

6 The Third Meditation: causal arguments for God's existence

INTRODUCTION

It is often thought that Descartes' epistemic project in the *Meditations* falls apart in the Third Meditation. Although some readers recoil at the method of universal doubt, which is the hallmark of the First Meditation, if one is a foundationalist about knowledge, it is at least plausible to begin from a clean slate by doubting all of one's former beliefs. Assuming one approves of Descartes' method, one also finds the main insights of the Second Meditation to be compelling. I cannot doubt that I exist, nor that I am a thinking thing. But readers report that after that concession their reserves of charity run dry. By the end of the Third Meditation no one remains on board with Descartes' project. The problem lies with his efforts to prove God's existence by invoking scholastic and Platonic principles. In the Third Meditation, he famously presents two causal (or cosmological) arguments that rely on antiquated doctrines about degrees of reality and different kinds of being, and bizarre principles of causality – none of which seem “evident by the natural light.” Descartes claims to be leaving the past behind, to be an innovator using only the resources of his own mind to determine what can be discovered about the nature of reality, but what he presents in the Third Meditation leaves a startlingly different impression. Ironically, his arguments failed to convince even those readers sympathetic with scholasticism, such as Johannes Caterus, who expresses deep reservations in the *First Objections* (AT 7: 92–95). If Descartes' arguments fell flat with his contemporaries, they are received with even greater aversion today. One influential philosopher has quipped that the causal proofs appear to have come from Mars!¹

Given this reception, trying to change readers' perceptions of the causal arguments is a tall order, but that is exactly what I hope to do in this chapter. In the next section, I begin by reconstructing a simplified version of the first causal argument. The aim of this reconstruction is to show that – at its core – Descartes' proof is simple, elegant, and fairly plausible, at least as compared to other arguments of its kind. The core argument eludes most of the objections that have been leveled against the more complex, "scholastic" version, but it also raises an important interpretive question: why does Descartes present the latter if he has the resources for a simpler and less contentious demonstration? On pages 000–00, I attempt to answer this question. On pages 000–00, I take up the second causal argument in order to show that it too can be formulated in simple terms. I also explain the sense in which the arguments are "reducible to one" and how God can be the cause of himself.

THE FIRST CAUSAL ARGUMENT

The "core" argument

A simplified version of Descartes' first causal argument can be formulated as follows:

- (1) I have an idea that represents an actually infinite being having all perfections.
- (2) Everything that exists has a cause of its existence.
- (3) The only possible cause of this idea is an actually infinite being.
- (4) Therefore, an actually infinite being exists.²

To determine whether this core argument succeeds, let us take each of the premises in turn. Like all causal arguments, Descartes' first effort starts from some known effect and then posits God as its only possible cause. Traditional cosmological arguments, such as those found among Aquinas' Five Ways, often take as their premise the existence of the universe or something else known through the senses. But the epistemic status of Descartes' meditator is highly constrained. At the beginning of the Third Meditation, the hyperbolic doubts of the First Meditation have not been discharged and if the reader is meditating faithfully he must not affirm anything that

admits of even the slightest doubt. Among other things, he is doubting the existence of physical objects and treating the reports of his senses as if they were false.³ However, in the Second Meditation he discovered that he exists and is a thinking thing. He can be certain of these two propositions at least as long as he is attending to them. As a thinking thing, the meditator can also be certain that he has ideas, among them the idea of God. The objects of his ideas are subject to doubt, but the meditator cannot doubt that he has these ideas or that they have the content that they do. The immediate deliverances of consciousness are indubitable. Thus, Descartes' first causal argument starts from the meditator's idea of God and the second from his existence as a thinking thing, which possesses that idea.

Early in the Third Meditation Descartes attempts to classify his ideas based on their causal origin into three mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories: innate, adventitious, and invented. The hope is that this taxonomy might enable him to determine whether anything exists outside him, but Descartes acknowledges very quickly that he does not yet have a means for classifying his ideas into one category or other. This effort may seem like a false start, but in fact it helps direct the meditator's attention to an important distinction that is crucial to both causal arguments, namely, the one between innate and invented ideas, the latter being ideas for which the meditator is causally responsible. The first causal argument is as much a proof that the idea of God is innate as it is a demonstration of God's existence. We infer that God exists *as* the cause of our idea of him – “the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work” (AT 7: 51). The argument also hinges on the claim that the idea of God is unique. The meditator can be the cause of his ideas of all other things, such as those of other people, animals, angels, and of course fictitious beings. This is not to say the meditator *is* the cause of all those ideas. On the contrary, Descartes ultimately affirms that the idea of oneself as a thinking thing is also innate. But since the ideas of all things other than God are of finite substances, and the meditator is a finite substance, he could be their cause. What is special about the idea of God, according to Descartes, is that *it represents an actually infinite being*.⁴ His strategy is to argue that because this idea represents something actually infinite, and because it is unique in this regard, the meditator cannot be its cause. The meditator forms new ideas by drawing upon other ideas at his

disposal, but since the idea of God is unique, there is no other idea upon which to draw.

Descartes' first premise is a powerful one, which it must be since he aims to prove both that God exists *and* that he has all of the perfections that Christian theologians have traditionally assigned to him. Descartes takes that to be one of the advantages of his causal argument over previous versions, which fail to deliver on the divine nature.⁵ I am not going to argue that this premise is unassailable, only that one can appreciate why he thinks he is entitled to it given the nature of his project and given what the meditator has discovered so far. Contemporary readers often object to the version of the proof that he presents in the Third Meditation on the grounds that it is too scholastic. But there is nothing especially scholastic about the first premise. In fact, it deviates from at least one important tradition among medieval philosophers of denying that we can have positive knowledge of God's essence.⁶ We can know God only negatively (Pseudo-Dionysius et al.), as the cause of creaturely attributes (Maimonides), or by analogy (Aquinas). Contrary to these philosophers, Descartes affirms that we can have a clear and distinct idea of God's essence.

Given this medieval tradition, Descartes anticipates that some readers will object to the claim that we, with our finite intellects, can *understand* an actually infinite being. To respond, he draws a distinction between knowing and grasping: I can know *that* God is infinite even though I do not grasp all of his properties nor fully understand what it means to be infinite.⁷ A deeper objection would be to deny that one even has an idea of God, or at least the idea that Descartes purports to have. This is the tack taken by some of his contemporaries, such as Hobbes, though his version of the objection assumes that ideas are corporeal images – a claim that Descartes vehemently rejects.⁸ A more charitable critic might grant that ideas are modifications of the mind, regarded as a thinking, non-corporeal thing, but still object that we do not have one that represents an actually infinite being. Descartes acknowledges that, if true, this criticism would be devastating:

But if no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to convince me of the existence of anything apart from myself. For despite a most careful and comprehensive survey, this is the only argument I have so far been able to find. (Third Meditation, AT 7: 42)

Both versions of the causal argument – and, for that matter, the ontological argument of the Fifth Meditation – depend on the claim that we have an idea of God. In some contexts, especially when responding to critics, Descartes takes it as obvious that we have such an idea and accuses those who deny it of being lazy, stubborn, and/or weak-minded.⁹ Anyone who uses the word “God” in a sentence and understands what they are saying has an idea of such a being.¹⁰ But in other contexts, Descartes allows that even readers who are meditating faithfully may have trouble discovering their innate idea of God. Indeed, he tells one of his correspondents that some readers may not discover this idea even after reading the *Meditations* a thousand times.¹¹ Descartes has a philosophical explanation for this, but we must look outside the *Meditations* proper to find it.

It is sometimes said that Descartes has a dispositional theory of innate ideas: to say that an idea is innate does not entail that it is always consciously present. Rather, “we simply mean that we have within ourselves the faculty of summoning up the idea” (AT 7:189).¹² Descartes maintains that our innate ideas often need to be triggered or “awakened,” to use the Platonic language that he sometimes encourages.¹³ In other places, he suggests that our inability to perceive one of our ideas is the result of philosophical prejudice ingrained by habit, especially the tendency to conceive of things using sensory images.¹⁴ He recognizes, therefore, that it is incumbent upon him to play role of the Socratic midwife, massaging the intellect of his meditator in order to dispel these prejudices and induce the proper ideas. Some commentators hold that Descartes must *argue* for the claim that we have an idea of God, but this denies his commitment to the doctrine of innate ideas. If the idea of God is innate, Descartes’ task is simply to help the meditator become aware of it, so that she can discover its contents.¹⁵

In the Third Meditation, Descartes attempts to do this by addressing a potential objection to the first causal argument. A meditator might suspect that he could form the idea of an actually infinite being by negating the idea of himself as finite. If that were true, then there would be no need to posit God as the cause of the former. But Descartes wants the meditator to notice that the idea of God as actually infinite is *prior* to the perception of the finite. “For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me

some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?" (AT 7: 45–46). In *Fifth Replies*, he puts the point somewhat differently: we do not form an idea of the infinite by negating the finite; on the contrary, we conceive of the finite by limiting the infinite, for "all limitation implies a negation of the infinite" (AT 7: 365). One might be tempted to read Descartes as saying that we conceive of the finite *through* the infinite, but that would put him very close to Spinoza and encourage the suggestion that there is only one substance, which he abhors. It would also make the idea of God temporally prior to, or at least contemporaneous with, the idea of oneself as finite, but in the *Meditations* the latter is discovered first. Descartes' claim is the more minimal one that the idea of oneself naturally recalls the idea of God. The idea of myself as finite, imperfect, and dependent triggers the idea of something infinite, perfect, and independent. As we shall see below, this is not Descartes' only means for awakening the meditator's idea of God, but it is the main one. Its success depends of course on whether we have the innate idea Descartes says we have.

- (2) Everything that exists has a cause of its existence.

The second premise of the argument is a statement of the general causal principle, *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, which has a long pedigree in philosophy.¹⁶ Unlike the other causal principles employed in the Third Meditation, the *ex nihilo* principle does not make any assumptions about degrees of reality or different kinds of being. For that reason, it does not state that everything has a *sufficient* cause, only that it has *some* cause. Every major early modern rationalist (and even some empiricists like Locke) accepts this general principle, as does Aristotle and his scholastic followers. So from the perspective of these traditions at least, this second premise is unobjectionable.¹⁷ Descartes is also not violating the strictures of his own method of doubt, for the meditator has already discovered that there are some very simple and self-evident truths – such as the fact that he exists, $3 + 2 = 5$, etc. – which cannot be doubted while one is presently attending to them. Descartes takes the *ex nihilo* principle to be among these truths.

- (3) The only possible cause of this idea is an actually infinite being.

For the purpose of appreciating the simplicity of the core argument, this premise is key. As noted above, Descartes asks the meditator to take stock of his ideas and to notice an important difference between the idea of God and the ideas of all finite substances, namely, he could be the cause of the latter. These other ideas can be constructed by borrowing elements from the idea he has of himself or, in the case of ideas of angels, by borrowing elements from the idea of himself and the idea of God, since the idea of an angel represents a substance more perfect than himself but less perfect than God.¹⁸ Later in the Third Meditation, Descartes recognizes that even the clear and distinct elements in his ideas of corporeal things, such as extension, shape, position, and motion, could be derived from the idea he has of himself. These elements are not part of that idea of a thinking thing, but since they are merely modes of a finite substance and he is a finite substance, he could be their cause (AT 7: 45).

In drawing our attention to this contrast between the idea of God and the ideas of all other things, Descartes is appealing to an intuitive account of how invented ideas are formed: one takes other ideas – or their elements – and combines them in novel ways.¹⁹ Of course, an empiricist might object that the idea of God is formed in the same way.²⁰ Descartes attempts to block this objection by prompting the meditator's awareness that the idea of an actually infinite being is unique. If that is right, then the meditator could not have borrowed the content of this idea from any other source, and thus the idea could only come from something outside of him! This is why Descartes reserves the term "infinite" for God, and applies the term 'indefinite' to the divisions of matter, the vastness of the extended universe, and other things that we might be inclined to call "infinite."²¹ Still, even if the idea of God is singular in this way, one might envisage another way to construct it using only the resources of one's own mind.²² I might notice that I, like the supremely perfect being depicted in my idea, am a thinking thing. My knowledge is finite and imperfect by comparison, but it seems to increase gradually. Perhaps it could be increased to infinity, at least conceptually. So what is the meditator supposedly doing? He is taking an element in his idea of himself as a finite being, such as knowledge or power, and augmenting or enlarging it. To construct an idea of God by this means, one would have to follow the same procedure for each of the perfections that is finitely instantiated in oneself – power, goodness, duration, etc. – and then

compound the products of that process. But Descartes wants the meditator to discern that the first task is impossible. The idea of divine knowledge is of something *actually* infinite, that is, a *completed infinity*. But the idea produced by augmenting the idea of finite knowledge would be only of a *potential infinity*. One cannot form an idea of actual infinity by endlessly augmenting the idea of something finite, any more than one can produce an infinite number by endlessly adding finite numbers.²³ Speaking in the Third Meditation of this proposed method for constructing an idea of God, Descartes writes:

But all this is impossible. First, though it is true that there is a gradual increase in my knowledge, and that I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential; indeed, this gradual increase in knowledge is itself the surest sign of imperfection. What is more, even if my knowledge always increases more and more, I recognize that it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of a further increase; God, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection. (AT 7: 47)

It will not help to object, as some of Descartes' contemporaries do, that one might have derived the idea of God from one's family or associates, reading books, etc., for this only pushes the problem back a step. Descartes can extrapolate from his own case that no finite being could form the idea of actually infinite knowledge or omniscience, etc., by augmenting the ideas of finite attributes.²⁴ Earlier we noted that Descartes takes the idea of God to be conceptually prior to the idea the meditator has of himself. One might add that the idea of actual infinity is also prior to the idea of potential infinity. One sees that the product formed by endlessly augmenting the idea of finite knowledge is incomplete only because one has a prior idea of the completed infinity that is God.²⁵ In addition to showing why he could not be the cause of his idea of God, this exercise illustrates again that the meditator has such an idea, thus bolstering Descartes' efforts to motivate the first premise of the argument.²⁶

Apart from the conclusion, which follows validly from the premises, this completes the simple version of the causal argument. To summarize briefly in a way that emphasizes its strength, the argument depends on one's having attained an idea of God as actually

infinite, a very general and intuitively plausible causal principle, and a simple cognitive exercise that shows that one could not be the cause of said idea. Again, there is no appeal to bizarre principles of causality or to antiquated doctrines about degrees of reality and different types of being. To be sure, the theistic proof that Descartes presents in the Third Meditation relies on such principles and doctrines, but the point of this reconstruction has been to demonstrate that he does not need them. He has the resources for a more compelling argument that puts his scholastic predecessors to shame, both for its simplicity and because it delivers on the nature of God in a way that they cannot.

The Scholastic Version of the Argument

The simplified version of the first causal argument is unlikely to persuade most readers today, but it is clearly superior to the elaborate, scholastic version that Descartes presents in the Third Meditation. So why then does he present the latter? One general suggestion is that cosmological arguments were the stock and trade of scholasticism and Descartes saw himself as writing for an audience steeped in that tradition, and so employs principles and doctrines that strike us as wildly improbable but which he could reasonably expect would resonate with his seventeenth-century readers. This is certainly part of the story, but there is a deeper explanation.

In the previous section, I noted that Descartes maintains that philosophical prejudices – formed in childhood and ingrained by long habit – constitute one of the main obstacles to discovering one's innate idea of God as an actually infinite being.²⁷ As he reveals in the *Second Replies*, the philosophical prejudices in question pertain to the habit of conceiving of everything in corporeal terms, including immaterial beings such as the soul and God. If one is regarding God as a corporeal being, then one is thinking of him as finite and corruptible rather than as infinite and supremely perfect, as required by the causal arguments.²⁸ The controversial doctrines that Descartes marshals in order to formulate the first causal argument are designed to dispel these prejudices or, short of that, to exploit them in such a way that the meditator will nevertheless be persuaded that God exists.

Let us turn now to some of these doctrines that readers have found so puzzling. I will not attempt to formulate the more complex version of the first causal argument, which has been treated at length by

others. Instead, I will focus on explaining how these doctrines of old are designed to dislodge prejudice, exploit the meditator's tendency to conceive of everything in corporeal or sensory terms, and induce his innate idea of God. Where possible, I will also indicate how, in Descartes' hands, these doctrines are more innocuous than they seem.

Perhaps the most important bit of metaphysical machinery that Descartes invokes is that being is scaled or admits of degrees. This doctrine is sometimes known as "the great chain of being" and has its roots in Plato and Aristotle's philosophies. Medieval proponents of this doctrine countenanced a continuous scale of being from inanimate objects all the way up to God, with plants, animals, humans, and angels falling in between. These days, philosophers have little sympathy for the claim that reality is scaled. One tends to regard existence in simpler terms: either something exists or it does not. Descartes' view is closer to ours than it might seem, for his version of the scale contains only three distinct levels. From greatest to least, they are 1) God or infinite substance, 2) finite substances (i.e., created minds and bodies), and 3) modes. This shows that Descartes is not simply taking over doctrines from the scholastics but adapting them for his own purposes and, in this case, conforming them to his substance-mode ontology. He enlists the traditional hierarchy – which plays no other role in his philosophy – merely as an instrument for achieving three specific goals relating to the causal arguments. First, it highlights that the proper conception of God involves regarding him as *actually infinite*. As noted above, the natural tendency to conceive of everything in corporeal terms makes it difficult to regard him in this way. Using terms that he believes the meditator accepts, Descartes illustrates that corporeal beings occupy a much lower place in the conceptual order than God does. Second, the first causal argument hinges on the claim that the idea of an actually infinite being is unique, a point that is reflected in the structure of the scale. In fact, because his scale is discontinuous he is able to stress that God is *sui generis*.

Third, the scale of being underscores Descartes' strategy of argument. Notice that on his three-point division, degrees of reality are a function of differences in ontological independence.²⁹ God or infinite substance occupies the highest end of the scale (i.e., is said to have the greatest degree of reality) because he does not depend on anything for

his existence. Finite substances are one step lower because they do not depend on anything except God for their existence, and modes – because they depend in turn on finite substances – constitute the lowest end of the scale. As Descartes writes, “a substance is more of a thing than a mode . . . and . . . if there is an infinite and *independent* substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and *dependent* substance” (*Third Replies*, AT 7:185, emphasis added). The salient contrast is between finite and infinite substance. The relevance of this contrast to Descartes’ strategy is clearest in the second causal argument, where I am supposed to observe that as a finite being, I *depend* for my existence on something else and therefore could not be the cause of myself. Moreover, my ultimate cause must be something that is ontologically *independent*. Commentators sometimes complain that modes depend on finite substances in a different way than the latter depend on God, thus upsetting the symmetry of the scale.³⁰ Granted, but that only shows that from within Descartes’ strict metaphysics the scale of being is an artificial construct; again, he is using it in the context of the causal arguments merely as a means to an end.

Another claim that readers of the Third Meditation often find perplexing is that ideas enjoy two types of being, formal and objective. These terms and the distinction itself are owed to scholasticism, as Descartes acknowledges in the French edition of the *Meditations*, where he speaks of “what the philosophers call” formal and objective reality (AT 9: 32). These notions are not as controversial as they once seemed, for commentators have come to see that “formal reality” is actual existence. “Objective reality,” by contrast, is the type of being that an idea has in virtue of its representational content and so is often referred to as “representational reality.” Descartes adopts this distinction in order to direct the meditator’s attention toward the representational character of ideas and away from their status as modes of mind. Only then will she be able to see that the idea of God is of something actually infinite and thus requires a cause other than the meditator. Considered merely as modes, all ideas are caused by the mind itself, of which they are modes, but given their representational character, they might require external causes.³¹ Given his empiricist tendencies, the meditator is likely to think that he caused his idea of God and, indeed, all ideas not deriving from the senses. The distinction between formal and objective reality thus plays a vital

role in Descartes' argumentative strategy, which is to show that the meditator cannot be the cause of this one very unique idea.

Without question, the most controversial aspect of Descartes' discussion in the Third Meditation is his appeal to two causal adequacy principles that are put forth as variations on the *ex nihilo* principle. Let us refer to the first of these as the formal reality principle (FRP): everything that exists must have a cause for its existence with at least as much formal reality. Let us refer to the second as the objective reality principle (ORP): the objective reality of an idea must have a cause with at least as much formal reality as the idea has objectively. What is interesting about these principles for our purposes is the way in which Descartes tries to persuade us of their truth. In some places, he derives them from one version of the *ex nihilo* principle together with the implicit assumption that reality is scaled.³² In other places, however, he treats them as basic or primitive truths³³ and, given the meditator's penchant for conceiving of things in sensory terms, tries to persuade us of their intuitive force by appealing to empirical examples. I shall focus on the latter.

Before discussing any of these examples, it is instructive to consider Descartes' famous comparison in the Third Meditation between ideas and images or pictures: ideas are "as it were the images of things" (*tanquam rerum imagines*) (AT 7: 37). This is important because only a few pages later he attempts to motivate the ORP by using the same analogy: "ideas are in me like <pictures, or> images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the things from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect" (AT 7: 42). Pictures of course are perceived through the senses, and it is in this general context that Descartes uses empirical analogies, such as the analogy of heat, to convince us of his two additional causal principles.

Heat cannot be produced in an object which was not previously hot, except by something of at least the same order <degree or kind> of perfection as heat . . . But it is also true that the *idea* of heat . . . cannot exist in me unless it is put there by some cause which contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be in the heat. (AT 7: 41)³⁴

The heat example is invoked here to motivate first the FRP and then the ORP. Although Descartes uses examples of this kind to help meditators mired in the senses, doing so is not without risks. As

noted in section 2.1, some of Descartes' contemporaries took his analogy between ideas and images too literally and concluded that ideas are corporeal. Others, including some recent commentators, have taken the analogy with heat as indicating a commitment to a causal likeness or so-called "heirloom" principle, according to which any property in the effect must be in the cause.³⁵ The latter claim is clearly belied by Descartes' view that even as a purely thinking thing, he could be the cause of his ideas of corporeal things such as shape and motion.³⁶ The two causal adequacy principles require only that the cause have the proper *degree* of formal reality, not that it be like the effect in any other respect. So why take these risks? Descartes may have thought that such misunderstandings were unavoidable and, in any case, that they were risks worth taking to help persuade a confused meditator who might otherwise be unreachable.

Before closing this section, let us examine one last attempt to motivate the ORP that often goes unnoticed, but which brings the discussion in the Third Meditation full circle. Having attained certainty about his own existence in the Second Meditation, Descartes' general aim in the Third is to determine whether anything outside of him exists. He notes at the beginning of this text, just after introducing the threefold classification of ideas, that in everyday life the most common judgments we make about external objects are formed on the basis of our sensory ideas. We judge that physical objects cause these ideas and that the latter "resemble" them. Descartes then argues that while such judgments *seem* to be taught by nature, they are in fact based on "blind impulse" and therefore should not be trusted (AT 7: 38–40). In at least two passages outside the *Meditations* proper, however, he indicates that we *can* justify such judgments based on the ORP. For example, in the *Second Replies* he writes: "[The ORP] is the sole basis for all the beliefs we have ever had about the existence of things located outside our mind. For what could ever have led us to suspect that such things exist if not the simple fact that ideas of these things reach our mind by means of the senses?" (AT 7: 135, cf. AT 7: 165). Descartes' primary aim in this passage, however, is not to justify our everyday judgments of sense, but to motivate the ORP itself. He is arguing that we *ought* to be committed to this principle given how entrenched such judgments are for us. Here again, he is appealing to ordinary sense experience to motivate his causal principles. The fact that they *can* be motivated in

this way is likely one reason he employs them in the context of the *Meditations*, given the epistemic status of the meditator.

THE SECOND CAUSAL ARGUMENT

One of the controversies concerning Descartes' causal arguments is whether in fact there are two distinct arguments or whether the second is merely an extension of, or a variation on, the first. If Descartes' presentation in the Third Meditation is any indication, there certainly seem to be two distinct proofs, the first from the idea of God and the second from the existence of the meditator *qua* thinking thing. But in a letter to Mesland, he writes:

It does not make much difference whether my second proof ... is regarded as different from the first proof, or merely as an explanation of it ... Nevertheless, it seems to me that all these proofs based on [God's] effects are reducible to a single one ... ("To [Mesland], 2 May 1644," AT 4: 112)³⁷

We can regard them as distinct arguments since there are differences between them, but they are reducible to one in that they have the same structure: they both depend on the *ex nihilo* principle and the idea of God. In keeping with the latter, Descartes consistently describes the second argument as an attempt to demonstrate God's existence "from the fact that we, who possess the idea of God, exist" (*Second Replies*, AT 7:168).³⁸ As we shall see below, the arguments also deploy the same strategy, namely to show that the proposed "effect" in each argument cannot be caused by the meditator.

Given the close relation between the two proofs, why does Descartes find it necessary to introduce a second one? In the *First Replies*, he addresses this issue explicitly in the context of comparing the idea of God to the idea of a highly intricate machine (another sensory analogy). The point of the analogy is that the idea of God, as rich in perfection as it is, requires a sufficient cause as much as the idea of a highly intricate machine. But he also draws our attention to an important *disanalogy* between these two ideas: it is easier to grasp that the idea of an intricate machine requires an external cause because few of us have the necessary expertise in mechanics to produce such an idea ourselves. But "because the idea of God is implanted in the same way in the minds of all, we do not notice it coming into our minds from any external source, and so we suppose it belongs to the nature of our

own intellect" (*First Replies*, AT 7: 105–106). Descartes' claim is that since the idea of God is innate, everyone possesses it and is thus more likely to take his own mind to be its source.³⁹ Ironically, the very fact that the idea of God is innate provides a reason for doubting that God caused it!⁴⁰ Descartes' responds by arguing that even if this reason for doubt proved to be justified, the mind that possesses the idea would still require a cause that was actually infinite.

Like the first causal argument, the second can be formulated without invoking any of the controversial causal principles that have come to be associated with both arguments, as follows:

- (1) I exist as a thinking thing that has an idea of an actually infinite being having all perfections.
- (2) Everything that exists has a cause of its existence.
- (3) The only possible cause of my existence is an actually infinite being having all perfections.
- (4) Therefore, an actually infinite being (i.e., God) exists.

The first premise is just a statement of the *cogito*, combined with a report on one of the meditator's ideas. The second is the general causal (*ex nihilo*) principle previously discussed. As with the first causal demonstration, the linchpin of the argument is the third premise. In this instance, Descartes employs three different sub-arguments to persuade the reader of its truth. He varies these sub-arguments to answer potential objections and to aid meditators who are having trouble grasping the truth of premise (3). The general strategy of each of them is to argue that if the meditator were self-caused then he would be God. Self-causation sounds absurd, for when one says that "x causes y" part of what one means ordinarily is that (a) x is distinct from y and (b) x is prior to y. But a thing cannot be distinct from, or prior to, itself.⁴¹ At the end of this section we shall discuss how Descartes escapes these difficulties. He recognizes of course that there are possible causes of his existence other than himself and God. Indeed, in the Third Meditation he presents the second causal proof as an argument from elimination and enumerates several possible causes – God, oneself, one's parents, or "some other beings less perfect than God" (AT 7: 48). However, Descartes focuses on eliminating the possibility that he is self-caused for two reasons. First, once the argument is complete, he can use this point to show that unlike himself, God *is* self-caused in an important sense. Second, by

eliminating the possibility that I am self-caused, I can summarily rule out that I was caused by any being less perfect than God. This too is similar to the procedure of the first causal argument, where, as we observed, Descartes argues that if I cannot cause my idea of God then nor can any other finite being.

Given space constraints and in the interests of highlighting the simplicity of Descartes' causal arguments, I shall focus on the first of Descartes' three sub-arguments for premise (3) and only sketch the second. The first might be called the "argument from omnipotence":

- (i) If I had the power to cause my existence *ex nihilo* then I would be omnipotent.
- (ii) I am not omnipotent.
- (iii) Therefore, I do not have the power to cause my existence *ex nihilo*.
- (iv) By parity of reasoning, no other finite being could cause me either.
- (v) Therefore, the only possible cause of my existence is an actually infinite being having all perfections, including omnipotence.⁴²

The crucial premise is clearly the first, the point of which is that if I caused my own existence then I would in effect be God. As for (ii), Descartes asserts quite plausibly that he, as a finite thinking thing, is imperfect in various ways. He knows, for example, that he lacks omniscience from the fact that he doubts certain things. Similarly, he knows that he lacks omnipotence from the fact that he desires things that are beyond his grasp.⁴³ Premise (iv) is an instance of the argumentative strategy noted above that runs through all three sub-proofs. Any finite being, in virtue of being finite, is going to lack omnipotence. The final conclusion in step (v) appeals implicitly to one's idea of God as a being having all perfections, including omnipotence. This idea is mentioned in the first premise of the main argument. Here, one might complain that the conclusion is too strong, given the premises, for what if my creator has omnipotence but no other perfection? Descartes anticipates this type of objection in the Third Meditation and replies by stressing that among all of the attributes that we find contained in the idea of God, unity or simplicity "is one of the most important" (AT 7: 50). So a being that has one perfection has them all.

In the *First Replies*, Descartes claims that the second causal argument bypasses a difficulty that besets scholastic versions of the cosmological argument: why not suppose that the meditator, rather than being created by God, is part of a chain of finite causes that extends back infinitely? The scholastics often responded that an infinite regress is inconceivable and therefore impossible.⁴⁴ They then posited God as the “First Cause” – i.e., the uncaused cause or, in Aristotle’s memorable phrase, the unmoved mover. Descartes agrees that a regress is “beyond my grasp,” but he does not think it follows from this limitation of his intellect that a regress is impossible (*Second Replies*, AT 7: 106). On the contrary, some regresses actually occur: e.g., matter is divided indefinitely and the universe is indefinitely extended. So, on his view, the regress objection is fatal to traditional versions of the cosmological argument. The scholastics have no way of ruling out the possibility that the universe is the product of an infinite series of finite causes, and positing God as the First Cause begs the question. Descartes develops a second sub-argument to show how his version of the second causal argument bypasses this objection. Descartes argues that the meditator’s duration can be divided into moments that do not depend on one another and, given this, he depends for his existence on something other than himself *at every moment*.⁴⁵ There can be no question of whether he, at this moment, might be the product of an infinite series of finite causes; God must be the immediate and total cause of his preservation.⁴⁶

Although Descartes seems to be right about this advantage of his argument, he still must confront the question of what causes God, given the universal character of the causal principle. Part of the force of his criticism of the scholastics is that positing God as the First Cause is inconsistent with that principle. So how does Descartes avoid violating the causal principle himself? Here, rather infamously, he declares that God is *causa sui*, but the notion of self-causation is thought to be incoherent for the reasons given earlier.⁴⁷ Arnauld takes him to task for this assertion and, as a way of being helpful, both he and Caterus propose that it be understood negatively: *God has no cause*.⁴⁸ But Descartes rejects this proposal, insisting that it be understood positively and that God is the cause of himself in a sense *analogous to an efficient cause*.⁴⁹ Despite appearances, Descartes’ position is a coherent one, as the following considerations will

indicate. In an effort to clarify his view, Descartes tells Arnauld that strictly speaking God is only the *formal* cause of his own existence, where the term “formal” refers to the divine essence. This means that God’s essence is the “cause or reason” (*causa sive ratio*) why he needs no efficient cause. Still, God is *causa sui* in a positive sense given his “inexhaustible power” or omnipotence (*Fourth Replies*, AT 7: 236). Descartes does not mean to suggest that he bootstraps himself into existence by sheer power. The point is rather that, given his omnipotence and ontological independence, God is the *reason* for his own existence.

In fact, a better way of characterizing what Descartes sees himself as doing is to say that he is employing a version of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). As the quotation above suggests (“cause or reason”), he conceives of the causal principle as a version of the PSR. He is even more explicit in the Geometrical Exposition, appended to the *Second Replies*:

Concerning every existing thing it is possible to ask what is the cause of its existence. This question may even be asked concerning God, not because he needs any cause in order to exist, but because the immensity of his nature is the *cause or reason* [*causa sive ratio*] why he needs no cause . . . (AT 7: 164–65, emphasis added)

Descartes’ use of the PSR in this context is typically overlooked⁵⁰ because he does not employ it anywhere else and because it is thought that unlike Leibniz and Spinoza, who make regular use of the PSR, Descartes must reject it given his commitment to divine voluntarism. Since absolutely everything depends on the divine will, there are no reasons for things apart from that will.⁵¹ But while that doctrine may constrain Descartes’ use of the PSR, it does not bar him from using it in this one case, since it is God’s essence (not his will) that provides the sufficient reason for his existence.

CONCLUSION

The primary aim of this paper has been to illustrate that Descartes’ causal arguments for God’s existence have been criticized, and even dismissed out of hand, unfairly. At their core, the arguments are simple, elegant, and relatively plausible, especially as compared to medieval versions. They are designed to mark an advance over the

latter, first, by delivering on the nature of God and, second, by showing how one can vindicate the universal character of the causal principle even in the case of God. Descartes' arguments have not received the respect they deserve, I have argued, because readers have not understood his reasons for formulating them using scholastic and Platonic doctrines, nor have they appreciated the ways in which he adapts these doctrines for his own purposes. Descartes saw himself as writing for an audience steeped in these traditions and also one that was mired in the senses and so casts his arguments in a way that will exploit the reader's prejudices.⁵²

NOTES

1. This remark is attributed to Ian Hacking.
2. In a previous paper (2006), Alan Nelson and I offer another way of simplifying the first causal argument. The discussion in this section owes much to Nelson and that earlier treatment.
3. Descartes explicitly distances his version of the causal argument from scholastic versions that proceed from sensory effects. See *First Replies*, AT 7: 106.
4. This does not mean that God *actually* exists, for that would beg the question. Rather, the point is that the idea represents a *completed* infinity, as opposed to a merely potential one. This contrast plays a pivotal role in the argument, as will become clear.
5. See, e.g., *Principles* I.22, AT 8A: 13.
6. Beyssade (1992) argues that Descartes' concept of God combines two divergent theological traditions without inconsistency.
7. Cf. "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1: 152; the Third Meditation, AT 7: 46; *First Replies* AT 7: 113–14. Williams (1978, 129–30) criticizes this distinction.
8. See *Third Set of Objections with Replies*, AT 7: 179–81.
9. See, e.g., *Second Replies*, AT 7: 135, *Third Replies*, 7: 183. Some deny they have the idea of God but do so in name only (*Third Objections*, AT 7: 139).
10. "To Mersenne, July 1641," AT 3: 392–93.
11. "To Hyperaspistes, August 1641," AT 3: 430.
12. Cf. *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT 8B: 357–58 and the passage cited in note 11.
13. See, e.g., the Fifth Meditation, AT 7: 63–64. For two contrasting interpretations of Descartes' doctrine of innate ideas, see Jolley 1990, ch. 3 and Nelson 2008.

14. See, e.g., *Second Replies*, AT 7: 135. Also see Nolan 2005.
15. Presumably, no argument could reveal the latter. Descartes recognizes of course that his efforts may fail, which is part of the point of his remark to Hyperaspistes. See note 11.
16. Strictly speaking, there are two different principles here (one positive and one negative), and Descartes invokes each at different places in his work. The negative principle states that “nothing cannot be a cause.” He asserts this typically in the context of the causal arguments as a ground for the scholastic causal principles. See, e.g., the Third Meditation, AT 7: 40; *Second Replies*, AT 7: 135. A statement of the positive principle, which constitutes premise (2) of the core argument, can be found in *Second Replies* (AT 7: 164–65). Following a general suggestion by Hume, Dicker (1993, 116–17), wonders whether Descartes conflates the two principles, but I do not find evidence of that.
17. I am bracketing Hume’s famous criticism, which came later. See *A Treatise of Human Nature*, I.iii.3.
18. The Third Meditation, AT 7: 43. Cf. *Second Replies*, AT 7: 139.
19. For a concise statement of this view, see *Fifth Replies*, AT 7: 362. For a perspicuous discussion of the ontology of both innate and invented ideas, see Nelson 1997.
20. Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxiii.33–34) and Hume (*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.6) both claim that we form the idea of God in this way.
21. See *First Replies*, AT 7: 113 and *Principles* I.27, AT 8A: 15.
22. Incidentally, Descartes does think that if one is confused or incautious, one could “construct an imaginary idea of God,” e.g., if one were to conceive of him as an “utterly perfect corporeal being.” That would be an example of having confounded one’s ideas of God and body. See *Second Replies*, AT 7: 138.
23. This analogy is mine, but Descartes advances a similar one in *Second Replies*, AT 7: 140.
24. See *Second Replies*, AT 7: 136.
25. This is one way of interpreting Descartes’ remarks in *Fifth Replies*, AT 7: 365.
26. Incidentally, this point explains why Descartes sometimes affirms that one *could* form an idea of God’s infinite understanding, for example, by indefinitely extending the idea of one’s own finite understanding. See, e.g., *Third Replies*, AT 7: 188. Descartes is not conceding the empiricist’s objection. Rather, the mental process of augmenting is just a heuristic tool. It produces the idea of a potential infinity, which reveals that one has a prior idea of a completed infinity, viz., the idea of God. Descartes sometimes says that the very ability to amplify creaturely perfections

- shows that we have “an idea of something greater, namely God” (*Fifth Replies*, AT 7: 365).
27. See *Second Replies*, AT 7: 130–31, 135.
 28. See *Second Replies*, AT 7: 138.
 29. Curley (1978, 130–31) makes this same point.
 30. See, e.g., Kenny 1968, 134.
 31. The Third Meditation, AT 7: 40–41.
 32. See the Third Meditation, AT 7: 40–41 and *Second Replies* AT 7: 135. In these places, he uses the “negative” formulation of the *ex nihilo* principle, viz., nothing cannot be a cause. See note 17.
 33. This is especially true in the *Principles*, where he presents all three causal principles as “evident by the natural light” (AT 8A: 11–12).
 34. Descartes’ English translators use diamond brackets to indicate material added in the French edition, to distinguish it from the original Latin.
 35. *Second Objections*, AT 7: 123. See, e.g., Cottingham 1986, ch. 3 for the former, and Delahunty 1980 for the latter. There are of course other reasons that commentators have attributed a causal-likeness principle to Descartes – e.g., he sometimes states his causal principles rather baldly, though I suspect that the reason he does so is because he wants to encourage the analogies from sense experience. See *Second Replies*, AT 7: 135.
 36. The Third Meditation, AT 7: 45.
 37. Cf. *First Replies*, AT 7: 105–106.
 38. Cf. the Third Meditation, AT 7: 48, and *Principles* I.20, AT 8A: 12.
 39. Cf. *Principles* I.20, AT 8A: 12.
 40. I am not claiming that “innate” means “caused by God,” though Descartes thinks our innate ideas *are* so caused. Incidentally, this account also explains his otherwise odd concession in the *Second Replies*: “we can find . . . within ourselves a sufficient basis for forming the idea of God” (AT 7: 133). He is *not* conceding that we do cause this idea, only that it is innate.
 41. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia, 2.3.
 42. See *First Replies*, AT 7: 110.
 43. See, e.g., the Third Meditation, AT 7: 45–46.
 44. Some scholastics also urged that the finite series itself would require a cause.
 45. The Third Meditation, AT 7: 48–49.
 46. See *First Replies*, AT 7: 106–7. Here, one might recall the traditional Christian doctrine of continual creation, according to which God not only creates but also *preserves* finite beings. However, to invoke that doctrine in this context would be to beg the question of God’s existence. So Descartes appeals instead to considerations about the nature of the

meditator's duration. Incidentally, Descartes takes up the issue in the Third Meditation of whether the objective reality of ideas can be caused by other ideas and whether there can be an infinite regress of such causes. He affirms the former, perhaps in part to allow for the possibility that an invented idea could derive its objective reality from one or more innate ideas. But he denies the latter; the objective reality of all ideas must ultimately be caused by something with formal reality, just like pictures (AT 7: 42). This seems right, for the alternative would be to hold that there is a realm of fictional or representational entities that is causally self-contained.

47. Descartes tries to block at least one of these reasons in the *First Replies* by arguing for causal simultaneity: a cause is simultaneous with its effect (AT 7: 108). For further discussion, see Secada 2000.
48. See *First Objections*, AT 7: 95; *Fourth Objections*, AT 7: 208.
49. *First Replies*, AT 7: 109–110; *Fourth Replies*, AT 7: 240.
50. One notable exception is Davidson 2004.
51. Melamed and Lin 2010 argue that Descartes' philosophy is "deeply antithetical to the PSR" for this reason.
52. I would like to thank David Cuning, Nicholas Jolley, Alan Nelson, and Al Spangler for comments on previous drafts of this chapter.