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The Ontological Argument as an Exercise in Cartesian Therapy

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I Introduction

It is sometimes suggested that Descartes' version of the so-called ontological 'argument' should be read not as a formal proof but as a self-evident axiom, grasped by intuition.[1] If correct, this suggestion would enable us to answer finally one of the vexed questions of Cartesian scholarship, namely what relation holds between the ontological argument, as presented in the Fifth Meditation, and the causal argument of the Third Meditation. The ontological argument has the appearance of being an afterthought but, given the elegant and tightly ordered structure of the *Meditations*, this cannot be. Still, commentators have wondered why Descartes separates his theistic proofs in this way, and why the ontological argument emerges later in the 'order of reasons.' If the ontological 'argument' were intended as the report of an intuition, then these long-standing difficulties would be easily resolved. One could argue that rather than being an afterthought, it is the culmination of the meditator's efforts to achieve perfect knowledge (*scientia*) of God's existence. The meditator advances from the complex causal argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation, whose premises are still subject to hyperbolic doubt, to a self-validating intuition in the Fifth Meditation that is immune from all doubt.

1 See e.g. Jonathan Barnes (1972, 16) and Martial Gueroult (1984, vol. 1, 253).

The main impediment to this account of the relation between the causal and ontological arguments is that, to date, no one has shown how an intuitive grasp of God's existence is achieved. As a result, the claim that Descartes takes God's existence to be ultimately self-evident has remained only a suggestion, and a receding one at that. Recent studies have characterized the ontological argument as a formal proof, and have focused on reconstructing a valid and definitive formulation.[2] This paper is an attempt to rectify this situation. It takes as its main burden the task of explaining how the meditator attains an intuition of God's existence and of identifying the barriers to such an intuition. The letter and spirit of Descartes' philosophy indicate that he did not think that God's existence is immediately self-evident, at least to most readers. So one question that demands an answer is why God's existence is not immediately self-evident. What, according to Descartes' diagnosis, is hindering us from forming the requisite intuition? Second, if God's existence is not immediately self-evident, how does it become self-evident? Third, Descartes wrote the *Meditations* to help the meditator discover the truth herself and conceived for himself the role of Socratic gadfly, massaging the intellect of his meditator in an effort to awaken her clear and distinct perceptions. How then does he propose to assist someone who is having difficulty intuiting God's existence? What strategies does he deploy and how does an understanding of these strategies illuminate the texts devoted to the so-called 'ontological argument'?

The key to answering these questions, I shall argue, lies with Descartes' notion of a philosophical 'prejudice' (*praejudicium*) and the method that he devises for extirpating our prejudices. Descartes maintains that, as a result of our reliance on the senses in childhood and (referring to his contemporaries) our educational training in scholastic philosophy, we have formed various prejudices that prevent us from intuiting God's existence directly and, more generally, that obscure and confound our innate ideas of God, mind, and body. To dispel these prejudices, Descartes devises a method called 'analysis' that he claims to have employed in the *Meditations* and elsewhere. I shall argue that he conceives analysis as a form of philosophical therapy designed to disabuse his readers of prejudice and to engender clear and distinct ideas.[3] Descartes' analytic method has been the subject of several studies over the past few decades, but there has been little discussion of the relation

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2 See e.g. Barnes (1972) and Willis Doney (1978 and 1993).

3 For other uses of the term 'therapy' in connection with Descartes' philosophy, see Daniel Garber (1986) and Mike Marlies (1978).

between this method and his theory of demonstration, and of the role that habits play in sustaining our prejudices. I hope to fill this lacuna. The main innovation of this paper, however, lies in the application of the method of analysis to the ontological argument. Using this method, I identify two specific prejudices concerning God and uncover Descartes' strategies for extirpating them, thus illustrating how the meditator is led to a direct intuition of God's existence.

In the next section, I attempt to elucidate the claim that God's existence is ultimately known through intuition by discussing what Descartes means by 'intuition,' by distinguishing it from another mental operation that he calls 'deduction,' and by outlining his criticisms of traditional logic as a means for attaining knowledge. Descartes' own theory of deduction places the claims of this paper in a larger context and provides evidence that he held that all knowledge is ultimately obtained through intuition. Section III examines the main body of textual evidence in support of the claim that God's existence is ultimately self-evident and answers potential objections. Section IV expounds the method of analysis and argues that Descartes conceives it as form of philosophical therapy. Section V constitutes the most significant section of the paper, for it is there that I show how Descartes deploys various analytic 'therapies' to dispel our prejudices concerning God so that we may intuit his existence. I conclude the paper by highlighting the wider implications of Descartes' theories of analysis and deduction for how we interpret his philosophy.

II Descartes' General Theory of Deduction

The claim that God's existence is ultimately known through intuition reflects Descartes' more fundamental views about the nature of proof and the prospect of using formal demonstration as a means for attaining knowledge. To gain a better purchase on this claim, let us begin with a brief discussion of these more fundamental views.

Like many early modern philosophers, Descartes was highly critical of traditional Aristotelian logic, which constituted formal reasoning as he knew it. He associated it with the 'dialecticians,' a pejorative term that he used to describe his scholastic predecessors, who, in his estimation, were more concerned with verbal disputes and sophistry than with discovering the truth.[4] Indeed, Descartes' main criticism of the Aristote-

4 See e.g. AT 9:13. References to Descartes' work are abbreviated as follows: AT: *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols., revised edition, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. (Paris: J. Vrin/C.N.R.S. 1964-1976). Passages are cited by volume and page numbers,

lian syllogism is that it does not provide a viable method of discovery. He conceded that it can be helpful in explaining to others truths one has already discovered by other means, but deemed it useless as a method for discovering new truths (AT 10:406). The only source of truth is the pure intellect or 'the natural light of reason.' In his early unfinished *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes developed a method for directing and increasing this light and for avoiding error, but regarded syllogistic reasoning as a 'positive hindrance.' 'As for other mental operations which dialectic claims to direct ... they are of no use here ... for nothing can be added to the clear light of reason which does not in some way dim it' (AT 10:372-3). In another passage, he said that when employing the forms of argument developed by Aristotle, 'our reason takes a holiday.' Such forms are only so many mechanical 'fetters' that 'ensnare' our native powers of reasoning (AT 10:406).[5]

As an alternative to the syllogism, the *Rules* develops a novel theory of inference that disdains formalism of any kind. The centerpiece of this alternative theory is the notion of 'intuition,' which is defined as 'the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason' (AT 10:368). The faculty of intuition, or what Descartes will later call 'clear and distinct perception,' just is our native power of reason. Deductive inference is defined in terms of this more primary notion. A deduction consists of a chain of self-evident intuitions in which there is a continuous and uninterrupted movement of thought from one intuition to another (AT 10:369-70). A Cartesian deduction, then, has nothing to do with formal relations between propositions or with valid argument forms; it is simply a concatenation of self-evident intuitions. It depends on intuition in the strong sense that there is nothing more to a demonstration than the individual intuitions, and the movement of thought between them, that compose it. Its only purpose is to induce an intuition that is not immediately attainable.

In a subsequent discussion, Descartes issues a methodological imperative to reduce deductions — or chains of intuitions — to single intuitions.

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respectively, separated by a colon. All English translations are based on *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and (for vol. 3) Anthony Kenny (abbreviated as CSM) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984); and from *Descartes' Conversation with Burman*, trans. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1976). Any divergences from these translations are my own. Page numbers from CSM are not given since that edition includes marginal AT page numbers.

5 For a further discussion of Descartes' critique of traditional logic, see Stephen Gaukroger (1989).

Insofar as they involve a movement of thought, deductions depend on memory and thus are less certain than single intuitions. To overcome the vagaries of memory, Descartes prescribes the following regimen:

> [1] So I shall run through them [long deductions] several times in a continuous movement of the imagination, simultaneously intuiting one relation and passing on to the next, until I have learnt to pass from the first to the last so swiftly that memory is left with practically no role to play, and I seem to intuit the whole thing at once. (AT 10:387-8)

There are different ways of interpreting this passage. I would like to urge the strong reading, according to which, through practice, we are eventually able to eliminate the intervening steps of a deduction and intuit the link between the first and last relation immediately.[6] I suggest that this is what it means to intuit 'the whole thing at once.' Descartes seems to confirm this suggestion later when he says that intuition and deduction complement each other 'so thoroughly that they seem to coalesce into a single operation' (AT 10:408). It is also in keeping with the nature and purpose of a Cartesian deduction, which, as we have seen, is just a series of intuitions *a ... n*, where *n* is not immediately evident. Once *n* is intuited, the other steps in the chain are disposable, for *n* is not 'inferred' in the traditional sense from those previous steps but simply arrived at by a succession of psychological states.[7] One might not at first be able to

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6 A referee for this journal has suggested a weaker reading, according to which we become proficient at intuiting all the steps of a deduction at once without ever being able to abandon any of those steps or the deduction as a whole. For reasons given below, I do not think this squares with Descartes' intentions.

7 It is easy to be misled by some of Descartes' statements about deduction in the *Rules*. For example, he initially defines 'deduction' as 'the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions that are known with certainty' (AT 10:369). But before concluding that Descartes conceives deduction in formalist terms after all, one should keep in mind that he first introduces intuition and deduction as the only two 'actions' of the intellect for achieving knowledge. Like intuition, deduction is a psychological operation, not a formal one. Why then does he sometimes slip into 'inference-speak'? This is a question that one might ask in the context of the Fifth Meditation too, and I think the answer is that it is the traditional language of philosophy, from which it is difficult to make a clean break, especially when one is writing for an audience that continues to be immersed in that tradition. But the context of Descartes' remarks shows him to be refashioning this language or, to use Étienne Gilson's apt metaphor, pouring new wine into old bottles (1930, 250). See Desmond Clarke (1977) for a discussion of the non-discursive uses of the Latin and French terms for 'deduction' and 'demonstration' in Descartes' corpus. Also see Jean-Marie Beyssade (1981) on the relation between intuition and demonstration.

recall this intuition without retracing the same steps as before, but this can be relieved through practice. I suggest that this is what is involved in 'mastering' a deduction in the manner characterized in this passage.

Descartes articulates this theory of deduction very early in his career. A natural question is whether it survives in the mature, published writings. In a thought-provoking paper, Ian Hacking has suggested that Descartes' conception of proof in the later works is consistent with the doctrine of the *Rules*, that deductions throughout his philosophy serve a heuristic function — to induce clear and distinct perception (1980, 172).[8] He compares Descartes' view with the thought of mathematician G.H. Hardy: 'Proofs are what Littlewood and I call gas, rhetorical flourishes designed to affect psychology...' (1928, 18). Hacking adds: 'Descartes is indifferent to what sort of ''gas'' induces clear and distinct perception. However you get there, when you see with clarity and distinctness you note that there is no other standard of truth than the natural light of reason' (1980, 172).

I agree wholeheartedly with Hacking's claims about the scope of Descartes' conception of proof and intend to provide positive evidence for it, which he does not. In fact, one way of reading the present paper is as an attempt to illustrate this general thesis about the status of proof in Descartes' mature philosophy by using the ontological argument as a case study. In a few key passages in the Fifth Meditation and elsewhere Descartes suggests that although we might begin with deductive arguments, God's existence is ultimately self-evident or axiomatic. Indeed, perfect knowledge of God's existence is attained only by the clear and distinct perception of a mind free from philosophical prejudice. Theistic proofs in general may help a confused meditator to attain clear and distinct ideas, but the goal of meditation is to acquire such facility with the idea of a supremely perfect being that one is able to dispense with arguments altogether and intuit God's existence directly.[9]

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8 Yvon Belaval (1960) deserves credit for being the first to draw attention to Descartes' *intuitionisme* (as opposed to Leibniz's *formalisme*).

9 In speaking of 'proofs' here, one must be careful to distinguish two kinds — a formal syllogism and a Cartesian deduction in the sense just explained. Despite Descartes' criticisms of traditional logic, he sometimes presents the ontological argument in the form of a syllogism, with major and minor premises explicitly labeled as such. These too, however, are just another form of 'gas,' to be dispensed with once one has attained the relevant clear and distinct perception of God.

III Knowledge of God's Existence via Intuition

Commentators sometimes complain that Descartes formulates several ontological arguments, or at least several versions of the same argument, where by 'argument' they mean a formal proof.[10] The Fifth Meditation, they say, yields two such arguments, one that derives God's existence directly from the claim that necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, a second that derives this conclusion from the premise that our idea of God represents a being having all perfections, together with the assumption that existence is a perfection. The First Replies appears to introduce yet another argument, which derives God's existence from the idea of his omnipotence.[11] And in the Second Replies, we are presented with different versions of the two proofs from the Fifth Meditation.[12] Befuddled by this profusion of ontological arguments, some readers have puzzled over the relation among them.[13] Is there a master demonstration for which the others serve as subproofs or is each argument intended to stand on its own? Were there evolutions in Descartes' thought about how best to formulate his argument or was he simply confused?

These difficulties are easily dispelled if, as according to my thesis, God's existence is ultimately known through intuition. On this view, the formal versions of Descartes' famed argument are simply heuristic devices or 'ladders' to be kicked away once one reaches the desired epistemic summit. Descartes formulates several versions of the argument 'so as to appeal to a variety of different minds,' each of which might be confused in different ways or to varying degrees (AT 7:119-20). This general line of thought is confirmed by almost every text devoted to the ontological argument, including the Fifth Meditation itself. There, after completing the two a priori arguments mentioned above, he writes:

> [2] But whatever method of proof I use, I am always brought back to the fact that it is only what I clearly and distinctly perceive that completely convinces me. Some of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive are obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully; but once they have been discovered, the latter are judged to be just as certain as the former. In the case of a right-angled triangle, for example, the fact that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the square on the other two sides is not so readily

10 See e.g. Doney (1978 and 1993).

11 See Margaret Wilson (1978, 174-6).

12 Doney (1978 and 1993, 75-84) documents these variations.

13 See Doney (1993), who also cites Caterus' perplexity in the First Set of Objections.

> apparent as the fact that the hypotenuse subtends the largest angle; but once one has seen it, one believes it just as strongly. But as regards God, if I were not overwhelmed by philosophical prejudices, and if the images of things perceived by the senses did not besiege my thought on every side, I would certainly acknowledge him sooner and more easily than anything else. For what is more manifest [*ex se ... apertius*] than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists? (AT 7:68-9)[14]

This passage diminishes the significance of the arguments that preceded it. For, as Descartes insists here, it is not proofs that ultimately convince him of God's existence but clear and distinct perception. Once one clearly and distinctly perceives that necessary existence pertains to the essence of a supremely perfect being, God's existence will be manifest.

Descartes, however, is not asserting that the deductive versions of the ontological argument are useless, at least not to all meditators. In fact, an implicit distinction is drawn in this passage between two kinds of meditators — those for whom God's existence is immediately self-evident and those who must 'look more closely and investigate more carefully.' Those in the former group will of course not need a proof. For them, God's existence is more akin to an axiom or definition in geometry. Indeed, they will find it is as simple and transparent as the fact that the hypotenuse of a right triangle subtends its greatest angle. But other meditators, more deeply burdened by philosophical prejudices and mired in sensory images, may continue to be confused in their thoughts about the divine, despite the accomplishments of earlier meditations. For them, apprehending God's existence is comparable to grasping the Pythagorean Theorem, for which a proof may be helpful in attaining the proper clear and distinct perception. The main point of this passage, however, is that *all* meditators who attain knowledge of God's existence do so ultimately by means of a direct intuition, i.e. by clearly and distinctly perceiving that necessary existence is included in the idea of a supremely perfect being. Thus even those meditators who must first rely on arguments should strive to attain the same intuitive awareness of God as possessed by those for whom such knowledge comes more easily. The goal of meditation in this instance is to acquire such facility with our innate idea of a supremely perfect being that we can summon it at will from what Descartes earlier calls the 'treasure house' of our mind, and immediately apprehend that such a being exists (AT 7:67). Once this facility is attained, the deductive versions of the ontological argument are dispensable.

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14 Elsewhere, Descartes writes: 'it is almost the same thing to conceive of God and to conceive that he exists' (AT 3:396).

The themes of the Fifth Meditation are replayed in the Geometrical Exposition, appended to the Second Replies. Descartes affirms the self-evident character of God's existence even more strongly. To help his readers discover this fact, he urges them to devote considerable time and effort contemplating the nature of a supremely perfect being.

> [3] Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a train of reasoning [*discursu*], will make them realize that God exists; and this will eventually be just as self-evident [*per se notum*] to them as the fact that the number two is even or that three is odd, and so on. For there are certain truths which some people find self-evident, while others come to understand them only by a train of reasoning (AT 7:163-4).

Again, in the *Principles of Philosophy*, he writes:

> [4] simply on the basis of its perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being, the mind must clearly conclude that the supreme being does exist (AT 8A:8).

Passage [3] makes the point about self-evidence more explicitly than the Fifth Meditation, even using the standard Scholastic term *per se notum*. Once the meditator appreciates that her clear and distinct idea of the divine nature contains not possible but wholly necessary existence, no argument or train of reasoning is required; God's existence will be as simple and self-evident as the simplest mathematical truth. But one might object that this passage also counts against the strong version of my thesis. For at the end, Descartes seems to allow that there are some people who come to know God's existence only through a train of reasoning. Doesn't this contradict my claim that *all* meditators who achieve knowledge of God's existence do so via an immediate intuition?[15] To begin to answer this objection, it is significant to note that Descartes uses the same Latin term for 'argument' or 'train of reasoning' as he had in the *Rules* to designate a deduction in his sense, namely *discursum*.[16] And, as we have seen, one of the goals of reasoning in that earlier work is to reduce deductions, or chains of intuitions, to single intuitions. So even if some readers required a *discursum*, that does not imply that reasoning stops there or that knowledge of God's existence is attained through a *discursum*. One should also keep in mind that passage [3] is part of the Geometrical Exposition, which is intended as a recapitu-

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15 A referee for this journal raised this objection.

16 See e.g. AT 10:369.

lation of what Descartes had already written in the *Meditations*, and which he insists 'will yield by far the greater benefit' (AT 7:159). This provides a strong case for privileging passage [2] from the Fifth Meditation and reading [3] in line with it. As we have seen, in that earlier passage Descartes distinguishes two kinds of meditators, those for whom God's existence is immediately self-evident and those who must mediate carefully in order to appreciate this fact. I suggest that he is relying upon a similar distinction in passage [3]. As before, the object of meditation is to attain the proper clear and distinct perception of God, such that the existence of such a being becomes self-evident. Some meditators, however, may be aided in their efforts by a 'train of reasoning.' Descartes should not be read, then, as saying that some meditators know God's existence through deduction rather than intuition, only that a deduction can help some meditators achieve the requisite intuition.[17]

17 Readers of the First Set of Replies may be surprised by Descartes' insistence in these passages that God's existence is, or can become, self-evident. St. Thomas Aquinas famously denied this view. When confronted with this denial by Caterus, the author of the First Set of Objections, Descartes appears to concede the point: 'St. Thomas asks whether existence is self-evident as far as we are concerned, that is, whether it is obvious to everyone; and he answers, correctly, that it is not' (AT 7:115). At first glance, this remark seems to contravene passage [3], but the inconsistency is only apparent. One of Descartes' favorite tactics for blunting criticism was to find common ground with his opponents, even if doing so required putting a subtle 'spin' on his own philosophical commitments. In this instance, very little spin is required. In his discussion of the ontological argument, Aquinas had drawn a crucial distinction between two notions of self-evidence. Something can be self-evident 'in itself' without being self-evident 'with respect to us.' Aquinas held that God's existence was self-evident in the first sense but not in the second. That it is not self-evident to us is clear, he thought, from the fact that some people are ignorant of God's existence or, like the proverbial fool, are capable of denying it without contradiction (*Summa Theologica* I, q.2, art. 1). Notice that this notion of self-evidence is quite strict, and this strictness is reflected in Descartes' own rendering of it: a truth is self-evident to us if and only if it is 'obvious *to everyone*.' Descartes can consistently deny that God's existence is self-evident in this strong sense while also maintaining that God's existence can become self-evident (to us) in a weaker sense. And this in fact is what he does. Not only does he deny that God's existence is self-evident to everyone, but in at least one passage in the corpus Descartes concedes that some meditators may be so confused and mired in prejudice that they will not notice their innate idea of God even after reading the *Meditations* a thousand times (AT 3:430). Meditation is not for everyone. But this fact is perfectly compatible with the assertion that God's existence is, or can become, self-evident to some people. That is all Descartes is claiming in passage [3].

IV Cartesian Analysis as Therapy

Descartes' readers have long had the sense that the *Meditations* is an uniquely written work. It is unlike the customary philosophical treatise, wherein an author sets forth various theses and then rounds up arguments in their defense. Although the *Meditations* does contain such things, its title and general apparatus suggest that it is closely allied with the tradition of spiritual autobiography, of which Augustine's *Confessions* serves as an illustrious model. As it is sometimes observed, the purpose of Augustine's *Confessions* is twofold: first, to record and explain how he progressed from his former life of sin to his conversion to Christianity; second, and more importantly, to inspire his reader to attain the same state of spiritual enlightenment. Descartes' aims in the *Meditations* are of course philosophical rather than strictly theological, but his procedure is similar. On the one hand, he represents himself as recounting the order in which he discovered his clear and distinct ideas and thereby attained perfect knowledge. But, like Augustine, his deeper purpose is to help the meditator discover the truth for herself. In keeping with this latter aim, the *Meditations* is written as a kind of guidebook to the truth — a goal that the meditator achieves only by faithfully engaging in the various cognitive exercises therein prescribed.[18]

The special character of the *Meditations* is transparent to the discerning reader, but it has taken several decades of scholarship to develop the link between this character and the analytic method of presentation.[19] Descartes claims to have employed this method exclusively in crafting the *Meditations* (AT 7:156). Although many of his other works contain analytic elements, this style of presentation appears in its purest and most characteristic form in the *Meditations* and has come to be recognized as one of its central organizing principles. In this section, I offer an interpretation of the analytic method that incorporates many of the insights of previous studies while also attempting to advance the discussion by

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18 I am indebted here to Gary Hatfield's (1986) characterization of the *Meditations* as 'cognitive exercises.' Also see Zeno Vendler (1989) and, for further discussion of the relation between Cartesian and Augustinian method, Stephen Menn (1998).

19 Edwin Curley (1986) has shown how a proper understanding of analysis helps elucidate some of the major themes of Descartes' *magnum opus*, and Gueroult (1984) has founded a systematic interpretation of Cartesian metaphysics on it. Also see L.J. Beck (1965, chap. 18), Gerd Buchdahl (1969), Garber (1986), Garber and Leslie Cohen (1982), Stephen Gaukroger (1989), Jaakko Hintikka (1978) and Stanley Tweyman's anthology (1993) of essays on the nature and role of analysis in the *Meditations*.

highlighting the therapeutic character of analysis and by linking it to Descartes' nativism in a new way.

Descartes is famous for his 'method,' but that term evokes many things in his philosophy. Usually when we think of Cartesian method, we are reminded of universal doubt or the four rules set forth in the *Discourse*. Analysis is related to these other methods but is a much broader notion. It is best understood in contrast with another method of demonstration that Descartes employs — albeit much more sparingly in works devoted to metaphysics — called 'synthesis.' Analysis and synthesis, broadly construed, are two methods for presenting truths 'geometrically.'

Descartes' exposition of analysis, synthesis, and the distinction between them is somewhat brief and confined to a single text.[20] It comes in response to a request by the Second Set of Objectors that he present the argument of the *Meditations* in geometrical fashion (*more geometrico*). They were a little disappointed, given his penchant and talent for mathematics, that he had not written his *Meditations* more like Euclid's *Geometry*, 'starting from a number of definitions, postulates and axioms'. Doing so, they thought, would enable the reader to grasp the entire Cartesian system in a single glance, and thus be more fully persuaded by it (AT 7:128). Descartes complies with their request, somewhat begrudgingly, but only after explaining the sense in which the *Meditations* had already been written in geometrical fashion. To appreciate this sense he says that we must distinguish two aspects of geometrical writing — *viz.* order and the method of demonstration.

By 'geometric order' Descartes means something quite minimal, which explains why he can claim to have followed it faithfully in the *Meditations* even though the work lacks the familiar Euclidean apparatus of axioms, definitions, theorems, etc. Order requires that 'those things which are proposed first must be known without the aid of what comes later; and the remaining items must be arranged in such a way that their demonstration depends solely on what has gone before' (AT 7:155).

These requirements can be satisfied by either of two methods of demonstration — analysis or synthesis. The choice between methods is determined by one's audience, subject matter, and general aims:

> [6] Analysis shows the true way by means of which the thing in question was discovered methodically and as it were a priori, so that if the reader is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points, he will make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself. (AT 7:155)

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20 There are also a few scattered references to analysis elsewhere. Cf. AT 7:249, 424, 444; AT 10:373. See Garber and Cohen (1982, 145) for a complete list.

Analysis is best employed when one is addressing a sympathetic and attentive reader, in part because it requires greater efforts of concentration and, in the case of the *Meditations*, because it demands that we meditate faithfully along with Descartes. When writing in the analytic style, Descartes is asking us to think like him, to follow the same progression he followed in discovering the truth. The goal of such a project is not simply to convince us of his own position by laying out all the best arguments but to enhance our understanding by leading us to discover the truth of that position for ourselves.

Because of what Descartes says here, analysis is sometimes referred to as the 'order of discovery,' i.e. the order in which we discover our clear and distinct ideas. Descartes indicates this point in part through his use of the term 'a priori' which, as his English translators observe, appears not to be intended in any of its usual senses, but means something like 'prior in the order of discovery.'[21] While it is true that analysis obeys a certain order — an order that is different from synthesis, but nevertheless 'geometric' in the minimal sense already stated — it would be a mistake to reduce it to that order. It would be better to say that analysis facilitates a certain order of discovery of clear and distinct ideas.

In contrast with analysis,

> [7] Synthesis ... employs a directly opposite method, where the search is, as it were, a posteriori.... It demonstrates the conclusion clearly and employs a long series of definitions, postulates, axioms, theorems and problems, so that if anyone denies one of the conclusions it can be shown at once that it is contained in what has gone before, and hence the reader, however argumentative or stubborn he may be, is compelled to give his assent. (AT 7:156)

Synthesis is the method of demonstration associated with Euclidean geometry and with the Scholastic syllogism. Indeed, Descartes identifies it as the method the second set of objectors was urging him to use (ibid.). Synthesis is essentially a deductive mode of argument (in the traditional sense) and thus is most useful when one's audience is hostile and/or inattentive because it compels assent. It proceeds from initial assumptions that everyone readily accepts and then draws deductive conclusions based on these assumptions and whatever has gone before in such a manner that the structure of the reasoning is fully transparent.

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21 Clearly, Descartes cannot be using it in the post-Leibnizian sense of 'independent of experience' nor, as CSM point out, in the medieval, Thomistic sense of proceeding from causes to effects (CSM 2:110, note 2). As Curley observes, the course of the *Meditations* is much more complex; it moves from effects to causes and then back to effects (i.e. from the self to God to the world) (1986, 155).

Descartes says that of the two modes of presentation, analysis is more satisfying, engaging, and the 'best and truest method of instruction' (At 7:156). He thinks of it as the 'teaching method,' again because it allows the reader to discover the truth for herself, thus producing a richer understanding.[22]

In addition to appealing to different audiences, analysis and synthesis are also suited to different subject matters. Of the differences mentioned so far, this one is foremost, at least for our purposes. Synthesis is tailored to subjects such as geometry, where the primary notions (*primae notiones*) or first principles are universally accepted by everyone since they accord with the deliverances of our senses. It is not suited to metaphysics (such as treated in the *Meditations*) where even the most basic concepts are not granted readily and often conflict with philosophical prejudices (*praejudicia*) derived from the senses. Analysis is much more appropriate for presenting metaphysical subjects because it trains the mind to withdraw from corporeal things and to meditate carefully on first principles. Without this sort of care, these principles could easily be

22 It is controversial whether analysis is indeed the best method for teaching. In the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes appears to contradict himself on this point by reportedly claiming that synthesis, which he employed in the *Principles*, is the method and order of teaching (*via et ordo ... docendi*) (AT 5:153). And referring to the *Principles* in a letter to Mersenne, he claims to be writing his philosophy 'in an order which will make it easy to teach' (*enseignée*) (AT 3:276). Gueroult suggests the proper way of resolving this apparent inconsistency. He argues there are two types of teaching, one (viz. analysis) which is addressed to the person who wishes to understand and is willing to take the trouble to meditate carefully, and the other (viz. synthesis) which is addressed to weak minds that can apprehend, without comprehending, by rote memorization and recitation (1984; vol. I, 255-6). Supporting this view, Descartes says that in synthesis 'the breaking down of propositions to their smallest elements is specifically designed to enable them to be recited with ease so that the student recalls them whether he wants to or not' (AT 7:156). It helps to recall here that Descartes intended his *Principles* to replace Scholastic textbooks. So it was addressed in part to students who could best assimilate its truths in bite-size morsels. Also see Cottingham, (1976, 70-71).

There is another controversy, affecting the first, about whether the *Principles* is truly synthetic. Commentators who wish to deny this claim observe that the only positive evidence for it is the *Conversation of Burman* just mentioned which is a second-hand report of what Descartes actually said. Critics also point out that the *Principles* lacks the formal apparatus of axioms, definitions, etc. that one finds in the Geometrical Exposition and that Descartes identifies with synthesis (See Garber and Cohen, 1982 and Garber 1995). I agree with Gueroult's suggestion that the *Principles* is a hybrid work combining features of both analysis and synthesis (1957, 126 and 137). It is synthetic at least in the sense that it often takes for granted the primary notions or axioms of the subject matter under study. For an illustration of this point, see section V. Also see Curley (1977 and 1986).

rejected 'by those who like to contradict just for the sake of it' (AT 7:156-7).[23]

Descartes refers to analysis and synthesis as two 'methods of demonstration' (*ratio demonstrandi*), but as the discussion so far suggests, this term is equivocal. In the case of synthesis, the term 'demonstration' is being used to denote deductive or, what was the equivalent for the seventeenth century, syllogistic reasoning. In synthesis, one begins from first principles and draws deductive conclusions from them. Analysis, in contrast, is a 'method of demonstration' only in a very broad sense.[24] When this method is employed, first principles are the end-points, rather than the starting-points, of the process and one reaches them not by deduction in the traditional sense but by removing philosophical prejudices.[25] Once these prejudices are dispelled, the primary notions can be intuited directly. This point is obviously very relevant to my claims about the ontological argument. Knowledge of God's existence is obtained not by formal proofs but by intuition, and this is achieved toward the end of Descartes' project in the *Meditations*, after the meditator's prejudices have been extirpated. Descartes regards God's existence as axiomatic, but in an analytic context, such axioms are discovered last.

In distinguishing analysis from synthesis, Descartes was trying to make clear to the Second Set of Objectors that to comply with their request to rewrite the *Meditations more geometrico*, he must act against his better judgment and restructure his argument in a way that casts it in a less favorable light. He does so with deep reservation and caution, intentionally omitting material from the Geometrical Exposition and treating the items he does include with less precision, lest his reader regard it as a substitute for the *Meditations* (AT 7:159). It was his view that metaphysical subjects do not admit of a purely synthetic treatment, at least not if one's aim is complete understanding.

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23 Descartes says that this is why he wrote 'Meditations' rather than 'Theorems and Problems,' as the geometers would have done: 'I would have nothing to do with anyone who was not willing to join me in meditating and giving the subject attentive consideration' (ibid.).

24 On at least one occasion, Descartes refers to analysis as a different 'style of writing' (*modo scribendi*) from synthesis (AT 7:158-9). This alternative locution is perhaps more descriptive and avoids the misleading connotations of 'demonstration' [*demonstrantur*], though in Latin dictionaries of the period, this term was used more broadly to mean a showing, a displaying, or a making manifest. See Secada (2000, 241). Clarke (1977) identifies specific passages in which Descartes uses the Latin term *demonstrare* and the French term *démontrer* to mean 'to show.' See note 7.

25 See Tweyman 1993, 10.

I have attended carefully to Descartes' treatment of analysis precisely because his exposition is so compressed. Some readers might find his exposition unrevealing or, worse, confusing. But I have tried to illustrate that what he says is quite lucid, if pithy. To summarize, analysis is primarily a method for dispelling philosophical prejudices so that the first principles of metaphysics can be clearly and distinctly perceived. This of course is only a statement of the aim of the method, not a description of the method itself or how the aim is to be achieved. One wishes that Descartes had elaborated this aspect of the method.[26]

Given the announced goal of analysis, I would like to suggest that the method itself comprises a broad set of heuristic devices, cognitive exercises, and rhetorical strategies. On this definition, perhaps the most important and familiar example of an analytic 'device' is the method of universal doubt. Indeed, in both the *Meditations* and the *Principles* Descartes stresses the essential role of methodic doubt in removing prejudices that bar our knowledge of the truth. At the beginning of the Synopsis of the *Meditations* he says that the greatest benefit of hyperbolic doubt 'lies in freeing us from all our prejudices, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses' (AT 7:12). In the opening section of the *Principles*, he makes a similar point and adds an account of how philosophical prejudices are formed:

> [8] Since we began life as infants, and made various judgments concerning the things that can be perceived by the senses before we had the full use of our reason, there are many prejudices that keep us from knowledge of the truth. It seems that the only way of freeing ourselves from these prejudices is to make the effort, once in the course of our life, to doubt everything which we find to contain even the smallest suspicion of uncertainty. (AT 8A:5)

Although, as we shall learn in section V, not all philosophical prejudices derive from our reliance on the senses, many of the most important ones do, and it is these on which Descartes typically focuses. The source of these prejudices, we are told here, are false judgments made in our youth when we were immersed in the senses and not yet in full command of our reason.[27] The interesting point in both passages is that methodic doubt is prescribed as the primary means for removing these prejudices. Commentators have enjoyed speculating about the various aims of

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26 Descartes is notoriously laconic in many statements of method, including the *Discourse on Method*, where one's expectations that his method will be fully revealed are disappointed. See Garber (1992, 44f).

27 Also see AT 8A:22.

Cartesian doubt and clearly there are many,[28] but the most important aim suggested here is to dispel debilitating prejudices so that the meditator can attain knowledge of the truth. In effect, the method of doubt is in the service of the analytic method. It is just one of many devices designed to remove prejudices, but it is clearly the most powerful.[29] It will provide a useful analogy for understanding the other analytic devices that Descartes employs in the context of the ontological argument.

Another way of elucidating the method of analysis is in terms of its relation to Descartes' nativist epistemology. Curley was perhaps the first to draw attention to this relation: 'Descartes' meditator is a sensual man, a man too attached to the senses, as we all are before philosophy, and he is not aware of his innate knowledge of...eternal truths' (1986, 156). Analysis then is a method for awakening this innate knowledge, for making explicit concepts and principles that are removed from the senses and that we may understand only implicitly. 'The essential task of the analytic method is to bring that knowledge to consciousness, to turn the unclear and indistinct ideas of commonsense into the clear and distinct ideas Descartes needs to make his argument demonstrative' (ibid.). This account squares nicely with passages such as those at the beginning of the Fifth Meditation where Descartes invokes the Platonic theory of recollection and suggests that our innate ideas must be 'awakened' in us.[30]

But this picture is still lacking the notion of a philosophical prejudice and is thus incomplete. As discussed above, Descartes appeals to this notion in an effort to diagnose our lack of knowledge, prior to meditating in the proper order. It is easy to understand why, as a nativist, he needs such a diagnosis. If the 'seeds of knowledge' — namely, our clear and distinct ideas of God, extension, thought, mathematical objects, etc. — are innate, then Descartes owes us an explanation for why we lack knowledge of these things (AT 10:217). Why must we meditate in the way that he has prescribed in the *Meditations* in order to attain *scientia*? Why, in his language, do we need the aid of another soul who has already

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28 See Hatfield for a complete catalog (1993, 260f).

29 One other analytic device noticed by commentators is the dialectical structure of the *Meditations*, which is written as an implicit debate between an Aristotelian Scholastic, committed to commonsense, and the mature Cartesian who is committed to the claims of reason. See Curley (1986, 157f) and Garber (1986, 99). As both commentators note, this Platonic procedure sometimes issues in false starts but this is part of the process involved in the discovery of new truths.

30 See AT 7:63-64 and AT 8B:166-7.

completed his meditations on first philosophy? Why are we unable to perceive these innate ideas for ourselves? Descartes' answer, I would like to propose, is that although the ideas that constitute the materials of knowledge are innate, our access to these ideas has been encumbered by our over-reliance on the senses and by the prejudices that this over-reliance engenders. Analysis is the method for removing these encumbrances. This is part of what is involved in turning the 'unclear and indistinct ideas of commonsense into ... clear and distinct ideas,' and is what makes analysis 'therapeutic.' Attaining knowledge, then, is not simply a matter of 'awakening' our innate ideas. It requires us to dislodge debilitating prejudices. And this can be achieved only through a rigorous meditative process from which success is not guaranteed.

The questions just posed can be pressed one step further. Why are prejudices, once formed, so recalcitrant and difficult to remove? Why are we unable to shrug them off by a simple act of will? In a few different contexts Descartes suggests an interesting answer to these questions — in a word, 'habits'. I noted in passing above that he conceives prejudices as false judgments typically formed in our youth before possessing full command of our reason. This account of the etiology of our prejudices already suggests that they are habitual, i.e. they are false judgments that we have become accustomed to making. And in at least three places in the corpus, Descartes explicitly asserts that prejudices are ingrained by long practice.[31] For example, at the end of the First Meditation, he observes how difficult it is, even in the face of strong skeptical arguments, to set aside one's former opinions and prejudices:

> [9] My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.... In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weights of prejudices are counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgment from perceiving things correctly. (AT 7:22)

Because they have been ingrained by custom or habit, prejudices cannot be removed by a direct application of the will.[32] Instead, one must employ other cognitive strategies, such as the method of doubt or pretending that one's former opinions are false. The force of habit also helps to explain why Descartes offers *several* skeptical arguments, in an

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31 See AT 7:131 and AT 8A:10-11. The latter is discussed in section V.

32 See Cottingham (1988, 247).

attempt to dislodge our prejudices from all sides, and why he rehearses the hyperbolic doubts at the beginning of the Second and, especially, the Third Meditations. The successful meditator has to be constantly vigilant against backsliding into his former opinions. Even as he makes epistemic strides, these opinions will continue to tug at him until the habits that forged them are finally severed.

Philosophical prejudices, however, are not the only things that have become ingrained by habit. Descartes speaks in many places of our dependence on the senses. Indeed, the root of many of our prejudices as we have seen is the immersion in the deliverances of the senses as children. As a result of this early dependence, we become accustomed to conceiving things by means of sensory images. From Descartes' perspective this habit is one of the primary obstacles to discovering the ideas that God has implanted innately within us. Such ideas can be perceived clearly and distinctly only in a purely intellectual manner. For example, prior to meditating, Descartes thinks we conceived the soul as an airy, tenuous, corporeal substance; in the Second Meditation he compares it to a 'wind or fire or ether, which permeated my more solid parts' (AT 7:26). Only after learning to detach my mind from the senses, and applying the method of doubt, am I able to discover that my soul is a purely thinking thing. The lesson to be drawn here is that dispelling prejudice requires a general program for retraining the mind. Specific prejudices, such as the judgment that the soul is a ghostlike substance that permeates my body, can be dispelled only by breaking the habits that sustain them, especially very basic habits, such as the tendency to conceive things in sensory terms. As a form of philosophical therapy, analysis is therefore concerned as much with breaking vicious habits as it is with dislodging prejudice. Both efforts go hand in hand.

Not all habits are vicious, of course, any more than all beliefs are false. In fact, one of Descartes' primary strategies for breaking vicious habits is to replace them with virtuous ones. This strategy is exemplified in Descartes' efforts to emancipate the meditator from the powerful grip of the senses. Rather than using our senses as a touchstone for truth, we are taught to rely on our intellect as the primary source of knowledge. But old habits are abandoned, and new ones forged, only by degrees and by continual practice. The *Meditations* is written so as to provide several opportunities for these new habits to be formed and Descartes encourages his reader to rehearse the exercises prescribed therein, and even to reread the work itself, several times (AT 7:131).

In closing this section, it is instructive to note several parallels between the present discussion and Descartes' treatment of the passions in his ethical theory. As with our prejudices, Descartes thinks that our passions are often forged by habit. The same motions in our pineal gland that are responsible for producing various thoughts in our soul become associ-

ated by custom with other bodily motions that produce the passions. These habitual associations make the passions difficult to suppress and put them beyond the direct control of our will. As such, they can be mastered only by a process of reconditioning, which involves forging new habits, such that virtuous passions — i.e. those beneficial to the mind-body union — are promoted and sustained.[33]

Thus, there are broad structural similarities between Descartes' epistemology and his ethical theory.[34] In both cases he offers a diagnosis in which the notion of habits figures prominently in accounting for what ails us. He then prescribes an elaborate retraining regimen that involves forming new habits. Success in both instances depends largely on the discipline and commitment of the 'patient,' who must partake in the various cognitive exercises that Descartes prescribes in a faithful and diligent manner.[35] It will be helpful to keep these similarities in mind as we proceed in the next section to investigate specific prejudices and habits associated with our thoughts about God, and as we uncover Descartes' strategies for extirpating them.

V Analysis and the Prejudices Concerning God

1. Two Main Prejudices

In the previous section, I noted that Descartes thinks that most — *but not all* — philosophical prejudices derive from our reliance on the senses. I stress this qualification because the prejudices that harry the meditator in the Fifth Meditation and other texts devoted to the ontological argument are not of the sensory variety. The successful meditator has already extirpated such prejudices and trained his mind to detach from the senses.[36] The prejudices that concern Descartes in the context of the

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33 AT 11:361-70. I have profited here from Cottingham's fascinating discussion of the relation between the will and the passions (1988, 255f). Also see Cottingham (1998).

34 For an extended discussion of the relation between Descartes' epistemology and his ethical theory, see Richard Davies (2001), who also develops the notion of cognitive virtues and vices.

35 One important difference is that while meditation is not for everyone, even the weakest minds supposedly can attain absolute mastery over their passions (AT 11:370).

36 As Descartes writes at the beginning of the Fourth Meditation: 'During these past few days I have accustomed myself to leading my mind away from the senses.... The result is that I now have no difficulty in turning my mind away from imaginable

ontological argument are more technical and subtler than those stemming from the senses.[37] He identifies two such prejudices, both of which must be removed if the meditator is to intuit God's existence. One of them derives from the reader's presumed Scholastic philosophical training, the other from his habit of inventing mental fictions. Although distinct, these prejudices are closely related and reinforce one another, and consequently their dissolution is effected in a similar manner. Understanding them fully will require us to review an important Scholastic tradition and make a brief excursus into Descartes' metaphysics. We shall then examine two analytic devices that Descartes deploys to dispel them.

Descartes' description of these two prejudices appears in three main texts — the Fifth Meditation, the First Replies, and the *Principles*. In this section I shall focus on the latter, since it is the clearest and most explicit of the three, though along the way I shall highlight parallels with the discussion in the Fifth Meditation. One is surprised to find a discussion of prejudices at all in the *Principles* as it is often regarded as a synthetic work. As I noted in the previous section, however, this claim is controversial. My own view is that there are no purely synthetic texts devoted to Cartesian metaphysics. I agree with Curley and Gueroult that the *Principles* is best read as incorporating elements of both analysis and synthesis.[38] Indeed, the very fact that Descartes speaks of prejudices at some places in the *Principles*, and then attempts to dispel them, reveals that we are in the midst of an analytic context.[39]

Descartes begins his discussion of God's existence in the *Principles* (part I) by affirming that it can be known 'simply on the basis of [the

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things and towards things that are objects of the intellect alone and are totally separate from matter' (AT 7:52-3).

37 A referee for this journal notes that the distinction between prejudices that we form due to the senses and those that derive from philosophical training is not always so clear-cut. Indeed, there are some prejudices of scholasticism, such as the belief that colors are in objects, which just are the prejudices of the senses. I fully concur, though I think a difference can still be made out, especially in this case. The scholastic prejudice in question concerns the relation between essence and existence in all things — an abstruse and highly technical issue upon which the senses are (mercifully?) silent.

38 See note 22. Even if I am wrong about the 'hybrid' status of the *Principles*, the points I wish to make on the basis of this text are confirmed independently by the other two.

39 Roughly the first half of the *Principles* (part I) also rehearses the content and methodology of the *Meditations*, including the method of universal doubt.

mind's] perception that necessary and eternal existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being' (AT 8A:10).[40] But to aid readers who might have difficulty forming this perception, he attempts in the next two articles to dispel prejudices associated with the idea of a supremely perfect being. The title of article 16 declares, 'Prejudices [*praejudicia*] prevent the necessity of the existence of God from being clearly recognized by everyone' (AT 8A:10). The article itself specifies these prejudices for us:

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40 It is often noted that the *Principles* reverses the order of the *Meditations* by introducing the ontological argument prior to the causal arguments for God's existence. Another interesting inversion, that has not been noticed, is that the *Principles* begins by affirming that God's existence can be known by clear and distinct perception alone (ibid.). This is passage [4]. Recall that in the Fifth Meditation Descartes introduced this point only after articulating what appear to be two separate arguments for God's existence. Both reversals of order are a function of the synthetic mode of presentation. Regarding the first, Descartes reportedly told Burman that he presented his theistic proofs in the *Meditations* in the order in which he discovered them — again, following the order of discovery associated with analysis. But in the *Principles*, where his purpose is exposition and his procedure synthetic, he reversed them: 'for the method and order of discovery is one thing, and that of exposition another' (AT 5:153) (see note 22). To appreciate this remark, it helps to recall that the synthetic method takes for granted the primary notions or axioms of the subject matter under study. It makes no attempt to remove philosophical prejudices or to facilitate the reader's discovery of her innate ideas of God, the self, body, etc. In effect, it assumes that such ideas are already clear and distinct, and is primarily concerned with expositing the truth in a manner conducive to recitation and rote memorization (AT 7:157). This approach is in keeping with Descartes' wish that the *Principles* replace what he regarded as outmoded Scholastic textbooks (AT 3:232-3). The primary goal of a textbook, as he conceived it, is not to engage the reader's intellect or to facilitate self-discovery but to indoctrinate. If the *Principles* had been a purely synthetic work, which it clearly is not (see Garber and Cohen, 1982), Descartes could have terminated his discussion of the so-called ontological argument at the assertion that God's existence is axiomatic and omitted reference to the causal arguments altogether. In fact, a purely synthetic work would have begun with this axiom and then derived from it all the other aspects of the Cartesian system. But as we have seen, metaphysics does not admit of a purely synthetic treatment and, perhaps because he knew that students would not be his only readers, Descartes could not resist the temptation to employ the analytic apparatus of the *Meditations*. Thus after asserting in article 14 that God's existence may be intuited immediately, he attempts in articles 15 and 16 to dispel prejudices associated with the idea of a supremely perfect being. The causal arguments are introduced in the five articles following these as a kind of last resort, to assist readers who are so deeply mired in prejudices that they must be nursed on Scholastic causal principles even to begin to apprehend God's existence. Our focus is confined to articles 15 and 16, which closely parallel the discussion in the Fifth Meditation.

> [10] Our mind will ... easily accept this [i.e. that God exists], provided that it has first entirely freed itself from prejudices. But because it is our habit to distinguish essence from existence in all other things, and because it is also our habit to invent at will various ideas of things which do not exist, nor ever did exist; it easily happens that when we are not completely intent on the contemplation of the supremely perfect being, we may doubt whether that idea is perhaps one of those which we invented, or at least one of those which does not include existence in their essence. (AT 8A:10-11)

We are alerted to two different prejudices in this passage, one resulting from our habit of inventing ideas of things which do not exist, the other from the habit — inculcated as we shall see by Scholastic philosophical training — of distinguishing a thing's essence from its existence.

The reference not just to prejudices but to the habits that produce and sustain them is quite striking given our discussion at the end of the last section. As discussed there, most prejudices derive from very basic habits, such as the tendency to conceive things in sensory terms or to treat our senses as touchstones for the nature of objects outside the mind. In this case, the habits in question do not concern the senses but are equally pernicious in the prejudices they engender and help explain why these prejudices are so intractable. As before, to dispel them we must break the habits that give them life.

For the purposes of discussion, let us formulate the two prejudices stated in this passage as follows (the order is arbitrary):

1) My idea of God *qua* necessarily existing being is a mental fiction that I invented.

2) There is a distinction in reality between God's essence and his existence.

My reasons for stating them in just these terms will become apparent as we proceed. It is important to note that Descartes articulates these same two prejudices in the Fifth Meditation. For example, he worries whether his idea of God is 'something fictitious that is dependent on my thought...' (AT 7:68). He also acknowledges the force of the second prejudice: 'Since I have been accustomed to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing' (AT 7:66).

2. The Origin of the First Prejudice

To appreciate Descartes' strategies for extirpating these prejudices, we must first trace their etiology. Notice that the first prejudice involves an issue that was treated with some care in the Third Meditation, long prior

to the discussion of the ontological argument in the Fifth Meditation. In that earlier meditation he was also concerned to establish that his idea of God, *qua* actually infinite being, is not invented. If it were invented then there would be no reason to posit an infinite being as its cause. The meditator, with his finite intellect, could be the cause, just as he is the cause of many ideas that have no existence outside thought. In ways that I will not rehearse here, Descartes thinks he is able to establish that his idea of God is not invented but innate — the 'mark of the craftsman stamped on his work' (AT 7:51). In the Fifth Meditation, however, he returns to the issue, insisting after lengthy discussion that his idea of God is innate (AT 7:68). One should wonder, if the origin of our idea of a supremely perfect being had already been discovered, why does Descartes revisit the question in the Fifth Meditation?[41]

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41 There are many important and yet to be developed connections between the causal and ontological arguments of the Third and Fifth Meditations. One issue already broached concerns the order and relation between Descartes' theistic proofs. In note 40, I offered an explanation as to why Descartes inverts the order of his theistic proofs in the quasi-synthetic context of the *Principles*, but does the analytic method explain why the causal arguments appear first in the *Meditations*? In answering this question, one should recall that analysis takes as its starting point the reader's own state of prejudice and habitual ways of thinking. I suggest that Descartes began with the causal arguments largely because he presumed that his reader would have been inculcated with Aquinas' famous Five Ways and with the Scholastic causal principles that underwrite them. But he subtly adapts the traditional causal or cosmological argument to suit his own purposes, one of which is to prepare the reader for a direct intuition of God's existence in the Fifth Meditation.

Descartes' adaptation of the cosmological argument must take account of the fact that the meditator has withdrawn from the senses and has turned inward toward her purely intellectual ideas. Moreover, in light of the method of doubt, Descartes cannot take as his premise an ontological claim about the universe known by the senses. At this point in the analytic order he is certain only that he exists as a thinking thing. Consequently, his version of the argument proceeds from the *idea* of God; as a thinking thing he is certain that he has ideas that present various things to his mind, even if the objects presented do not exist outside thought. The 'effect' which stands in need of a sufficient cause is the idea of an actually infinite being who is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly benevolent, etc. This difference is crucial to Descartes' purposes. By proceeding from the idea of God, he is able to lead the meditator ultimately to a direct intuition of God, without the need of causal principles. In the Fifth Meditation, we simply clearly and distinctly perceive that necessary existence is included in the idea of such a being, along with all other perfections already enumerated. The causal arguments are thus formulated with an eye to the simpler and more elegant ontological argument that comes later. It is likely that Descartes relished in the irony, given Aquinas' vehement denial that God's existence is self-evident to us (see section III), that he had shown how the traditional cosmological argument can be transformed into an immediate intuition. For more on the causal argument and its place in the Third Meditation, see Menn (1993).

Answering this question requires us to consider how invented ideas are formed. Interestingly, Descartes holds a compositional theory of fictitious ideas, much like his empiricist successors.[42] According to this theory, invented ideas are formed by arbitrarily combining other ideas, or elements of other ideas, in one's thought. The painter analogy in the First Meditation provides one statement of this theory but it is also confirmed by remarks about fictitious composites in the context of the ontological argument itself: one forms the idea of Pegasus, e.g., by combining the ideas of horse and wingedness.[43] By its very nature or structure, a fictitious composite cannot be distinct in Descartes' definitional sense of clarity and distinctness: a distinct idea is one that is 'sharply separated from all other perceptions...' (AT 8A:22). But if an idea is not clear and distinct then it cannot be relied upon to reveal the true nature of reality.

Consider now what was discovered about the idea of God in the Third Meditation. There the meditator attempts to prove God's existence, using causal principles, from the idea of such a being. Descartes thinks that one attraction of this method of proof is that it demonstrates the existence of a certain *kind* of God, namely one who is omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, infinite, etc. (see e.g. AT 8A:13). We achieve this latter result by unveiling the contents of our clear and distinct idea of God. In the Third Meditation Descartes provides two lists of divine attributes (AT 7:40, 45). Noticeably absent from these lists, however, is 'necessary existence.' To discover the other attributes it was sufficient for the meditator to train her mind to withdraw from the senses and to conceive God through the intellect alone. Necessary existence, however, is much more elusive. Much of the difficulty would seem to lie with the nature of the attribute to be perceived. It is one thing to perceive that the idea of God includes, say, omnipotence, quite another to determine whether necessary existence is properly included. For only in clearly and distinctly perceiving the latter are we compelled to conclude that God exists.[44] Such a result could raise suspicions about whether we are dealing with a true idea or one of those false, invented ideas that lack existential import. So although it was established in the Third Meditation

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42 See Walter Edelberg (1990), Nelson (1997), and Wilson (1978).

43 See e.g. AT 7:117f. Perhaps most telling is Descartes' use of the Latin word *componere* (literally, 'to put together') to refer to the act by which invented ideas are formed in thought.

44 Here I rely on the well established Cartesian doctrine that clear and distinct perceptions are assent-compelling (see e.g. AT 8A:21).

that the idea of God is innate, the question now is whether the idea of God *qua* necessary being is innate. The meditator may judge that he has corrupted or 'fictionalized' the true idea of God discovered in the Third Meditation by superadding necessary existence to it. This is where the compositional theory of invented ideas comes into play. In perceiving that my idea of God contains necessary existence have I merely unveiled one of its further contents or have I, perhaps in one of my imaginative reveries, illicitly superadded another idea to it?[45]

3. The Distinction between Essence and Existence

I turn now to the origin of the second prejudice, which reinforces the suspicion that the idea of God *qua* necessary being is invented. Unlike the first, this prejudice is more technical in nature and derives from Scholastic philosophy in which most of Descartes' readers would have received their formal education. To understand it fully, we must embark on a brief excursus into Scholastic and Cartesian metaphysics.

There is a long medieval tradition dating back to Boethius in the sixth century, but which receives its full flowering in Aquinas and later Scholastic thinkers, of distinguishing a finite thing's essence from its existence. A debate about the exact nature of this distinction produced three main positions:[46]

1) The Theory of Real Distinction

2) The Theory of Formal or Modal Distinction

3) The Theory of Rational Distinction

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45 I take this to be the force of the following statement from the First Replies: 'we do not distinguish what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect. So, even if we observe clearly enough that existence belongs to the essence of God, we do not draw the conclusion that God exists, because we do not know whether his essence is immutable and true, or merely invented by us' (AT 7:116).

Descartes tells Gassendi that when we discover more perfections in our clear and distinct idea of God, we are not 'augmenting' that idea, but simply making it more distinct (AT 7:371). Whether we are 'augmenting' or 'discovering' depends of course on whether the idea is clear and distinct, and remains so.

46 For a fuller treatment of these positions, see Étienne Gilson (1952) and John Wippel (1982a).

Aquinas was one of the leading proponents of the first position, which he developed as a way to mark the theological divide between God and created beings. Like many Scholastic philosophers, he believed that God is perfectly simple and that created beings, in contrast, have a composite character that accounts for their finitude, contingency, and imperfection. Some previous medieval philosophers attempted to locate this character in the composition of matter and form, but Aquinas rejected the doctrine of universal hylomorphism on the ground that purely spiritual creatures such as angels lack matter. He appealed to the real composition and distinction of essence and existence as an alternative way of differentiating created beings from God, whose essence just is to exist.

Thomistic scholars sometimes say that Aquinas treated essence and existence in created entities as two different 'principles of being,' neither of which can exist independently from the other.[47] But as a result of some unfortunate expressions of the doctrine by some of Aquinas' followers, the theory of real distinction came to be understood in more extreme terms. In particular, it came to be regarded as a distinction between *two things* (*duae res*); on this view, actual existence is a thing added to an essence, which enjoys an attenuated form of being (*esse essentiae*) eternally in God independent of his creative activity.[48] This doctrine of *duae res* was later excoriated by various Scholastic Nominalists both because it reified essences and existences, and because it seemed to violate the theological doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.[49]

In response to these and other objections, some Scholastic philosophers developed a position at the polar extreme from the theory of real distinction. This was the view that there is merely a rational distinction or, literally, a 'distinction of reason' (*distinctio rationis*) between essence and existence in creatures (position 3)). Using language that was delib-

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47 See e.g. Gilson (1952, 172-6) and Wippel (1982a, 395).

48 Here the main culprit is Giles of Rome (c.1243-1316) whose treatment of the real distinction, shortly after the death of Aquinas, became the standard. For example, when defining the real distinction, the sixteenth-century Scholastic Francisco Suárez uses the words not of Aquinas but of Giles 'whose personal terminology had done much to obscure the genuine meaning of the doctrine' (Gilson, 1952, 99-100). Also see Wippel (1981, 43-5; 1982a, 397-8 and 1982b). Norman Wells suggests that this corruption of Aquinas' original position is not completely due to his followers, as Thomists such as Capreolus, Soncinas, Cajetan — and even, at times, Giles himself — offer disclaimers that essence and existence are not *duo entia* (Introduction to Suárez, 1983, 7).

49 For examples of the latter criticism, see Pedro Fonseca (1964, 4, 2, q.4, 1) Secada, (2000, 215), and Suárez (1965, 31.2.1-4; 1983, 57-60). For the general point, see Wippel (1981, 44).

erately intended to counter the theory of real distinction, proponents of this view often asserted that there is a 'real identity' between the essence and existence of a created being; the distinction between them is confined to our thought or to reason.[50] Needless to say, proponents of this theory were forced to distinguish created beings from God on grounds other than the real composition of essence and existence.

There was yet another group of Scholastic thinkers who, while sympathetic with Nominalist objections to the theory of real distinction, thought that advocates of the rational distinction had gone too far. In particular, they urged that if there were a real identity between essence and existence in all things, then creatures would exist necessarily. One should say exclusively of God that his essence is to exist.[51] These philosophers attempted to stake out various intermediate positions, the most famous being Duns Scotus' notion of a 'formal' or 'modal' distinction. On Scotus' view, essence and existence are distinct in reality but not as two separate things; existence is a mode or 'formality' of an essence but inseparable from it.[52]

Like Francisco Suárez, his most immediate Scholastic predecessor, Descartes espouses the third position in our triad, the theory of rational distinction. A few commentators have argued that Descartes appropriates much of his account of the distinction between essence and existence, and the theory of distinction generally, from Suárez.[53] Suárez was by no means the only Scholastic advocate of the rational distinction, but there are certain distinctive features of his account that find their way into Descartes'. In expositing Descartes' account, I will highlight some of these common features, though I begin with an important difference between their views.

Unlike Suárez, Descartes' account of the distinction between essence and existence is part of a more general account of the nature and relation between what he terms the 'attributes' of a substance. In articulating his general theory of distinctions in the *Principles*, Descartes claims that there

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50 On the real identity of essence and existence, see e.g. Suárez (1965; 31.1.12, 31.4.3, 31.6.23).

51 See e.g. Fonseca (1964, 4, 2, q.4, 1) and Secada's discussion of this text (2000, 218).

52 The exact nature of Scotus' position is controversial. In any case, Scotus clearly held that the distinction between essence and existence is 'something more than a mere distinction of reason, and something less than a real distinction' (Wippel, 1982a, 407).

53 See Gilson (1979, 87), Secada (2000, ch.8), and Wells (1966).

is merely a distinction of reason between a substance and any one of its attributes, or between any two attributes of a single substance (AT 8A:30).[54] This is intended to be a general claim, to include both created substances and God. Among created substances, the paradigm of a rational distinction is that which obtains between a substance and its essence — or what Descartes sometimes refers to as its 'principal attribute' (AT 8A:25). So, since thought and extension constitute the essence of my mind and body, respectively, my mind is merely rationally distinct from its thinking and my body is merely rationally distinct from its extension (AT 8A:31). But Descartes insists that a rational distinction also obtains between any two attributes of a substance. Since existence qualifies as an attribute in this technical sense (AT 8A:26), the essence and existence of a substance are also distinct merely *ratione*.

Descartes reaffirms this conclusion in a letter intended to elucidate his account of the relation between essence and existence:

> [11] I do not remember where I spoke of the distinction between essence and existence. However, I make a distinction between modes, strictly so called, and attributes, without which the things whose attributes they are cannot be.... Thus shape and motion are modes, in the strict sense of corporeal substance ... [and] love, hatred, affirmation, doubt, and so on are true modes in the mind. But existence, duration, size, number and all universals are not, it seems to me, modes in the strict sense; nor in this sense are justice, mercy, and so on modes in God. They are referred to by a broader term and called attributes, or modes of thinking [*modi cogitandi*] ... *because we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing*; but the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence.... Accordingly I say that ... there is a lesser distinction between [them].... I call it a rational distinction. (AT 4:349; emphasis added)

This is the central Cartesian text on the relation between essence and existence. As such, I will save most of my comments on it for the larger discussion below. Suffice to say here that Descartes is quite explicit in affirming that there is merely a distinction of reason between essence and existence in all things, both created and divine.

As mentioned above, Scholastic defenders of the theory of rational distinction maintained that the essence and existence of a thing are identical in reality. While Descartes is not quite as candid about his commitment to this principle as his predecessors, it can be inferred from other things he says in the passage just considered. In particular, one can infer it from the account he appears to borrow from Suárez of how one

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54 For interpretations of Descartes' theory of distinctions, see e.g. Paul Hoffman (2002), Nolan (1998), Secada (2000), and Wells (1966).

produces a rational distinction in thought. Of the three kinds of distinction recognized by the tradition, the distinction of reason is unique; whereas the real and modal distinctions obtain in things (*in rerum natura*), the distinction of reason is confined to, and produced by, thought or reason — hence the term. It is thus incumbent upon the advocate of such a distinction to explain how exactly we produce such a distinction. Suárez and Descartes both maintain that we do so by regarding a single thing in different ways. For example, speaking generally, Suárez asserts that rational distinctions are produced by conceiving a single 'real entity' in diverse ways (*diversis modis*) or by conceiving things 'which are not distinct as though they were distinct' (DM 7.1.6). Of the specific distinction at hand, he writes: 'it must be said that essence and existence are the same thing but that it is conceived of under the aspect [*ratione*] of essence ... [and] under the aspect [*ratione*] of existence...' (DM 31.6.23).

Descartes uses very similar language in passage [11] to describe how we draw a distinction between essence and existence. He begins by referring to attributes, as he had in the *Principles*, as 'modes' or ways of thinking, which already suggests that we produce rational distinctions by regarding a single thing in various abstract ways.[55] He then asserts more explicitly that we 'understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing.' This account provides very strong evidence that, like Suárez and Scholastic proponents of this position generally, Descartes holds that the essence and existence of a substance are the 'same thing' in reality and that the distinction between them is confined to our thought. Indeed, in the continuation of passage [11], he asserts that outside thought the essence and existence of a triangle are 'in no way distinct' (ibid.).

The doctrine of real identity raises an important theological problem for the advocate of the distinction of reason. As noted above, Aquinas and others originally invoked the notion of a real distinction to mark the theological gap between God — the sole necessary beingand finite, created beings. By asserting that essence and existence are identical in all things, proponents of the rational distinction appear to erase this gap. Indeed, if essence and existence are identical in all things, and not merely in God, then it seems to follow that finite beings necessarily exist.

Scholastic defenders of the rational distinction between essence and existence were well aware of this objection and regarded this distinction, and the distinction between God and created beings, as independent

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55 See AT 8A:26-7. This is likely the passage to which he refers at the beginning of [11].

issues.[56] They thought they could affirm an identity between essence and existence in all things while also avoiding the abhorrent consequence that finite beings exist necessarily. Descartes concurs in this judgment and, I shall argue, avoids this difficulty himself by distinguishing two different grades or kinds of existence.

To approach Descartes' answer to this objection we must first introduce a couple pieces of conceptual machinery. As already noted, Descartes thinks that we produce a rational distinction in our thought by a process of intellectual abstraction. Like many early modern figures, Descartes conceives abstraction in terms of selective attention; we abstract by selectively attending to one or more of the contents of our idea of something, while ignoring others. For example, as noted above, one abstracts from the idea of a substance by attending only to its essence and ignoring whether or not it exists or, alternatively, by attending only to its existence and ignoring its essence. Descartes opposes abstraction to a more radical mental operation that he terms 'exclusion'. When performing a mental exclusion one is not simply ignoring some feature of an idea but actively denying it. Some exclusions can be performed clearly and distinctly, others cannot. The most important example of clear and distinct exclusion within Descartes' system occurs in the proof of real distinction. In that case, one attends to the clear and distinct ideas of both mind and body and mutually excludes one from the other.[57]

The distinction between abstraction and exclusion figures prominently in Descartes' criterion of a rational distinction. In the *Principles*, he says that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of a substance if we *exclude* one of its attributes from it or, in the case of two attributes (such as essence and existence), if we *exclude* one from the other (AT 8A:30). If essence and existence were really or modally distinct, then we could perform this clear and distinct exclusion.[58] (As we shall see below, Descartes draws on this point in formulating the second prejudice. The criterion for a rational distinction also figures prominently in at least one of his strategies for extirpating our prejudices concerning God.) We produce a rational distinction then by a process of intellectual abstraction, but the test for

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56 For Suárez's awareness of this problem, and his attempt to resolve it, see 1965, 31.6.13-15; 1983, 95-6. Also see Gilson (1952, 63), Secada (2000, 217f), and Wells' Introduction to Suárez (1983, 14-15).

57 For Descartes' account of abstraction and exclusion, see AT 3:475-6, Murdoch (1993), and Wells (1966).

58 For the role of exclusion in the real and modal distinctions, see Murdoch (1993, 40f) and Wells (1966, 110f).

whether two things are merely rationally distinct is the inability to exclude one from the other by a clear and distinct mental operation.

The criterion for a rational distinction provides a way of expressing the claim that two things are merely rationally distinct in conceptual terms. So, for example, to say that the existence of a substance is merely rationally distinct from the substance itself is to say that existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of that substance (and therefore cannot be excluded). Descartes expresses himself in precisely this way in the First and Second Replies and, in the process, draws our attention to an important distinction between two kinds of existence:

> [12] we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. (AT 7:116-17)

> [13] Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being. (AT 7:166)

The insight that one cannot conceive anything except as existing is often mistakenly credited to Hume and Kant. Here we find Descartes expressing his own commitment to this principle, though with important qualifications. First, he restricts the principle to clear and distinct ideas. Second, and more importantly, he distinguishes two different kinds of existence — contingent and necessary. The latter qualification requires us to make an important addendum to the theory of rational distinction: what we should say, strictly speaking, is that God is merely rationally distinct from his *necessary* existence and that a finite substance is merely rationally distinct from its *possible* or *contingent* existence.

Descartes' distinction between two kinds of existence provides him with the means for solving the theological problem in a more elegant way than the Scholastics, while relying on resources that they would find amenable. As we have seen, Aquinas and others invoked the notion of a real or modal distinction to mark the gap between God and created things. But on Descartes' view, essence and existence are identical in all things and distinguished solely within our thought. Descartes marks the gap instead by appealing to the two kinds of existence. God is identical with his necessary existence, while every created thing is identical with its possible or contingent existence. The theological division so precious to the faith is built into the very nature of being itself.[59]

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59 For an alternative account of how Descartes resolves the theological problem, see

The distinction between two kinds of existence also provides Descartes with a clear-cut strategy for blocking an ontological argument for the existence of finite things. One of the classical objections to the ontological argument is that, if it were valid, one could proliferate such arguments for supremely perfect islands, etc. To appreciate the Cartesian reply, one must unpack what Descartes means by 'necessary existence' and 'contingent existence.' It is tempting to suppose that 'necessary existence' means something like 'existence that follows from the concept of a thing' (a logical notion). But this cannot be right, for Descartes holds that the clear and distinct idea of God contains *necessary* existence, not existence *simpliciter*. A much more plausible suggestion is that Descartes understood necessary existence in terms of the medieval notion of 'aseity' (*a se esse*) or ontic independence. Medieval philosophers often spoke of God as the sole 'necessary being,' by which they meant a being who is uncreated and depends only on himself for his existence. It follows from this that God has neither a beginning nor an end, but is eternal.[60] Descartes indicates that he has this notion of necessary existence, as he sometimes speaks of God's 'necessary and eternal existence'

Secada (2000, 218). At one place in the corpus, Descartes appears to suggest that the distinction between essence and existence is different in the case of God as compared with the case of finite beings: 'the existence of a triangle should not be compared with the existence of God, since the relation between existence and essence is manifestly quite different in the case of God from what it is in the case of the triangle. God is his own existence, but this is not true of the triangle' (AT 7:383). This passage must be read very carefully, however, in light of its context. In the objection to which Descartes is responding, Gassendi had argued that existence cannot be separated from the essence of a triangle anymore than it can be separated from the essence of God, but that it does not thereby follow that either a triangle or God exists (AT 7:323). Descartes responds by trying to stress the difference in the grade of existence associated with God as opposed to finite things such as triangles. Actual existence follows from the idea of God, and not from the idea of a triangle, because the former uniquely contains necessary existence. This explains why he begins by insisting, 'the existence of a triangle should not be compared with the existence of God.' It is further confirmed by what he says in the continuation of this passage: 'I do not, however, deny that possible existence is a perfection in the idea of a triangle, just as necessary existence is a perfection in the idea of God' (op. cit.). Descartes' point then is not that the distinction between essence and existence is any different in God and finite things; in both cases essence and existence are identical in reality and distinguished only *ratione*. His point is rather that actual existence follows from the idea of God alone, as it uniquely contains necessary existence. Descartes' remarks to Hyperaspistes on this same issue, though more compressed, admit of the same reading, as the discussion concerns the very passage from the Fifth Replies (AT 3:433; see CSM 3:196, note 2).

60 For a fuller treatment of the notion of 'aseity,' see John Hick (1989, 12-24).

(see e.g. AT 8A:10).[61] In one place, he even analyzes necessary existence as that which 'can exist by its own power' (AT 7:119). This account also squares with Descartes' definition of substance in terms of ontological independence. In the *Principles* he asserts that a substance is 'a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence.' He then notes that only God is a substance in this strict sense, as only God is completely independent of all other things (AT 8A:24). If 'necessary existence' means independent existence then 'contingent existence,' with which it is directly contrasted, must mean dependent existence. This is not the logical sense of 'contingent' but the sense that figures into some formulations of the cosmological argument.[62] This analysis squares with Descartes' definition of finite substance as that which depends on *nothing but God* for its existence (AT 8A:25).

It should be clear from this understanding of the distinction between both kinds of existence why Descartes thought we could produce an ontological 'argument' for God but not for finite things. From the clear and distinct idea of God we intuit that such a being always exists from its own power, but from the corresponding ideas of finite things we intuit only that if it exists, then its existence is dependent. To know whether it actually exists, we must, among other things, first establish that the thing upon which it depends (*viz.* God) exists. The *cogito* might seem like an exception to this general rule, but even here there are strong indications in Descartes' writings that we do not have perfect knowledge of anything, including our own existence, until we establish the existence of a supremely perfect creator.[63]

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61 Descartes is not always careful to specify God's *necessary* existence. In the Fifth Meditation for example he writes, 'For what is more manifest than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?' (AT 7:69) But here he is not so concerned to distinguish God's necessary existence from the contingent existence of creatures. Moreover, the French edition of this work adds, 'in the idea of whom alone necessary and eternal existence is comprised' (AT 9A:55).

62 Neither 'necessary existence' nor 'contingent existence,' then, are intended as logical notions. Here I have profited from the entry on 'contingent' in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Robert Audi, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 158. As its author (Raymond D. Bradley) observes, modally speaking, 'contingent' and 'necessary' are not contradictories (rather 'necessary' is opposed to 'non-necessary' and 'contingent' to 'non-contingent'), which is further reason for thinking that Descartes had some other kind of opposition in mind.

63 See, aptly, the end of the Fifth Meditation (AT 7:71).

4. The Dissolution of the Prejudices Concerning God

With this excursus into Scholastic and Cartesian metaphysics complete, we now have the resources for understanding the origin of the second prejudice concerning God and Descartes' strategies for extirpating it. In stating the second prejudice in passage [10] from the *Principles*, Descartes refers to the habit of distinguishing essence from existence in the case of all finite beings. He then observes that as a result of this habit we might mistakenly judge that God is one of those beings 'which do not include existence in their essence' (AT 8A:10-11). He makes similar points in the Fifth Meditation and in the First Replies (AT 7:66, 116). It is clear from these passages that Descartes assumed his reader would have been steeped in the real and modal traditions on the distinction between essence and existence. On the theory of rational distinction that Descartes favors, existence is included in the clear and distinct idea of every single thing and cannot be excluded, even from the ideas of finite beings, but only abstracted in the weak sense previously described. But someone trained in the other two traditions — which again held essence and existence to be distinct in reality — would have formed the habit of *excluding* existence from the essence of finite beings.[64] That Descartes regarded the other traditions as having greater currency is further confirmed by one of his exchanges with Burman. There he reportedly refers to the real distinction between essence and existence, in particular, as the 'customary distinction' (AT 5:164).[65]

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64 At least as Descartes understands the modal and real distinctions, which both involve exclusion. See AT 8A:29-30 and Wells (1966).

65 See Secada (2000, 215f). In a letter to Hyperaspistes, Descartes appears to deny that the real distinction is the most common one in the Schools: 'someone whose eyes are unsteady may take one thing for two, as people often do when drunk; and philosophers may do the like, *not when they distinguish essence from existence — because normally they do not suppose any greater distinction between them than there really is* — but when in the same body they make a distinction between the matter, the form and the various accidents as if they were so many different things' (AT 3:435, emphasis added). I do not think this text should be read as contradicting what he tells Burman. For one thing, this offhand remark appears in a peculiar context. The topic is not the relation between essence and existence per se, but the real distinction of mind and body. I suspect that Descartes is referring exclusively here to the Scholastic Nominalists and/or to Scholastic defenders of the rational distinction, many of whom — though they did not reify essence and existencehypostatized matter, forms, and real accidents. He certainly could not have been referring to the Scholastics collectively for, as we have seen, they disagreed among themselves on how to understand this distinction and these disagreements were well documented by Suárez (among others), whose work was widely revered by Descartes' Jesuit

Allow me to stress once again that Scholastic proponents of the real and modal distinctions restricted these distinctions to finite, created beings, and wanted to say in contrast that God's essence just is to exist. But Descartes understood that deeply ingrained habits are difficult to break and often exercised unreflectively (see AT 8A:35-7). Someone who has become accustomed to attributing a distinction in reality to created beings might mistakenly extend this distinction to God (especially in the context of the ontological argument where one is being asked to consider God's essence initially in abstraction from whether he exists or not). This is how a confused reader would have formed the second prejudice. From the perspective of Descartes' own theory of the relation between essence and existence, both the second prejudice and the Scholastic habit that produced it are mistakes. It is just as wrong to ascribe a real or modal distinction between essence and existence to created beings as it is to ascribe such distinctions to God.

Given its source, the most powerful way of defeating the second prejudice would be to break the habit itself, which in fact is Descartes' strategy. To suppose that there is a real distinction between essence and existence abroad in all things would be to exclude existence from our clear and distinct concepts. But Descartes thinks that if we reflect on the matter carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive anything except as existing. Existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of every single thing. In fact, if the meditator is having trouble intuiting that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God, it helps to turn to the clear and distinct ideas of finite things, and to observe that a certain grade of existence is contained therein. Repeated reflection on this fact will break one of the habit of ascribing to all things a distinction in reality between essence and existence. This then is the force of passages such as [12] and [13].

Descartes' strategy for defeating the first prejudice is a variation on this same device. Recall that the reader whose mind is confused by this prejudice falsely judges that he has 'fictionalized' his innate idea of God by combining it with the idea of necessary existence. To form such a composite in the mind, however, one would have to derive the idea of necessary existence from some other source, perhaps by abstraction from the idea of some finite thing. But this is not possible. A careful survey of

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teachers. However one reads the remarks to Hyperaspistes, they are outweighed by Descartes' published writings. As noted above, in the Fifth Meditation, the First Replies, and the Principles Descartes affirms that we habitually exclude existence from the essence of all finite things. As he understood it, exclusion is associated with the real and modal distinctions.

our clear and distinct ideas reveals that necessary existence is unique to our idea of God. As we have seen, Descartes stresses this point in both [12] and [13]. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the clear and distinct ideas of all finite things, while necessary existence is peculiar to the idea of a supremely perfect being. We could not have derived the idea of necessary existence from any other source.

He stressed this same point in passage [3] from the Geometrical Exposition. This again is one of the main passages where he affirms that God's existence is ultimately self-evident. To help his readers discover this fact he makes an urgent request of them:

> Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a train of reasoning, will make them realize that God exists.... (AT 7:163-164)[66]

At first sight, this request seemed baffling, but put in the proper context the motivation is now clear. The aim of Descartes' plea is therapeutic. Observing that necessary existence is unique to the idea of God is a useful analytic exercise for overcoming the prejudice that we have invented such an idea. Once such prejudices are removed, God's existence will be self-evident.

In the end, Descartes defeats the first prejudice by turning it on its head. Perceiving that the idea of God contains necessary existence led us to suspect that this idea might be one of those fictions that our mind is prone to fashion. But rather than invigorating doubts about the origin of our idea of God, the fact that it (uniquely) includes necessary existence confirms that this idea is innate and not invented.

VI Conclusion

One of the primary aims of this paper has been to illustrate, using the ontological argument as a case study, a general thesis about the role and status of proof in Descartes' mature philosophy. Commentators have

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66 He reiterates this point in the *Principles*: 'The mind will be even more inclined to accept this [i.e. that God exists] if it considers that it cannot find within itself an idea of any other thing such that necessary existence is seen to be contained in the idea in this way. And from this it understands that the idea of a supremely perfect being is not an idea which was invented by the mind, or which represents some chimera, but that it represents a true and immutable nature which cannot but exist, since necessary existence is contained within it' (AT 8A:10).

long wondered about the relation between the method of the early *Rules* and that of the later *Meditations* and *Principles*. Some have suggested that the non-formalist account of inference that one finds in the former survives in the later works but, perhaps with the exception of the *cogito*, no notable instance of this suggestion has been fully developed. The present paper has attempted to fill this void with the hope of inspiring further applications of the general thesis to other Cartesian arguments and doctrines.

In developing the interpretation, I have tried to show how Descartes' theory of inference is linked to the method of analysis, which as commentators are beginning to concur constitutes one of the keys to his philosophy. The injunction of the *Rules* to reduce deductions, or chains of intuitions, to single intuitions is achieved in large measure in the mature work by means of various analytic devices, which are designed to dispel prejudice and to engender clear and distinct ideas. I have argued that analysis, so conceived, should be regarded as a form of philosophical therapy.

This paper has benefited from several excellent treatments of the analytic method and related topics in the secondary literature, but I have tried to break new ground in several ways.[67] First, I have developed the relation between analysis and Descartes' nativism. Descartes holds that the 'seeds of knowledge' are innate but that our access to them has been encumbered by various philosophical prejudices. Analysis is the method for removing these encumbrances so that our innate ideas can be clearly and distinctly perceived. Second, I have uncovered the role that habits play in promoting and sustaining our prejudices. Because they are ingrained by habit, prejudices — like the passions of the soulare not under the direct control of the will. The habitual nature of our prejudices explains why they are so difficult to extirpate and is one reason, notwithstanding Descartes' nativism, that an elaborate regimen of meditation is required to attain knowledge. Third, whereas previous treatments of the notion of a philosophical prejudice have tended to focus on those deriving from the soul's reliance on the senses, I have argued that Descartes was concerned to stem other sources of prejudice as well, such as technical training in Scholasticism. Fourth, I have developed two specific prejudices associated with the idea of God, and then traced how Descartes attempts to disabuse us of them. I hope to have shown that analysis is not merely an abstract concept but a practical notion that yields specific principles for interpreting Cartesian texts and doctrines. Some treat-

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67 See the works listed in note 19 and Hatfield (1986), Marlies (1978), and Vendler (1989).

ments of analysis have been overly narrow in their focus, suggesting for example that the method is fully constituted by Socratic dialectic.[68] I have argued, in contrast, that analysis comprises a wide range of cognitive exercises and heuristic devices. This broader conception has the virtue of uncovering the relation between various forms of Cartesian method, specifically between analysis and the method of doubt; the latter is merely one instancealbeit the most significant — of an analytic device. Universal doubt is subsumed under the method of analysis.

This account of the analytic method, and its relation to Descartes' theory of inference, has important implications for how we interpret his philosophy generally and may even call for reform in how we approach other historical figures. For many commentators, one goal of studying the history of philosophy is to understand a thinker's body of work on its own terms, without anachronistically importing contemporary intuitions and ways of framing philosophical questions. Contemporary assumptions may enter into the evaluative phase of one's inquiry but not the descriptive or exegetical phase. Failure in this regard is easier than it might seem, for some assumptions that we bring to an historical figure, supposing we are aware of them, appear to be innocuous. Just so, it is a great truism of much contemporary philosophy, and perhaps the history of philosophy generally, that philosophers trade in arguments and that logical argumentation is the primary way in which one should convince others of the truth of philosophical positions and theories. Commentators on Descartes often take for granted that he is writing in this same tradition and hence adopt the task of locating his arguments in the corpus and searching for valid formulations. When the argument inevitably appears inadequate, they resort to supplying what they conceive as missing premises or, in the absence of actual proofs, of showing how Descartes might have argued given other commitments.

The central thesis of this paper suggests that this entire approach, though well intentioned, is deeply misguided as interpretation. Given the account of deduction that one finds in the *Rules* and that is later exemplified in the so-called ontological argument, the very notion of a Cartesian 'argument' is highly problematic. A 'proof,' if one is to use that term, is not a matter of having a certain logical form, not an expression of logical relations between propositions, but a psychological process whereby prejudices which have been contingently formed are dispelled so as to produce clear and distinct ideas. Descartes is not averse to employing more traditional (syllogistic) arguments, but even these serve

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68 See note 29.

as heuristic devices designed to induce clear and distinct perceptions. In light of this situation, how are we to understand Descartes' 'proof' that he is a thinking thing, that mind and body are really distinct, that bodies exist independently of thought, or any of the other famous proofs associated with Cartesian philosophy? If the central thesis of this paper is correct, all of these 'arguments' demand careful reinterpretation.[69]

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