

Descartes's Ontological Proof: Cause and Divine Perfection

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Some commentators have worried that Descartes's ontological proof is a kind of afterthought, redundancy, or even embarrassment. Descartes has everything needed to establish God as the ground of certainty by Meditation Three, so why bother with yet another proof in Meditation Five? Some have even gone so far as to doubt his sincerity.¹ Past literature on this topic is of daunting variety and magnitude, dating back to the seventeenth century.² The current discussion has focused on Descartes's premises in relation to the coherence of his concept of God.³ I wish to take up this issue from a somewhat different tack, showing that

¹ See the discussion in Donald Sievert, "Essential Truths and the Ontological Argument: Cartesian Reflections on Recent Discussions," *Southwest Philosophy Review* VI, no. 1 (1990); S.K. Wertz, "Why is the Ontological Proof in Descartes's Fifth Meditation?" *Southwest Philosophy Review*, VI, no. 2 (1990), 107-09. The standard work questioning Descartes's sincerity is Hiram Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), which argues that any discussion of God in Descartes is really part of an elaborate philosophical burlesque that he was forced to go through in order to make his work approvable to the authorities. Ironically, Caton's own book is itself a philosophical burlesque, designed to highlight the philosophical difficulties of post-Cartesian philosophy. See the review by Charles E. Marks, *The Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 457-460.

² See Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (Macmillan: St. Martin's Press, 1972); John Hick and Arthur McGill, eds., *The Many-Faced Argument: Recent Studies on the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God* (London: Macmillan, 1968).

³ Edwin Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991); idem, "Back to the Ontological Argument," in Christina Mercer and Eileen O'Neill, eds., *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 46-64; idem, "Analysis in *Meditations*: The Quest to Clear and Distinct Ideas," in Amelie Rorty, ed., *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 153-76; Jean-Luc Marion, "The Essential Incoherence of Descartes's Definition of Divinity," in *ibid.*, 297-338. The consequences of Marion's position are spelled out in Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), and idem, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1981). The literature on Descartes's ontological argument is almost hopelessly extensive. For more recent work see the entry in Jean-Robert Armogathe and Vincent Carraud, eds., *Bibliographie Cartésienne 1960-1996* (Lece: Conte, 2003). Older material may be found in Gregor Sebba, *Bibliographia Cartesiana: A Critical Guide to the Descartes Literature, 1800-1960* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964). The most cogent and

Descartes's ontological proof actually involves a subtle change in the direction of his argument from a reflective to a recollective theory of innateness. In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes does not simply expand on his previous discussion of God, which arose out of reflection on his self; rather, the ontological proof depends on a kind of recollection of God's being that could only be based on the causal positivity, or "power," of His existence. God is the structural cause of our idea of him and thereby restricts the way in which we may think of Him, in the same way as the essence of a triangle structurally determines the ways we must think of it.⁴ We are not free to construct such ideas in any way we want, so there must be a cause, or a reason, that restricts such construction.

The specific argument of Meditation Five, however, must be understood in its larger context, for part of the structurally determined idea of God contains necessary existence, which Descartes interprets in terms of causal power. In the process of explaining this causal power, first to Caterus and, later to Arnauld, Descartes develops a way of interpreting God's causal relationship to himself, in terms of a scholastic distinction between God as *causa sui* and *ens a se*, which preserves the universality of the causal principle and allows us to understand why God can be considered as the formal cause of His own being—the self-grounding ground of all existence—an idea of subsequent importance to Malebranche and Spinoza, among others. Understanding this position on God and cause allows us to see a complementarity between Mediations III and V that has previously been overlooked.⁵ While the principle of eminent causality found in Meditation Three is central to the structural causation argument of Meditation Five, it is God's power, the positivity of His causal relationship to himself, that allows the argument from his effects to his existence in the first place.

The dualistic structure to Descartes's arguments for God's existence in Meditations Three and Five mirrors Anselm's approach in the *Monologion* and the *Proslogion*. Appreciating this stylistic debt is crucial for understanding Descartes's attempts to improve on Anselm's arguments, as well as his attempt to truly ground all knowledge in the certainty of God's existence. Yet while Anselm's dual argument is ultimately based on a negative intuition of God's being, described in the *Monologion* as that without which the world cannot be, Descartes's dual argument in Meditations Three and Five is based on a positive intuition or recollection of God's being as a necessary structural restriction on

overlooked contribution to the whole debate is by Beatrice Rome, "Created Truth and *Causa Sui* in Descartes," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 17 (1956): 66-78.

⁴ That the ontological argument is a causal argument has been suggested previously by Robert Imlay ("Descartes' Ontological Argument," *New Scholasticism* 43 [1969]: 440-48), but Imlay says that this makes the proof in Meditation Five identical to the proof in Meditation Three, overlooking the different kinds of innateness involved in each case. See too the discussion by J.M. Humber, "Descartes' Ontological Argument as Non-Causal," *New Scholasticism* 44 (1970): 449-59; Imlay's reply, Robert Imlay, "Descartes' Ontological Argument: A Causal Argument," *New Scholasticism* 45 (1971): 348-51; and the discussion by R.D. Hughes, *New Scholasticism* 49 (1975): 473-85.

⁵ Genevieve Rodis-Lewis, "On the Complementarity of Meditations III and V: From the 'General Rule' of Evidence to 'Certain Science,'" Amelie Rorty, *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*.

our concepts of the world. The ontological proof is primarily based on this recollective theory of innateness. It is God as *causa sui*, recollected as the necessary ground of all things, that is the sole efficient cause of the existence of every finite, limited thing—especially human beings and their clear and distinct ideas.

Background to the Ontological Argument

Anselm provided the original form of the ontological argument in 1077 or 1078. In the preface to the *Proslogion*, he claims that he has discovered “a single formula which needs no other to prove itself but itself alone, and which by itself suffices to establish that God truly is, and that he is the greatest good needing no other, and that which everything else needs if it is to be and be well, and whatever else we believe about divine being.”⁶ The argument generated a brief controversy amongst the monks when Gaunilo replied, but it lay fallow till the 13th century when Aquinas revived it only to disprove it. This also made it unpopular. Then in the 17th century Descartes discovered a proof for the existence of God that is plainly similar to Anselm’s, and controversy over the Cartesian philosophy eventually culminated in Kant, who labelled the whole argument “ontological,” and allegedly closed the case with the claim that “existence is not a predicate”—though in fact this criticism was first raised by Gassendi in the Fifth Set of Objections.⁷ According to Collingwood, Hegel revived the case, and from there it has been taken up in the 20th, and now the 21st, century.⁸

The argument has clearly taken on a life of its own, quite apart from the intentions of its original formulator. In fact, as Marion has pointed out, in its original form the argument cannot be considered “ontological” at all.⁹ Anselm claims in the *Monologion* that the mind has an intuition of a wholeness that cannot be captured in any finite category and especially within the categories of

⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, edited with an introduction by Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford/Toronto : Oxford University Press, 1998), 93, 6-10.

⁷ Charles Adam, “Biographie de Descartes,” vol. VII, René Descartes, *Oeuvres*, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., 13 vols (Paris: Leopold Cerf, 1897-1913), 323. I also cite the standard English translation of Descartes by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vol. II, 224.

⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method: Revised Edition with The Metaphysics of F.H. Bradley, The Correspondence with Gilbert Ryle, Method and Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). See too the discussion by Gilbert Ryle, “Mr. Collingwood and the Ontological Argument,” in Hick and McGill, *The Many-Faced Argument*, 137-51. Ryle returns to the topic in, “Back to the Ontological Argument,” *Mind* 46, no. 181 (1937): 53-57, which is a reply to Errol Harris’s defense of Collingwood, “Mr. Ryle and the Ontological Argument.” Curley is obviously referencing Ryle by using a similar title. For the history of the topic see Barnes, *The Ontological Argument*, 1.

⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological? The Argument According to Anselm and its Metaphysical Interpretation According to Kant,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (1992): 201-18.

cognitional or contingent being. The historical context to this claim is given by the influence of Christian neo-Platonism and Augustine's reworking of the neo-Platonic One in particular. It is not so much that Anselm was trying to prove God as he was trying to provide his fellow monks with a way of thinking about God. This makes the whole question of what fallacy the argument commits somewhat beside the point. His position is really the restatement of a claim basic to any kind of Platonism: that there is an intuition of unity prior to the duality of self and the world that cannot be brought into existence by reason because reason in fact depends upon it. Nor can this unity be simply a "mental" as opposed to a "real" concept because unity itself grounds this distinction: the intuition of unity is the self-grounding whole within which all thought moves. It is neither "thought" nor "being" but the first principle presupposed by this distinction. Thus, according to Plato, the Good whose revealing activity unites the knowing with the real is the beginning and end of all philosophical reflection. In Derridean terms, it might be thought of as *différance*: that which allows difference as difference to appear and so is unrepresentable as difference. Much of the discussion of Anselm's "argument" is thus beside the point.

Anselm's position is based on an intuition rather than an argument, his whole point is that it is impossible to conceive of its denial.¹⁰ The position cannot be opposed except philosophically, that is, through reason, and this is to grant the point in attempting to think the world as a whole—which is what Gaunilo did not realize. Gaunilo is in fact the first to think that Anselm is offering an argument for God that treats existence as a predicate, as we can see by his counter-example of the perfect island. But Anselm's discussion is an "argument" only in the negative sense that he is trying to show what we must affirm by pointing to the impossibility of doing otherwise: it can be expressed discursively only in the form of a negative demonstration. We cannot not conceive of God in conceiving the world. God has necessary existence in this sense of a negative intuition. The argument is thus not concerned with finding a bridge from a concept to a thing in the world, but rather with showing how this opposition itself depends on something more fundamental. The difference between concept and thing vanishes in Anselm's intuition of the infinite One or the Good.

In the *Proslogion*, which was actually the second part of the demonstration, Anselm sets out to show what follows from this necessary existence conceived of as "something than which nothing greater can be conceived." Anselm's argument thus begins in faith because reason must proceed from there. Rationality consists in recognizing in faith the permanent condition of the possibility of thinking. In order to proceed, reason needs faith in the fact that we have to believe in unity in order to achieve understanding. Ultimately, however, for Anselm this unity is inaccessible. God dwells in the inaccessible light and this inaccessibility is in fact a basic feature of the divine. The whole

¹⁰ I rely on Bernard Wills, "What's Different in Anselm's Argument?" published in this volume of *Analecta Hermeneutica*.

argument thus relies on the impossibility of any adequate concept of God: God is such that anything greater cannot be thought, so God in fact begins where our conceptualization ends, and this maps the limits of our finitude. As Marion points out, “Anselm aimed at a *transcendent* but inaccessible item only through the *transcendental* test of our *cogitation*,” or power of thinking. It is somewhat ironic that it was Kant who was the first to miss this critical approach and criticize Anselm for not being as critical—in the Kantian sense—as Kant himself was supposed to be.¹¹

Descartes certainly knew about Anselm’s argument but seems to have read it in the traditional sense: once we understand the meaning of the word “God” we understand it to mean “that than which nothing greater can be conceived.” But to exist in reality as well as in the intellect is greater than existing in the intellect alone. Therefore once we understand the meaning of the word God we understand that God exists in reality as well as in the understanding. Descartes sides with Aquinas about the criticism of this argument that all that can be validly concluded is that we understand the meaning of the word God to indicate something that exists in reality as well as in the understanding. But this by itself does not mean that God exists.¹²

Descartes’s argument in Meditation Five is somewhat different. Here is his own summary, taken from the “First Set of Replies”: “That which we clearly and distinctly understand to belong to the true and immutable nature, or essence, or form of something, can truly be asserted of that thing. But once we have made a sufficiently careful investigation of what God is, we clearly and distinctly understand that existence belongs to his true and immutable nature. Hence we can now truly assert of God that he does exist.”¹³ The key aspect of this concept of God which makes it possible to prove his existence is supreme perfection. In Meditation Five, the proof of God’s existence is not an immediate effect of the concept of God but arises out of consideration of God’s essence, and particularly God’s supreme perfection, which includes among other things the perfection of existing. This latter perfection, I argue, must be understood in terms of our innate idea of God’s causal power.

Innateness and Cause

In the analytic narratives of the *Meditations* and the *Discourse*, the ontological argument follows the argument for God’s existence from the objective perfection of our idea of Him; in the synthetic presentation of the “Second Replies” and the *Principles*, however, the ontological argument comes first and the argument from objective perfection second. But Descartes’s goals differ in each case, as he points out in his justification for the analytic approach in the “Second Replies,” where he explicitly acknowledges that the structure of the *Meditations* was

¹¹ Marion, “Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?” 209.

¹² Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 115; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 82.

¹³ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 116; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 83.

dictated by the discursive requirements of his philosophical position—which apparently mirror his biographical development as well, if we can believe the *Discourse*.

Descartes’s geometric presentation of his argument in the “Second Replies” focuses on the universality of the causal principle and the centrality of God:

- I. Concerning every existing thing it is possible to ask what is the cause of its existence. This question may even be asked concerning God, not because he needs any cause in order to exist, but because the immensity of his nature is the cause or reason why he needs no cause in order to exist.
- II. There is no relation of dependence between the present time and the immediately preceding time, and hence no less a cause is required to preserve something than is required to create it in the first place.
- III. It is impossible that nothing, a non-existing thing, should be the cause of the existence of anything, or of any actual perfection in anything.
- IV. Whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present either formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause. It follows from this that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently.¹⁴

In the *Meditations*, however, the causal principle is first clearly stated only in Meditation Three: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it?”¹⁵ Lest we be inclined to think of causality only in terms of physical bodies, Descartes’s makes it clear that this principle applies not only to physical things, but also to ideas. The causal law “is transparently true not only in the case of effects which possess ‘what the philosophers call’ actual or formal reality, but also in the case of ideas, where one is considering only ‘what they call’ objective reality.”¹⁶

To put it in modern terms, Descartes is arguing that the causal principle applies to everything, including the semantic content of our ideas.¹⁷ Indeed, the principle of causality is central to Descartes’s entire project. It is this principle, known by the “natural light,” which allows him to go from the *cogito* to God as the source of our clear and distinct ideas of the world. Descartes thereby drew attention to the importance of the concept of causality, particularly with regard to the connection between causes and reasons,

¹⁴ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 165; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 116.

¹⁵ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 41; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ See David B. Hausman and Alan Hausman, *Descartes’ Legacy: Minds and Meaning in Early Modern Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

thereby opening a whole debate on the relationship between causality and explanation that has lasted till the present-day.¹⁸

Recent scholars have questioned the validity of the causal principle, attributing its authority to either Descartes's scholastic milieu or his insincerity.¹⁹ In a sense, however, the causal principle is constitutive of reason itself, which we see if we consider the "metaphysical" doubt of Meditation One.²⁰ The principles of reasoning never themselves fall prey to doubt; Descartes doubts only the objects of his understanding, not the understanding itself—hence he calls the doubt "metaphysical." When doubt has stripped away all these objects he is left with the *cogito*, where consciousness becomes its own object in the immediate certainty of self-consciousness. Everything is then built-up from there through Descartes's elaborate theory of innateness, but the causal principle is fundamental throughout.

Descartes realizes that reason, in a sense, is self-validating, for a critique of thinking is itself thinking: no one can question reason without assuming it. The natural light is self-referential and innate, and Descartes sees the causal principle as part of this natural light: one simply cannot think except in accordance with certain basic principles which constitute the form of thought, and the causal law, along with the principle of non-contradiction, provides the two most basic forms: "I ask [my readers] to ponder on those self-evident propositions that they will find within themselves, such as 'The same thing cannot both be and not be at the same time,' and 'Nothingness cannot be the efficient cause of anything,' and so on."²¹ For Descartes, both the causal law and the principle of non-contradiction are rules of thought, and because they are nothing but the form of thinking, their soundness cannot in any way be questioned through thinking. As Descartes puts it: "Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty . . . capable of showing me that such things are not true."²² The causal law may, therefore, be said to be innate—but not in the same way as the ontological proof shows that the knowledge of God's existence is innate. The connection between these two ideas of innateness helps explain an unexplored side of the complementarity of Meditations Three and Five.

¹⁸ See the discussion in Kenneth Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Modern Philosophy: 1637-1739* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Harmondsworth, England: Pelican, 1978), 135; Louis E. Loeb, "Was Descartes Sincere in his Appeal to the Natural Light?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 377-406.

²⁰ See Wills, "What's Different in Anselm's Argument?"

²¹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 163; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 115.

²² Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 39; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 27.

Meditation Three

The causal principle arises out of a reflective kind of innateness: in acts of reflection we think of that which calls itself “I” and observe that this or that is within us.²³ It is thus in thinking of ourselves that we think of “being,” “substance,” and “number.” Having got these ideas from reflection on the self, we then extend them to all other beings. In Meditation Three, for example, substance, duration, and number are extended from the self to all corporeal things. In the *Principles*, Descartes refers to these ideas, along with existence, order, and “possibly such other similar matters,” as the most general concepts we have, applying to all classes of real things.

This version of innateness is based on apperception: the innate ideas of “thing,” “thought,” and “truth,” are clearly involved in the *cogito*; reflection on my nature as involved with the *cogito* also yields the idea of God, as we see in Meditation Three. Finally, in Meditation Four, reflection on the experiences leading to the *cogito* reveals the idea of freedom.

This kind of innateness plays a crucial role in Descartes’s idea of “intuitive induction” used throughout the *Meditations*, and which includes the derivation of the universals of geometry from the experience of the particular—it also plays a role in connection with the derivation of the universal concepts and principles from the *cogito*. The general approach is that there are some ideas which are implicit in our experience and consciousness, but to which we do not necessarily attend or render explicit. The idea of the perfect being, for example, is logically presupposed in my knowledge of my own imperfection. The perfection of God is recognized implicitly. All lack and negation presupposes the thing of which it is a negation.

This reflective theory of innateness dominates the first four Meditations: Descartes’s entire activity is to extract concepts like “substance” and “God” from reflection upon what I am pre-reflectively conscious of in the *cogito*. There is thus a passage from the experience of the individual to general notions and principles. These notions are innate in the sense that they are implicit in experience or consciousness. They are not prior to experience, but only prior to reflection on experience. So certain universal concepts such as “thought,” “existence,” “ex nihilo, nihilo fit,” and “He who thinks, exists,” are all capable of being derived by intuitive induction from my experience or consciousness of any individual act of thinking. In that sense they are innate in everyone.

Besides the sense experience of particulars, from which we derive the universals of geometry, there is also the internal experience of any individual act of thinking from which by a similar intuitive induction we can derive certain primitive notions which belong among the principles of philosophy. They are innate in that we find them in ourselves when we reflect on what is implicit in our consciousness or experience of ourselves as thinking; they are found in the

²³ For this terminology of innate ideas, see the classic article by Robert McRae, “Innate Ideas,” in R.J. Butler, ed., *Cartesian Studies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 32-54.

mind when the mind reflects on what it is already conscious of when it thinks. With regard to the idea of God in Meditation Three, this is an idea that is imprinted on my nature. This is why reflection on the self of which I am conscious yields not only the idea of what I am, but the idea of God too. The two ideas are innate in the same sense.

Meditation Five

In Meditation Five, however, a different idea of innateness is used. The ontological argument relies on a modified theory of anamnesis, modelled on the innate ideas of mathematics. Descartes regards the ideas and truths of geometry as innate in the mind in the sense that they are logically entailed by an idea which is in the mind, namely, extension, without reference, however, to whether the idea of extension originates in sense or not. That it does actually originate in sense experience is irrelevant to the conception of innateness whereby the soul, through its “own fixed laws,” the laws of logic, draws out logical consequences by a kind of natural illation.

Innate knowledge in this sense is any enlargement of our knowledge which results from the perception of logical relationships. When these are interpropositional, to “recollect” a previously unknown proposition is to come to know it by seeing that it is entailed by others already known. When the relations are intra-propositional, as in the case of the “what is X?” question, then to “recollect” is to gain insight into the logical structure of a concept, so that when faced with its correct definition one will see that the concepts concerned are analytically connected. This idea of innateness is operative throughout Meditation Five, particularly with respect to the idea of God.

By this stage in the *Meditations* Descartes has established the *cogito*, God’s existence, and the truth of his clear and distinct ideas, and he is beginning to see what else he can let back into his thought. Sensible qualities, we know, are subject to the problem of material falsity. However clear they might be as ideas existing in the mind, they are not distinct with regard to the content they contain, so we cannot tell which contain objectively simple natures and which are just privations of those natures. To this extent our perceptions of qualities are confused and all our knowledge of such simple natures is cast into doubt because we do not know which ones are positive and which are privative.

This is not true, however, of the simple nature of extension. It has a number of modes, or manners under which it may exist, like sizes and shapes, that assume more general ordered attributes like position and number. All manner of truths may be deduced from the modes of extension. From the shape of triangularity, for example, we can deduce Pythagoras’s Theorem; we can “figure out” a lot about triangles, their modes, and how they go together.

The point about these truths is that they are not something we in any way invent or determine: even when we cook-up the shape we cannot do it any way we want. The shape must conform to certain truths: we are compelled by the truth itself—by the nature of the triangle which exists independently of our will.

The truth of these matters is so evident, states Descartes, “that on first discovering them it seems that I am not so much learning something new as remembering what I knew before; or it seems like noticing for the first time things which were long present within me.”²⁴ Despite the fact that we invent such ideas in our imagination, we are compelled to put only certain things into them and not others by a kind of natural illation of the soul. How could this be if such ideas were materially false? Since we are compelled, the simple nature “extension” must be real “something and not merely nothing.”²⁵

Meditation Five thereby lays the ground for a mathematical and mechanical science of nature: with extension and its modes, not only do we clearly and distinctly perceive the existence of the ideas, but also that the simple natures that the ideas contain are indeed something real and positive, existing independently of our imagination. We not only perceive all the different modes of extension, but we know what goes into these modes and how they are related to each other in detail through the sciences of geometry and arithmetic. There is an objective structural necessity in certain ideas, and this objective necessity, writes Descartes, is equally applicable to the idea of God: “From the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists.” It is not that my thought makes it so, or “imposes any necessity on any thing,” Descartes writes, “on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect.”²⁶ It is this positive intuition of God that ultimately grounds Descartes’s whole project; such an intuition must not be understood as an argument, but as an immediate experience of the ground of certainty, which ensures the continual truth of clear and distinct ideas. It is the grounding of certainty in this positive intuition of God that is the essence of Descartes’s reply to Arnauld about the Cartesian Circle.²⁷ The onus is not on Descartes to prove God’s existence; given the certainty of our positive intuition of Him, it is rather up to Arnauld to come up with an argument for doubt that would shift Descartes from his foundation. In the subsequent discussion of the concept of God Descartes attempts to understand this positive intuition in terms of causal power.

Causality and the Divine Essence

For Descartes, the causal principle is inseparable from reason itself in so far as it is constitutive of the natural light. Moreover, it has universal application, as is seen in the geometrical exposition in the second set of replies. The importance of this universality has been recognized by most commentators. Noting that “to regard God as the efficient cause of himself, in any ordinary sense of the word ‘cause’ is . . . impossible,” Kemp-Smith points out that we are to see Descartes’s use of the word in terms of his emphasis on the limitations of human thought in

²⁴ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 64; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 44.

²⁵ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 65; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 45.

²⁶ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 67; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 46.

²⁷ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 246; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 171.

understanding the divine: Descartes, he argues, strains to apply efficient causality *analogically* to God, so as to preserve the universal applicability of the causal principle.²⁸

In the “Fourth Set of Replies,” Descartes himself discusses this analogical use of efficient causation in terms of a sort of geometrical passage to the limit:

All the above ways of talking, which are derived by analogy with the notion of efficient causation, are very necessary for guiding the natural light in such a way as to enable us to have a clear awareness of these matters. It is exactly the same sort of comparison between a sphere (or other curvilinear figure) and a rectilinear figure that enabled Archimedes to demonstrate various properties of the sphere which could scarcely be understood otherwise.²⁹

This focus on efficient causality is necessary for Descartes because if the causal principle is not applicable to God, then its universality is called into question, as is the entire proof of God’s existence which is based upon it. Priority has to be given to the notion of efficient cause, Gilson argues, because if it is not, then the whole causal principle itself is called into question, and so, consequently, is the causal argument for God’s existence in Meditation Three.

The difficulty seems to be that the concept of God as *causa sui* cannot be understood in any other way except in terms of efficient causality, and God cannot be understood as the effect of efficient causality insofar as this would be contrary to his divine nature as *ens a se*.³⁰ For Thomism, this divine nature lies within real being in *actu*: God is pure actuality and so cannot be in a causal relationship to himself. Instead God is the good towards which all things strive (in accordance with their nature). In aspiring to perfection, everything aspires to God, the final Goal and the uncaused first cause—the *prima causa incausata*—which, for Aquinas, we can only speak of analogically.³¹

According to Taylor, the theory of causality involved in Cartesian self-grounding is actually neo-Platonic, and while its precise formulation comes from the *Institutio Theologica* of Proclus, Descartes certainly got it from Aquinas, who in turn got it from both the pseudo-Aristotelian *Liber de Causis* (really a fragment of Proclus) and the works of Dionysius. Taylor concludes: “That Descartes, in his attempt to re-found philosophy should have assumed Proclus’s doctrine of causation as axiomatic is as interesting an example as I know of the

²⁸ Norman Kemp-Smith, *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes: Descartes as Pioneer* (London: Macmillan, 1952), 316.

²⁹ AT VII, 241; CSMK II, 168.

³⁰ Étienne Gilson, *Étude sur la Role de la Pensée Médiévale dans la formation du Système Cartésien* (Paris : J. Vrin, 1951), 231.

³¹ Aquinas, *Sum. theol.*, 1a, q. 3, a. 7; 1a, q. 13, a. 6.

artificiality of the whole distinction between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ philosophical thought.”³²

This neo-Platonic influence is clearly seen in the primacy of God as efficient cause and in the reality principle in particular—“there must be as much in the total and efficient cause as there is in the effect of that cause.” This principle of causality was in fact one of the major features of emanationism, though none of the Cartesian literature mentions this, and though it was Aquinas who first spelled out the pre-eminence of efficient causation and God as first cause, in a sense he was only making plain what was there to be read in neo-Platonism, and in Pseudo-Dionysius in particular.³³ In addition, Descartes and the neo-Platonic tradition, including Aquinas, share a belief in (1) a hierarchical universe that descends through several levels from God, or the One, which is beyond being, to the corporeal world (the *pro-odos*); and (2) the inner spiritual experience that enables the self to reascend through the intelligible world to the One (the *epistrophe*). This abiding-procession-return triad may be said to form the essential *exitus/reditus* structure of the *Summa Theologica*, but it is also Augustinian so Descartes probably knew it from both sources.³⁴

Descartes’s work has further literary affinities with this tradition in so far as he played with issues of identity and formal framing, and in Pseudo-Dionysius, as indeed in Plato, what written philosophy reduces to is a question of framing, of presenting structures, or limits, whereby texts may be read.³⁵ Many Platonic texts, for example, are recursive and turn back on themselves, and they thereby raise the question of the relation of the whole to the part. They sometimes involve repetition, and the text often allows different points of view. Narratives are sometimes framed within other narratives, so sometimes it is hard to know where one frame ends and another begins. They are polyphonic and open-ended texts, and the way they are written is often an important clue to their meaning. Thus, for example, Pseudo-Dionysius not only assumes an identity—a *declamation* with meaning of its own -- he is always making reference to non-existent works, as well as calling attention to the way the structure of the text mirrors the content. The most important structure that these writings exhibit is the divine structure of procession and return, of Lower and Higher Eros, which was first sketched out by Plato in the *Symposium*, developed triadically by the

³² A.E. Taylor, “Review of *Locke’s Theory of Knowledge and its Historical Relations* by James Gibson,” *Mind* 27, no. 107 (1918): 360.

³³ For the discussion of the reality principle in Descartes, see Tad Schmaltz, “Deflating Descartes Causal Axiom,” in Daniel Garber and Steven Nadler, eds., *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1-31. See Charles Dubray, “Emanationism,” entry in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909). Retrieved 10 May 2010 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05397b.htm>>.

³⁴ Augustine, *The Magnitude of the Soul (De Quantitate Animae)*, trans. John J. McMahon, in Ludwig Schopp, ed., *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2 (CIMA Publishing Co., 1947), chapters 33-36.

³⁵ For similar themes in Descartes, see the discussion in Dalia Judowitz, *Subjectivity and Representation in Descartes: The Origins of Modernity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

neo-Platonists, and Christianized in Pseudo-Dionysius (also an important source for Anselm's negative theology). The primacy of efficient causation in Descartes's thought, and our interior return to the source of knowledge in God, has important precedents.

The ancient/modern distinction has always been somewhat questionable, especially amongst French historians of philosophy like Gilson and Koyré, who concentrated on medieval and Platonic continuities in Descartes's thought.³⁶ Similarly, most current work in the history of philosophy has focused on links rather than breaks. Much of the recent material on causation in Descartes, for example, discusses the medieval background to his thought, particularly his Thomist views on concurrentism and divine conservation, which is related to his occasionalism, more fully developed by Malebranche.³⁷ Other notions of causation, however, also play a significant role in Descartes's thought: he discusses primary and secondary cause, essential and accidental cause, eminent causation, and all four of the Aristotelian causes.³⁸

Misunderstandings about Descartes's complex concept of causation in God date back to the 17th century. In 1648, in the *Notae in Programma*, Descartes warns Regius that he "never wrote that 'God should be said to be, not only negatively, but positively, the efficient cause of himself,' as he affirms in a very rash and ill-considered manner in page 8 of his second pamphlet. Let him turn over, read, and thoroughly search my writings, he will find in them nothing like this, but the very reverse."³⁹

The issue first came up, however, in Caterus's objections to the *Meditations*, where he challenges Descartes to clarify what he meant in Meditation Three when he pointed out that a being which derived its existence "from itself" would be God.⁴⁰ According to Caterus, this phrase can only have two meanings: the first, positive, sense of the phrase means "from itself as from a cause." Caterus implies that this surely could not be what Descartes means, for

³⁶ Étienne Gilson, *La Liberté chez Descartes et la théologie* (Paris: Alcan, 1913); Alexander Koyré, *Essai sur l'idée de Dieu et les preuves de son existence chez Descartes* (Paris: Leroux, 1922).

³⁷ Roger Ariew, *Descartes and the Last Scholastics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); David Scott, "Occasionalism and Occasional Causation in Descartes' Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 38 (2000): 503-28.

³⁸ See the discussion in Kenneth Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate in Early Modern Philosophy, 1637-1739* (New York: Routledge, 1999). Three recent books that discuss Descartes on cause have reached different conclusions. Vincent Carraud, in his *Causa sive ratio. La raison de la cause, de Suarez à Leibniz* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), argues for the primacy of efficient cause in Descartes's thought. Daniel E. Flage and Clarence A. Bonnen, in *Descartes and Method: A Search for Method in the Meditations* (London: Routledge, 1999), support the primacy of formal cause, particularly in explanation. Stephen Gaukroger, in his *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), argues that Descartes allows for all four Aristotelian causes and only rejects our *knowledge* of final cause, not its existence.

³⁹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VIII B 369; *Writings of Descartes*, I, 310.

⁴⁰ For a thorough discussion of the context of the exchange with Caterus, see Jorge Secada, *The Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Secada uses the focus on formal cause to argue for an essentialist reading of Descartes where understanding a thing's essence precedes any question of its existence.

then the being would “exist prior to itself so that it could choose in advance what it should subsequently be,” and this is manifestly absurd. The phrase is usually taken to mean, he writes, “not from another,” and if this is indeed what Descartes means by a being that derives its existence “from itself,” then “how can we prove that this being embraces all things and is infinite?”⁴¹ What Caterus’s question centers on is what it means to consider God as either *causa sui* or *ens a se*, and Descartes’s reply to him explains the difference.

Causa sui means “cause of itself,” which when applied to God means that God owes his existence to nothing other than himself.⁴² As Descartes uses the terms it does not mean that God brought himself into existence, but that the very nature of God logically requires that he exist. What accounts for the existence of a being that is *causa sui* is its own nature. In the “Fourth Set of Objections,” Arnauld takes Descartes, in his reply to Caterus, to be arguing precisely that God’s existence “from himself” somehow implies that “God somehow brought himself into existence.” Descartes, however, had explicitly rejected this idea. In the “First Set of Replies,” he writes: “Although God has always existed, since it is he who in fact preserves himself, it seems not too inappropriate to call him ‘the cause of himself.’ It should however be noted that ‘preservation’ here must not be understood to be the kind of preservation that comes about by the positive influence of an efficient cause; all that is implied is that the essence of God is such that he must always exist.”⁴³ Which is to say that Descartes conceives of God as *causa sui* in terms of self-sustenance, as he himself points out to Arnauld.⁴⁴ At any rate, Caterus, as we have seen, thought that Descartes could not have meant that God’s existence “from himself” was the kind of positive notion found in the idea of “efficient cause of self.” This phrase could only be taken in the negative sense of “not from another,” but then the problem is that we may be able to interpret the phrase in such a way that it does not apply only to God but also to limited things, and if this is so, then we cannot argue from things as effects of God, back to God as their only cause.

According to Suarez, Caterus says, something existing from itself could only mean something is uncaused, and this would only apply to God, who then, as cause of everything else is the cause of their limitations insofar as he is unwilling to endow them with more greatness or perfection. Because every limitation proceeds from some efficient cause, we are able to trace the causal train back from limited finite things to God, who, as existing from himself is an uncaused cause. But what if, Caterus says, the phrase “from itself,” meaning “not from another,” just means that a thing’s limitations arise from that thing’s internal constitutive principles, i.e., its essence or form? That would mean that we could not accept the premise that every limitation proceeds from some efficient cause, and therefore the causal proof of the existence of the uncaused

⁴¹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 95; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 68.

⁴² For more on the history of *causa sui* see Joachim Ritter, ed., *Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe and Co., 1971), 976.

⁴³ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 109; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 78.

⁴⁴ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 235-236; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 164-65.

cause will not work, because then we would be unable to trace a causal chain back to God.⁴⁵ It is the difficulty over this meaning of *aseity* that leads Caterus to question Descartes on the issue.

The word *aseity* is formed from the Latin prepositional phrase *ens a se*, which means “a being from itself” or a being that is self-sufficient. Since every created thing depends upon God for its existence, only God could be *ens a se*, for if he depended on any other being, he would not be self-sufficient. As Descartes will try to explain to Caterus, *ens a se* is to be distinguished from *ens ex se*. *Ens a se* is from itself and not “out of itself”; it does not depend on itself for its own existence, because it is in no way dependent.⁴⁶

Immediately after explaining *causa sui* to Caterus, Descartes goes on to point out that God’s *aseity*, or existence “from himself,” can be taken in a positive sense that eliminates the difficulties with the causal proof that arise from its negative sense:

These considerations make it easy for me to answer the point about the ambiguity in the phrase “from itself” which, as the learned theologian [Caterus] has reminded me, needs to be explained. There are some who attend only to the literal and strict meaning of the phrase “efficient cause” and thus think it impossible for anything to be the cause of itself. They do not see that there is any place for another kind of cause analogous to an efficient cause, and hence when they say that something derives its existence “from itself” they normally mean simply that it has no cause. But if they would look at the facts rather than the words, they would readily observe that the negative sense of the phrase “from itself” comes merely from the imperfection of the human intellect and has no basis in reality. But there is a positive sense of the phrase which is derived from the true nature of things, and it is this sense alone which is employed in my argument.⁴⁷

According to the traditional, negative, interpretation of *ens a se*, it “does not depend upon itself for its own existence, because it is supposed to be dependent on absolutely nothing.” If *ens a se* depended upon itself in a positive way, this could only mean that it was the efficient cause of its own existence, which is absurd. Given Caterus’s difficulties with interpreting the phrase in a negative sense, however, Descartes is here opening up the possibility of interpreting *ens a se* in a positive sense, a cause “analogous to efficient cause.” What this means is that God causes himself only in virtue of his power and perfection: “There is no need to say that God is the efficient cause of himself, for this might give rise to a verbal dispute. But the fact that God derives his existence from himself, or has no cause apart from himself, depends not on nothing but on the real immensity of

⁴⁵ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 95; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 68.

⁴⁶ For more on the history of the term “*aseity*” see Ritter, *Historische Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, 538.

⁴⁷ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 110; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 79.

his power; hence when we perceive this, we are quite entitled to think that in a sense he stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect, and hence that he derives his existence from himself in the positive sense.”⁴⁸

Arnauld had given Descartes a “sombre warning” that “it will scarcely be possible to find a single theologian who will not object to the proposition that God derives his existence from himself in a positive sense and as it were causally.”⁴⁹ Descartes, therefore, always concerned with orthodoxy, is at some pains to point out to Arnauld that “this way of talking is extremely useful and even necessary when dealing with the topic under discussion.” Indeed, he writes, “it seems to me to be wholly innocent of any suspicion of being likely to cause offence.”⁵⁰

Descartes is aware that theologians had been wary of using the word “cause” in any discussion of God because it might lead to the idea that certain persons of the Trinity were inferior to others, due to some kind of causal relation. Descartes, however, wants only to discuss God as a unity, and consequently he does not see “why the word cause is to be avoided at all costs, especially when we come to a context where it seems extremely useful and almost necessary to use the term.”⁵¹ “Those who follow the sole guidance of the natural light will in this context spontaneously form a concept of cause that is common to both an efficient and formal cause: that is to say, what derives its existence ‘from another’ will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as an efficient cause, while what derives its existence ‘from itself’ will be taken to derive its existence from itself as a formal cause—that is, because it has the kind of essence which entails that it does not require an efficient cause.”⁵²

Most people take the phrase “from itself” only in the negative sense of “not from another,” which leads to the difficulty with the causal proof that is pointed out by Caterus. The only way to take the phrase that does not lead to these difficulties, Descartes argues, is precisely in the positive sense of formal cause. As he had pointed out to Caterus, unless the chain of efficient causes is traceable back to something which is in some way the cause of itself, we would have to go tracing the causal chain to infinity, and we could never arrive at a first cause.⁵³ So the question of efficient causality is applicable to everything, and if we find that something has no need of an efficient cause, we may ask why it does not need one; if the reason it does not need one is because it derives its existence “from itself,” the only sense of “from itself” that does not lead to difficulties in the causal proof is “from itself” due to its power, perfection, and essence—that is, as a formal cause. Descartes writes to Caterus: “Each of us may ask himself whether he derives his existence from himself in this same sense. Since he will

⁴⁸ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 111; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 80.

⁴⁹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 214; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 150.

⁵⁰ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 237; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 166.

⁵¹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 237-238; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 166.

⁵² Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 238; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 166-67.

⁵³ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 108-109; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 78.

find no power within himself which suffices to preserve him even for one moment of time, he will be right to conclude that he derives his existence from another being, and that this other being derives its existence from itself.”⁵⁴ That is “from itself” in the positive sense of formal cause—which is analogous to efficient cause but not the same thing. The true nature of the analogy, however, has yet to be explained. To do this, Descartes thinks it is necessary to show:

In between “efficient cause” in the strict sense and “no cause at all” there is a third possibility, namely “the positive essence of a thing” to which the concept of efficient cause can be extended. In the same way in geometry the concept of the arc of an indefinitely large circle is customarily extended to the concept of a straight line; or the concept of a rectilinear polygon with an indefinite number of sides is extended to that of a circle. I thought I explained this in the best way available to me when I said that in this context the meaning of “efficient cause” must not be restricted to causes which are prior in time to their effects.⁵⁵

Efficient causes are comparable to “the positive essence of a thing,” or formal cause, insofar as in neither case does a temporal restriction apply. The restriction of temporal priority in relation to effect can be deleted from the concept of efficient cause because “the notion of [efficient] cause is applicable only during the time when it is producing its effect.”⁵⁶ Both formal and efficient causes are comparable because they share the property of temporal coincidence with regard to their effects, in the same way as the arc of an infinite circle and a straight line share orthogonality. This example, like the one cited previously, is taken straight from Cusa, who also argues that in the divine coincidence of opposites all the attributes of God are the same. Infinite justice is the same as infinite mercy; in the same way as every geometrical figure reduces to every other one (“The Minimum is contained in the Maximum”). Yet, for Descartes just as the arc of the infinite circle and the straight line are different, so are formal and efficient cause, insofar as a formal cause of a thing is not distinct from its effects, while an efficient cause is. This is why, strictly speaking, nothing can be the efficient cause of itself. As he points out to Arnauld if we thought of *causa sui* in this way: what gives itself existence would have to be different from itself insofar as it receives existence; yet to be both the same thing and not the same thing—that is, something different—is a contradiction.⁵⁷

In other words, this concept of efficient cause would lead to the rejection of what Descartes would later present in the *Principles* as one of the eternal truths of reason: “It is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the

⁵⁴ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 111; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 80.

⁵⁵ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 239; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 167.

⁵⁶ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 240; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 167. See Gilson, *Études*, 232. Carraud, *Causa sive ratio*, Chapter One, examines Suarez as the immediate source for this discussion.

⁵⁷ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 240; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 167.

same time.”⁵⁸ This is why Descartes says there is no risk of error in the analogy between efficient and formal cause as applied to God “since the one feature peculiar to an efficient cause, and not transferable to a formal cause, involves an evident contradiction which could not be accepted by anyone, namely that something could be different from itself, or the same thing and not the same thing at one time.”⁵⁹ This means that, with regard to God as formal cause, insofar as formal cause is reflexive, God can be seen as “the cause of himself” without this necessarily implying that “he has any of the indignity of being an effect.”⁶⁰ God as formal cause of himself in the positive sense has priority. This why Descartes makes the final point: “The answer to the question why God exists should be given not in terms of an efficient cause in the strict sense, but simply in terms of the essence or formal cause of the thing. And precisely because in the case of God there is no distinction between existence and essence, the formal cause will be strongly analogous to an efficient cause, and hence can be called something close to an efficient cause.”⁶¹ In taking formal causality to be the whole essence of a thing in this way, Descartes says, he is simply following Aristotle, who calls it the first kind of *aitia*, or cause: “[Aristotle] then extends this notion to all the essences of all things, since at this point he is not dealing with the causes of a physical compound (any more than I am in this context), but is dealing generally with the causes from which any kind of knowledge can be derived. It was scarcely possible to deal with this topic without attributing the term ‘cause’ to God.”⁶²

It is not so difficult for Descartes to conceive of formal cause in God since formal causes are usually intrinsic to that of which they are cause. But this does not seem to raise the same problem as the problem of efficient cause, unless one wants to say that the formal cause is in some sense determining of and therefore prior to that in which it is realised. Would this make the divine essence in some sense determining of the divine existence? This is the problem raised by the suggestion that what Anselm’s argument supposedly would show is that if God exists he exists necessarily—and that of course is not enough for a fully ontological argument, as Aquinas points out.

In the end, while Anselm and Aquinas cannot agree on conceptualizing God, they do agree that God is transcendent and, in some sense, inaccessible, though for different reasons. For Scotus, however, and later on for Suarez, the univocity of being allows us to think God under the concept of causality, so that even if infinitely perfect and simple, God is not inaccessible. This sets the scene for the arguments of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz who are all in search of a self-explanatory principle whose infinite perfection does not carry us beyond conceptual comprehension. In Descartes’s case this causal relation is not simply a way of thinking about God, for it reflects a *real* relationship in God. Descartes

⁵⁸ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VIII A, 24; *Writings of Descartes*, I, 209.

⁵⁹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 241-242; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 168.

⁶⁰ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 242.

⁶¹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 243; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 170.

⁶² Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 242; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 169.

argues that God's existence and essence are conceptually distinct, but this does not mean that they are distinct only in reason. He clarifies the matter in one of his letters to an unknown correspondent. While shape and other modes are strictly speaking modally distinct from the substance whose mode they are, there is a lesser distinction between attributes such as existence and number, but this not mean that the distinction is merely rational or conceptual.

Descartes, in fact, plainly states in Axiom 10 of the "Second Replies" that existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of every single thing.⁶³ God is conceptually distinct from his *necessary* existence, while every created thing is conceptually distinct from its *possible* or *contingent* existence. This is not, however, a mere distinction of reason, it is a conceptual distinction with a ground in the formal realities to which the distinction applies. This latter distinction can be called modal in a broad sense, as in the "First Set of Replies," but Descartes says "it is perhaps better called formal." To avoid confusion, he says, in the Principles he referred to this distinction as "conceptual": "that is, a distinction made by reason *ratiocinatae*. I do not recognize any distinction made by reason *ratiocinantis*—that is, one which has no foundation in reality—because we cannot have any thought without a foundation."⁶⁴

Descartes clarifies his argument in the reply to Arnauld:

In every passage where I made a comparison between a formal cause (or reason derived from God's essence, in virtue of which he needs no cause in order to exist or be preserved) and the efficient cause (without which finite things cannot exist), I always took care to make it explicitly clear that the two kinds of cause are different. And I never said that God preserves himself by some positive force, in the way in which created things are preserved by him; I simply said that the immensity of his power or essence, in virtue of which he does not need a preserver, is a positive thing.⁶⁵

The immensity and power of God is the "cause or reason" for his not needing a cause. Since that power is a positive thing, the "reason or cause" why God needs no cause is a *positive* "reason or cause." What is operative here is a kind of structural causation. The cause of the reality contained by an idea is a structural cause that determines the idea to be of one thing rather than another. The crucial causal principle is that for the mind to know its thought must be adequately

⁶³ "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." Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 166; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 117.

⁶⁴ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, IV, 349; *Writings of Descartes*, III, 280. See Justin Skirry, "Descartes' Conceptual Distinction and its Ontological Import," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42 (2004): 121-44. Skirry is arguing against what he calls the "standard account," that Descartes's conceptual distinction is merely a distinction of reason. Rather, he argues, the idea is grounded in Scotus's *distinctio formalis a parte rei*.

⁶⁵ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII 236; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 165.

structured to its object. Such ideas are *materially true* in so far as they are *of* their object, and this is what ensures the truth of everything “recollected” out of the idea. This is what grounds the necessity of thinking of God as the existent and self-causing ground of creation itself. This is why Descartes writes in Meditation Five that “it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect.”⁶⁶ This is a kind of positive intuition of God as a necessary being—as opposed to the negative intuition of God’s necessary existence which we find in Anselm. Descartes’s “recollection” of the idea of God in Meditation Five builds on the positivity of the idea of God established in Meditation Three, just as Anselm’s argument concerning necessary existence in the *Proslogion* builds on what was established negatively in the *Monologion*.

Causality in Meditation Five

This causal background allows us to understand Descartes’s presentation of the ontological argument in Meditation Five:

But if the mere fact that I can produce from my thought the idea of something entails that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive to belong to that thing really does belong to it, is not this a possible basis for another argument to prove the existence of God? Certainly, the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one that I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature.⁶⁷

The existence of God thus seems to be entailed in his concept as a kind of natural illation or recollection, which is why Descartes talks about *another* way of proving God’s existence, another innate idea of God distinct from reflective innateness:

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 apparent as the fact that the hypotenuse

⁶⁶ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 67; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 46.

⁶⁷ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 65; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 45.

subtends the largest angle; but once one has seen it, one believes it just as strongly.⁶⁸

Existence belongs to God's essence deductively because, as Descartes puts it in the reply to Caterus: "When we attend to the immense power of this being, we shall be unable to think of its existence as possible without also recognizing that it can exist by its own power; and we shall infer from this that this being does really exist and has existed from eternity, since it is quite evident by the natural light that what can exist by its own power always exists. So we shall come to understand that necessary existence is contained in the idea of a supremely perfect being."⁶⁹

It may be thought that Descartes is equivocating between "reason" and "cause," that he continuously slides between cause-as-thing and cause-as-proposition, where both terms of a syllogism and things can be explanatory causes, without drawing a sharp distinction between them.⁷⁰ But this misses the point that, for Descartes, reasons are causes. The distinction between reason and cause is itself based on an empiricist distinction between sense and reason. But for Descartes's metaphysics, reason is a cause. You are asking why, so any cause is also, metaphysically, a reason. Everything, moreover, has to be considered *in thought*. Cause is a logical term and so means more than simply efficient cause. This means that God too, like all existing things, is subject to the causal question, but for Descartes this amounts to asking why God does not need a cause. God is not a caused being in the ordinary sense, but there is a reason (in God's immense power) why God does not require a cause. This link between premise and thing is what makes it easier for Descartes to argue that causes are necessarily linked to their effects—as Hume would later realize.

God's existence follows from the fact that it is contained in the "true and immutable essence, nature, or form" of a supremely perfect being, just as it follows from the essence of a triangle that its angles equal two right angles. Unlike Anselm, who starts from the infinite nature of God, Descartes agrees with Aquinas that the idea of supreme perfection follows only after a process of deductive reason. Although it seems, he says, that we can consider God's essence apart from His existence, as Aquinas suggested, we have to realize that when we pay sufficient attention to the idea of God "existence belongs to its essence"—"necessarily belongs" in the French version: "For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, [French version: "in the idea of whom alone necessary and eternal existence is comprised"] exists?"⁷¹

So though the main purpose of Meditation Five is to lay the groundwork for a mathematico-mechanical science of nature (the essence of material things consists simply in extension and extension is described by geometry and

⁶⁸ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 68-69; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 47.

⁶⁹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 119; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 85.

⁷⁰ See Carraud, *Causa sive ratio*, and Clatterbaugh, *The Causation Debate*.

⁷¹ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 68; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 47.

mathematics), in fact, Descartes argues, once we realize this we also have to realize that the knowledge of God has to be considered as higher and more certain than our knowledge of extension. Even those who would reject the argument for God's existence in Meditation Three, but who would nonetheless accept the validity of geometrical and mathematical demonstrations, would have to grant that the existence of God is known as clearly and distinctly as any proposition of mathematics or geometry. Mathematical and geometrical demonstrations start off with the idea of extension and then proceed to deduce things about this idea by drawing out the content of the idea and what that content entails. Each step in the proof is legitimate because it rests on a clear and distinct perception either of the nature of extension or of some consequence which immediately follows from this nature. If you are going to allow that knowledge can be obtained in this way, then you must accept as a principle that whatever can be learned by clear and distinct perception of the content and consequences of an idea must be true—otherwise we could not rely on geometrical demonstrations. But if this principle is accepted then you must accept the existence of God just as you accept the truths of geometry and mathematics, because the ontological proof for God's existence proceeds in the same way. The necessary existence of God is thus derived by deduction from the content of the idea of an all perfect being.

Conclusion

Both Curley and Marion have recently questioned the coherence of Descartes's concept of Divinity, though to different ends.⁷² The details of their arguments would take us too far afield here, so it must suffice to say that both of their positions arise out of what are really neo-Platonist and voluntarist difficulties with the nature of God's unified power. Problems with this concept arise only if we assume that the concept of God is a wholly discursive one, so that the concept of unity would be seen merely as a collection of attributes.⁷³ In reply to this the neo-Platonists tended towards a non-discursive *via negativa*, while the voluntarists attempted to solve the problems of compossibility by making subtle distinctions between the absolute and ordained powers of God.⁷⁴ Both traditions provide an important background to Descartes's work.

⁷² See the literature cited in footnote 3. Koyré, *Essai sur l'idée de Dieu*, contains a thorough discussion of the whole issue, also linking the knowledge of God with Scotus, who, he says, Descartes may have known through Gibieuf. *Ibid.*, 102-03.

⁷³ Marion subsumes Descartes's concept of God under infinity, which ultimately reduces to the blank emptiness of ineffable Being—the *théologie blanche* of his title. Recent work in reply to Marion, however, suggests that perfection may play a more important role in Descartes's thought than infinity and that perfection is determinate of infinity. See Kenneth P. Winkler, "Descartes and the Names of God," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 67 (1993): 451-6. Phillip Clayton, "Descartes and Infinite Perfection," *The American Catholic Philosophical Association Proceedings* 66 (1992): 137-45. Koyré reached a similar conclusion in his *Essai*, 128-129.

⁷⁴ In Chapter 19 of the *Proslogion*, Anselm explicitly denies that we ought to think of God's unity as a collection of attributes. For the voluntarist tradition, which includes Scotus, see Amos

Both Anselm and Descartes obviously think that there is something about the concept of God that is discursive, and that it is possible to discuss God's nature. In both cases God is transcendent and is argued to be such.⁷⁵ Descartes, however, thinks he has improved on Anselm's description of the nature of God by focusing on God's infinite causal power, thus using the principle of perfection to deal with the problem of infinity in a positive way, showing that the concept of God as *causa sui* is not self-defeating and thereby overcoming Anselm's *via negativa*. In the infinite power of God all perfections are one: God is wholly just, and wholly merciful. Infinite justice is the same as infinite mercy (just as an infinite circle coincides with an infinite line), yet they are conceptually, or formally, distinct. *Quod rem* God's justice and mercy are one. The conceptual distinction only implies a certain non-identity (as opposed to a separation), and this non-identity is grounded in the formal realities to which the distinction applies.

Ultimately, however, God's nature is a discursive concept only to us. We know God only finitely. Only on the level of finite differentiation can we distinguish God's attributes. This may present problems for us, but not for the unity of God itself. So, in the end, both Anselm and Descartes abrogate discursive reason in their ontological arguments and rely for their idea of God on an intuition. In Anselm, as we saw in the first section of the paper, this intuition is negative; in Descartes, however, the intuition is positive. For Descartes, recognizing God in an act of intuition guarantees His existence because this is to "recollect" him as an idea indistinguishable from its cause. God must be thought of as the positive ground of all creation. As Descartes points out to Caterus: "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 than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists?"⁷⁶ Insofar as Descartes's ontological argument tries to explain this intuition of God it is a "causal" argument.

The centrality and innateness of the causal principle is thus the key to understanding Descartes's ontological proof and its placing in the *Meditations*. Descartes, self-conscious about the structure of his argument and the writerly requirements of his task, clearly highlights the turn from reflective to recollective innateness right at the beginning of Meditation Five, where God's causal relation to himself is said to follow deductively and innately from his very nature: God's existence belongs to his essence. So despite his insistence on preserving God's

Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), and Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

⁷⁵ See Stephen Gaukroger, "The Role of the Ontological Argument," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* 23, no. 1 and 2 (1996): 169-80.

⁷⁶ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 68-69; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 47.

incomprehensibility, Descartes arrived at a positive notion of God by making a distinction between formal and efficient causality that preserved the universality of the causal principle: causality does apply to God, especially in so far as God and His attributes can be understood distinctly, but only in terms of formal causality, which is analogous to efficient causality but is not the same thing. This allows us to understand the place of the ontological argument in the *Meditations* and adds a further strand to the complementarity of Meditations Three and Five.⁷⁷ God as a perfect and necessary being is recollected as the formal cause of his own reality, which is why we can ask for an explanation even of Him. As Descartes argues, this idea of God is the most positive, clear, and distinct idea we have, and its truth is the foundation of the truth of all others: everything depends on God and the fact that he is no deceiver.⁷⁸ For Descartes, God is the positive ground of all existence and truth.

⁷⁷ See Rodis-Lewis, "On the Complementarity of Meditations III and V."

⁷⁸ Descartes, *Oeuvres*, VII, 70; *Writings of Descartes*, II, 48. See Rome, "Created Truths and Causa Sui."