might be that the only available route to the impossibility of self-causation is through the Perfection Claim, which requires that Descartes offer some justification of the Perfection Claim in terms of the relationship between substance-creation and attribute-creation.

Relatedly, it might seem problematic to attribute to Descartes the principle that the ability to bring about being-as-such entails the ability to bring about any determinate being whatsoever. In Aquinas, this principle is grounded in God’s pure actuality and motivated in part by the maxim that potentiality is reduced to act by something already in act. Thus, the principle seems to presuppose a robust distinction between potency and act, which distinction Descartes rejected.[[42]](#footnote-42) The issue is how to justify two claims, namely: (a) God is able to cause being-as-such, and; (b) the ability to bring about being-as-such entails having the ability to bring about any determinate being. In his replies to Caterus’ objections, Descartes argues that God is the efficient cause of God’s existence.[[43]](#footnote-43) But God, as being-as-such, is then capable of causing being-as-such.[[44]](#footnote-44) Further, God’s perfection entails that every created thing depends on God for both its creation and preservation over time. Thus, Descartes wrote in a 1645 letter to Princess Elizabeth that: “God is the universal cause of everything in such a way as to be also the total cause of everything.”[[45]](#footnote-45) This seems to provide alternative reasons to accept both aspects of the relevant causal principle without adopting more substantive commitments of the Thomistic framework.

**VI**

This paper focuses on part of Descartes’ argument for God’s existence in the Third Meditation where he eliminates the possibility of self-causation. To do this, he relies on the Perfection Claim as a premise. Standard reconstructions of the justification for the Perfection Claim presume that Descartes straightforwardly infers the Perfection Claim from the *difficulty* of substance-creation relative to attribute-creation. But it is unclear how to interpret difficulty such that the Perfection Claim follows. I argued that the principle, articulated in Aquinas, that the ability to bring about being-as-such entails the ability to bring about determinate being helps to justify the Perfection Claim. Moreover, if this principle is operating in the background, it would explain why Descartes took the relative difficulty of substance-creation to attribute-creation as obvious *and* found it to be a satisfying response to objections raised against his argument for the Perfection Claim.

1. \* I use the following abbreviations for standard collections of Descartes’ work:

   AT = *Oeuvres de Descartes*, C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) 1904. Paris: J. Vrin (References are to volume number and page number, e.g. AT 7:114).

   CSM = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, two vols., J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (eds.) 1984-1985. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (References are to volume and page number, e.g. CSM 2:33).

   CSMK = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (eds.) 1991. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. AT 7:241/CSM 2:168; AT 4:112/CSMK 232. Gassendi, in the *Fifth Objections*, describes parts of the argument as “quite unnecessary” (AT 7:300/CSM 2:209). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Carriero, *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes’ Meditations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Edwin Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978); Lawrence Nolan, “The Third Meditation: Causal Arguments for God’s Existence,” in *Cambridge Companion to Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. David Cunning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 127 – 48; Anat Schechtman, “Descartes's Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52, 3 (2014): 487-517; David Scott, “Doubt and Descartes' A Priori Proof of God's Existence,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30, 1 (1992): 101 – 16; Rowland Stout, “Descartes's hidden argument for the existence of God,” *British journal for the history of philosophy* 6, 2 (1998): 155-168; Bernard Williams, *The Project of Pure Enquiry* (New York: Penguin, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, for example, AT 7:166/CSM 2:117. See also Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*, 137 – 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This discussion does not depend on individuating Cartesian arguments in a particular way. In fact, Descartes saw himself as giving a single argument for God’s existence in the third Meditation: “It seems to me that all these proofs based on [God’s] effects are reducible to a single one” (AT 4:112/CSMK 232). I follow the scholarly convention in labeling this the second *a posteriori* proof. Having acknowledged that convention, however, I will drop the label and hereafter refer only to Descartes’ argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Stephen Menn, “The Problem of the Third Meditation,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67, 4 (1993): 537 – 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. AT 7:48/CSM 2:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. AT 7:48/CSM 2:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This summary is adapted from Curley, *Descartes against the skeptics*, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In what follows, I will use ‘conceivable’ to abbreviate ‘conceivable to me’ for ease of expression. The subjective viewpoint in question is the meditator. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The argument subsequently rules out the possibility that a being less perfect than God could cause someone with the idea of God to exist. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. E.g., AT 7:240 – 241/CSM 2:168. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In fact, these are two ‘axioms’ Descartes employs when these arguments in ‘geometrical form’ in AT 7:165 – 66/CSM 2:116 – 17. See also AT 4:111/CSMK 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Carriero, *Between two worlds*, 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Williams, *Project of pure enquiry,* 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Anthony Kenny, *Descartes* (New York: Garland, 1987), 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Baruch Spinoza, *The Complete Works of Spinoza*, Samuel Shirley (tr.) and Michael Morgan (ed.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), 135n35. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. AT 4:111/CSMK 232. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Spinoza, *Complete works*, 135 – 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. AT 7:109/CSM 2:78. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Nicolaus of Autrecourt was a prominent Christian defender of occasionalism (Harry A. Wolfson, “Nicolaus of Autrecourt and Ghazali’s Argument Against Causality,” Speculum 44 (1969): 234 – 38). Within the Islamic tradition, al-Ash’ari and al-Ghazali were influential proponents of occasionalism (Sukjae Lee, "Occasionalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*(Fall 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/occasionalism/>; although see Frank Griffel, “Al-Ghazālī,” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2007 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2007/entries/al-ghazali/>> for some discussion of whether al-Ghazali leaves room for creaturely causal powers). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Durandus de Saint-Pourçain, *In sententias theologicas Petri Lombardi* (Venice, 1571) provides a defense of mere conservationism (see Tad Schmaltz, *Descartes on Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Besides Aquinas (discussed later in this section), Medieval concurrentists include Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in II Sententiarum* (Paris, 1894); Francisco Suarez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, ed. C. Berton (Paris, 1866), and; Luis de Molina, *Liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobation concordia*, ed. J. Rabeneck, S.J. (Madrid, 1953). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* q. 3, a. 7 co: “modo unum est causa actionis alterius, sicut principale agens est causa actionis instrumenti; et hoc modo etiam oportet dicere, quod Deus est causa omnis actionis rei naturalis. Ipsum enim esse est communissimus effectus primus et intimior omnibus aliis effectibus; et ideo soli Deo competit secundum virtutem propriam talis effectus: unde etiam, ut dicitur in Lib. de causis, intelligentia non dat esse, nisi prout est in ea virtus divina. Sic ergo Deus est causa omnis actionis, prout quodlibet agens est instrumentum divinae virtutis operantis. Sic ergo si consideremus supposita agentia, quodlibet agens particulare est immediatum ad suum effectum.” English translation from Aquinas, *On the power of God (Quaestiones disputatae de potential dei)*, tr. Dominican Fathers of the English Province (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952). Latin texts of Aquinas are taken from Corpus Thomisticum when they are not available in the Leonine editions: <https://www.corpusthomisticum.org/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See, for instance, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, c. 66 (*Opera Omnia* XIV, ed. Leonina, Rome 1926, 188-89): “…the order of the effects follows the order of the causes. But the first among all effects is the act of being, since all other things are certain determinations of it. Therefore, being is the proper effect of the primary agent, and all other things produce being because they act through the power of the primary agent. Now, secondary agents, which are like particularizers and determinants of the primary agent’s action, produce as their proper effects other perfections which determine being (Secundum ordinem causarum est ordo effectuum. Primum autem in omnibus effectibus est esse: nam omnia alia sunt quaedam determinationes ipsius. Igitur esse est proprius effectus primi agentis, et omnia alia agunt ipsum inquantum agunt in virtute primi agentis. Secunda autem agentia, quae sunt quasi particulantes et determinantes actionem primi agentis, agunt sicut proprios effectus alias perfectiones, quae determinant esse.). English translation taken from Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles: Book Three: Providence, Part 1*, tr. Vernon Bourke (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Schmaltz, *Descartes on Causation*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 2, a. 3, resp. (*Opera Omnia* IV, ed. Leonina, Rome 1888, 32): “Invenitur enim in rebus aliquid magis et minus bonum, et verum, et nobile: et sic de aliis huiusmodi. Sed magis et minus dicuntur de diversis secundum quod appropinquant diversimode ad aliquid quod maxime est: sicut magis calidum est, quod magis appropinquat maxime calido. Est igitur aliquid quod est verissimum, et optimum…Quod autem dicitur maxime tale in aliquo genere, est causa omnium quae sunt illius generis…Ergo est aliquid quod omnibus entibus est causa esse, et bonitatis, et cuiuslibet perfectionis, et hoc dicimus Deum.” English translation from Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, tr. Dominican Fathers of the English Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 45, a.5, resp. (ed. cit., 469): “Oportet enim universaliores effectus in universaliores et priores causas reducere. Inter omnes autem effectus, universalissimum est ipsum esse. Unde oportet quod sit proprius effectus primae et universalissimae causae, quae est Deus.” English translation from Aquinas, *Summa theologica*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *De potentia Dei* q.3, a.1, resp: “…quaelibet illarum habet actum determinatum ad unum genus et ad unam speciem; et inde est quod nulla earum est activa entis secundum quod est ens…determinatum in hac vel illa specie: nam agens agit sibi simile. Et ideo agens naturale non producit simpliciter ens, sed ens praeexistens et determinatum ad hoc vel ad aliud, ut puta ad speciem ignis…Et propter hoc, agens naturale…requirit materiam, quae sit subiectum mutationis vel motus, et propter hoc non potest aliquid ex nihilo facere…Ipse autem Deus e contrario est totaliter actus…unde per suam actionem producit totum ens subsistens, nullo praesupposito…Et propter hoc ex nihilo aliquid facere potest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See Alfred Freddoso, "God's General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation is not Enough," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In the case of corporeal substances these two elements are form and matter, respectively. Aquinas believes that there are created substances which lack any matter, such as angels. However, while angels lack matter, they too are composed of two elements which play a corresponding role, namely essence and being. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes,” 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Freddoso, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes,” 562. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Of course, this does not entail that God could bring about the existence of properties such as omnipotence or omniscience in created things since, according to Aquinas, such properties are possibly exemplified only by a being which is pure actuality and thus uncreated. This is the reason that Freddoso, in the above passage, restricts the scope of the divine power to “any possible *participated* being.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See *Summa theologiae* 1a Q.15, a.3, which clarifies that all created beings correspond to some exemplar that is an idea in God. Thus, for any idea in God of some determinate form of being, God’s power to bring about being-as-such entails the ability to actualize any determinate form of being. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. This challenges Gilson’s assessment that Descartes uses causal principles that differ entirely from the Scholastics (see Étienne Gilson, *Discours de la Méthode: Texte et Commentaire* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947): 232; see also Henri Gouhier, *La Pensée Métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978): 174). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. “For it would be a greater thing for a human being to be able to produce human beings and ants than to be able only to produce human beings; and a king who could command horses as well would be more powerful than one who could command only his people” (AT 4:111 – 12/CSMK 231). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Interestingly, Caterus, in his objections, seems to implicitly endorse the claim that substance-creation is more difficult than attribute-creation when he restates Descartes argument: “For what derives existence from itself will *without difficulty* have endowed itself with all things” (AT 7:94/CSM 2:68; emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. AT 7:166/CSM 2:117. Descartes also appeals to Axiom IX: “It is a greater thing to create or preserve a substance than to create or preserve the attributes or properties of that substance. However, it is not a greater thing to create something than to preserve it, as has already been said.” [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. AT 7:208 – 209/CSM 2:146 – 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. AT 7:241/CSM 2:168. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. See Gary Hatfield, “First philosophy and natural philosophy in Descartes,” in *Philosophy, its history, and historiography*, ed. A.J. Holland (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985): 149 – 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. AT 7:111/CSM 2:80. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Consider Descartes’ description of God’s power in the *Fourth Replies*: “And since that inexhaustible power or immensity of the divine essence is as *positive* as can be, I said that the reason or cause why God needs no cause is a *positive* reason or cause” (AT 7:236/CSM 2:165). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. AT 4:314/CSMK 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)