

THE CARTESIAN MEDITATOR'S CONCEPTION OF CERTAINTY:  
KNOWLEDGE OF THOUGHT AND KNOWLEDGE OF  
GOD IN THE FIRST THREE MEDITATIONS

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**The Cartesian Meditator's Conception of Certainty:  
Knowledge of Thought and Knowledge of God in the First Three Meditations**

by

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I argue that Descartes' method of doubt not only reveals the Mediator's very conception or understanding of certainty but, furthermore, that this particular grasp of certainty is not fully satisfied by the first principle – the existence of Thought - but rather by his knowledge of God's existence. The underlying scientific endeavor taken by Descartes expresses that what the Mediator is ultimately after is *external* ontological truth – the ontological reality of some thing in the empirical domain of the sciences. Before actually reaching that domain, per se, the Mediator must first understand the very possibility of Certainty with respect to something external to him; something external to *thought*

The *Cogito* - as the first principle to emerge from the limitations of metaphysical doubt - functions primarily to establish the 'thinking' and 'knowing' subject as the necessary condition for there being any knowledge to begin with. The possibility of external certainty itself is only instantiated through our knowledge of something other than and external to the Thinking Self -- God's existence. Knowledge of God is the first piece of knowledge proper we are certain of, for it is the first moment of bridging an idea to its purported object outside of thinking. Knowledge of God's existence brings to life the conception of certainty concerning the existence of something external to self, for it shows that, at the very least, such a conception is concretely realizable.

## Introduction

While the encyclopedia of scholarship on the 'Meditations' has offered an array of critiques, and detailed analyses of Descartes' actual method of doubt as well as the proofs for his existence in the Second and Third Meditations, most arguments have not explicitly explored the effects that knowledge of Self and knowledge of God each have on the Mediator's very understanding of what certainty for him entails. The literature, naturally, has taken the approach of looking at Self and God primarily as actual particular certainties. While they most certainly are instantiations of certainty, they are much more than that; they have a particular function within the Mediator's overall conception of certainty and, more specifically, his conception of certainty with regard to the external world which stands at the very core of his underlying enterprise – grounding science and thus the empirical world, on something 'firm and lasting'.

In the following work I first examine the unfolding of the Mediator's conception of certainty, as expressed in the First Meditation. I engage in a reading which sees the goal of the Meditation as not only a pursuit for a particular instantiation of certainty, but rather, a clarification of the very *meaning* of certainty that the Mediator will adopt. At each stage of his method of doubt the Mediator not only 'casts doubt' but, in doing so he continuously makes it clearer to us, albeit implicitly, what certainty ultimately entails for him. Once this reading of the Meditations is established, my main goal is then to proceed to examine the two instantiated ontological apodictic truths the Mediator arrives at – knowledge of the existence of Thought and knowledge of the existence of God –as they stand in relation to the criteria laid out by the First Meditation. That is to say, how and



where do these 'instantiated' certainties fit within the overall conception of certainty laid out by the First Meditation.

### ***The Problem: The Meditator's conception of Certainty***

One of the important, implicit and hidden features of the Meditations' quest for certainty is that Meditator himself does not lay out a working definition of *certainty proper*, that is to say, one stated explicitly by the Meditator. The Meditator himself tells us that he will cast aside all things which allow for even the slightest bit of doubt until he finds that one unshakable truth or certainty. The immediate goal of his method appears to be clear; pushing skepticism of one's beliefs and ideas, to the limit – the point at which doubt is no longer possible. Yet what does this entail at the beginning of the endeavor? What exactly it is that constitutes certainty for the Meditator, specifically within the framework of this present meditative enterprise, is not stated at the very onset of his approach. Rather, what certainty means to the Meditator only becomes clear as we move through the development of the Method of Doubt employed in the First Meditation. It is only once the Method has fully unfolded that we can truly see what the Meditator is after.

The apparent ambiguity of the Meditator's initial stance has been pointed to by many scholars, and most notably stressed by Harry Frankfurt.<sup>1</sup> How can the very pursuit of the Meditations even commence unless the Meditator has some pre-established awareness or conception of what certainty entails? Some mainstream interpretations<sup>2</sup> have approached this issue, appealing to the technical side of Descartes' own conception

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<sup>1</sup> See Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen: The Defense of Reason in Descartes's Meditations*. Chapter II

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Cottingham, *Descartes*, Chapters I-II.

of certainty and truth. These approaches focus on the previous more scientific works, mainly the '*Regulae*', where the philosopher has offered a model of certainty which rests on *mathematical* knowing and indubitability. Taking the position that for Descartes, the scientist, certainty was equated with a state or condition of 'knowing' that was parallel to mathematical certainty – that which the mind grasps absolutely clearly and distinctly and which cannot coherently be doubted - such approaches then, ultimately suggest that the Meditator all along has in mind, internal indubitability as the meaning of certainty.

What we have here then is a folding of the pursuit of certainty towards a purely internal intuitive self-given awareness. Certainty appeals only to a mental state, an epistemological-psychological condition, where epistemological dissent or disagreements are not coherent options. This is of course at the heart of mathematics and may very well have reflected Descartes' own methodological conception of certainty, but clearly as we proceed through the method of doubt we see this is not what the Meditator himself is ultimately after.

As we examine the different facets of the Method of Doubt we note that that the point of indubitability the Meditator is seeking is not merely that which is psychologically indubitable - as is the case with self-evident, mathematical, truths and other moments of pure intuition - but also the externally indubitable. The Eternal Truths of mathematics and other pure (clear and distinct) truths are understood by the Meditator as internally irrefutable and indubitable certainties and as such he never doubts their validity as long as he reflects upon them. In many aspects, mathematical certainty in fact represents for Descartes a model or archetype of self-given clarity. Yet what the Method of Doubt ultimately shows us, is that the validity of mathematical truths rests in the fact

that they are indubitable in *thought* but do not necessarily possess any external-ontological reality. That is to say, they are undeniable truths when we contemplate them in thought, but, their reality outside of mind, their external existence in a mind-independent ontological reality is what the Meditator is ultimately after.

The Demon Hypothesis and the move towards hyperbolic doubt shows us that what the Meditator himself wants is internal self-givenness *coupled with*, actual external certainty. It is not sufficient that these truths are self-evident to reason, we want them to be true in the 'externally-real' sense. The Certainty he is looking for is not only knowledge of the internally indubitable but of something external and concretely real – in short it is knowledge that is clear and distinct *as well as* ontologically and concretely real. That is not to say that mathematical certainties are any less real but, rather, their actual existence is only given within thought and not the external world, whereas what the Meditator is after is actual external existence.

Focusing only the internal certainty does not give the Meditator's own external endeavor the same level of urgency that it deserves, and thus reduce certainty to that which is clear and distinct and, not, that which is clear, distinct, and is in fact about a non-mental reality. While such 'historical-context' commentators recognize the movement towards externality, the strong focus on Descartes' mathematical-driven rationalism at times appear to reduce the initial stage of the Meditations to a type of defense of rational intuition. This, I believe, only gives us Descartes, and not Descartes as the Meditator. Since Descartes' own epistemological and metaphysical conceptions constantly make their way to the writings of the supposedly detached Meditator, it is crucial, as Broughton, Markie, Carriero and many other scholars have stressed, that the

entire meditative nature of the work requires that we primarily focus on the metaphysical approach that the Meditator himself engages in. Not the philosopher, but the detached Meditator. This is especially the case with respect to the pursuit for certainty.<sup>3</sup>

The meaning of certainty itself is understood and derived through a discovery or instantiation of our knowledge of that which must necessarily exist - not in thought alone but in an external non-mental sphere. That which he can know to be necessarily existent is what, epistemologically, grounds the very meaning of certainty in a concrete sense – the actual existence of something, not conceptually, but actually. The movements of the method of doubt suggest that for the Meditator the pursuit of certainty is rooted not in pure mental indubitability but rather an external-ontological one. Thus the different stages of doubt reveal that, he is not after indubitability alone but, rather, *truth*, in the strictest ontological external meaning of the word; truth as correspondence to an external world.

The First Meditation, has received its fair share of attention from scholars, yet one of the permeating tendencies in the different analyses is a fairly particular focus on the intentional objects of Descartes own brand of skepticism.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, it has mainly concentrated on *what* the skepticism involved is targeting; namely, first the empirical domain of the senses and then, the internal domain of intuitive self-evident mathematical truths. Naturally then, the tendency has been to focus on the Meditator's quest for a

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<sup>3</sup> Descartes of course does not always make this easy or even possible. Thus placing the Meditator's approach in relation to Descartes' own intellectual stance on various issues is plainly inevitable. That being said, the overall enterprise as laid out by the first Meditation exhibits the possibility and, I believe, the necessity of separating the two.

<sup>4</sup> See for example approach taken by Martial Gueroult in *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*. Though Gueroult attention and exegesis of the Method of Doubt is second to none, as with many other scholars, the focus is strictly directed at *that which is being doubted* and not what lies behind the method insofar as it helps the Meditator clarify and come to terms with what certainty actually means for him.

particular instantiation of certainty. This is, after all in line with Descartes' own development of the method. Yet, an examination of the First Meditation directed solely towards the end result of the Meditator's method of doubt, always leads us to affirm that nothing positive has been gained by his endeavor. The Meditator in fact himself tells us in the opening paragraphs of the ensuing Meditation that, all is lost, and the only thing that can be affirmed is that nothing is actually certain.

While this is indeed the gloomy situation the Meditator finds himself in as his method reaches its zenith, the entire meditative process of doubt has nevertheless given us a clearer description of what certainty actually means to him. In the very process of his repeated failure to eliminate and overcome doubt, lies implicitly an expression of the very meaning of certainty. Ontologically empty handed as our solitary Meditator may be once the Meditation has reached its peak - with the Demon Hypothesis casting doubt on all spheres of knowledge - the radical deception at least allows us, the readers, to see the external dimension of the Meditator's grasp of certainty; certainty with respect to external ontological truth.

In this respect, we should, I suggest, engage in a reading of the First Meditation which allows us to see not only the inherent nihilistic conclusions of the Meditator's skepticism but rather what these very conclusions reveal about his overall conception of certainty. When we peel the layers of the method of doubt we see the direction it takes us towards; a coherent and definitive conception of certainty with regard to the external world, regardless of the fact his conclusions thus far suggest that such conception can never be met. His failure to overcome doubt, at the very least, allows us to grasp more definitively what the Meditator is after in his pursuit of certainty. Reading the First



Meditation in this way allows us to move beyond the relentless skepticism and see its positive outcome.

It is indeed possible to see that, the issue of whether he has armed himself with that particular 'external' definition of certainty from the very onset of the Meditation or, rather comes to know or understand what certainty is via the process of doubt, becomes a peripheral issue within a strict adherence to the text alone. For us, the readers, it is only at the end of the process of doubt and its inherent movements that we can fully know what the Meditator ultimately wants – truth, in the external ontological sense; knowledge of the being and existence of something.

Within the order of discovery inherent to the Meditation itself, if we stick to the Meditator's words alone, we cannot clearly know what his pursuit for certainty entails until the Meditation has fully unfolded and, thus, I believe it should be read in such a revelatory manner - at least with respect to certainty. The movement of the Meditation may suggest that it is only natural for us readers to suppose that the Meditator must have had this or some other conception of certainty from the very beginning of the endeavor. While it may very well be the case that what certainty means is already presupposed by the Meditator, in so readily accepting this position, much of the literature has not looked at the very completion of the process of doubt as revealing the Meditator's conception of certainty.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in the first part of this discussion, I offer a technical examination of the different facets of the Method of Doubt which is, for the most part, in conformity with

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<sup>5</sup> My position here offers merely an interpretive theoretical approach on how to read the overall tone of the First Meditation. There is no reason, to assume that Descartes had actually intended for the Meditation to express the Meditator's very understanding of the concept or notion of Certainty itself. Nevertheless, as implicit or even unintentional as it may be, it is the goal of the present thesis to stress the important of reading the First Meditation in such manner.

various traditional interpretations, yet my ultimate goal is to show how those facets, at each stage bring us closer to grasping the direction the Meditator is heading towards, in his own understanding of certainty. While such a reading is, I hold, valuable to any analysis of the First Meditation, it is my aim to show that its true significance comes to light when examined in relation to the arguments of the Second and Third Meditation – the existence of Thought and God.

Seeing the First Meditation as implicitly revealing the Meditator's conception of certainty, opens the door, I believe, to a new way of looking at the core discoveries of the two ensuing Meditations – the existence of Thought and the existence of God. By not explicitly engaging in this kind of reading, the abundant scholarship pertaining to *Cogito* and God – regardless of its immense scope and breadth – has overlooked the dynamic between knowledge of the existence of these truths and the Meditator's own understanding of the meaning of external certainty.

***The Problem: The Meaning of Certainty and the Knowledge of Thought and God.***

The traditional approaches of the scholarly literature pertaining to the arguments on the existence of God and *Cogito* – regardless of their specific themes or concerns – have all treated the Meditator's discoveries as particular moments or instantiations of actual certainty. In treating them as such, the scholarly focus, historically, has mainly concentrated on a technical analysis of Descartes' actual method of arriving at these truths; examining the structure of the proofs, questioning their validity, their actual meaning, etc.<sup>6</sup> Through dissecting both his methods and conclusions, much attention has

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Bernard Williams' approach to the Meditator's knowledge of God in *Descartes: The*

been given to clarifying *what* exactly the Meditator believes he has discovered. These approaches are both valuable and necessary in the process of learning the development of the Meditator's argument, yet what is lacking in the literature, is not only seeing how and through what means the Meditator proves the existence of Thought and God, but the meaning and significance of these proofs to both the criteria necessary for an understanding of certainty and the manner in which Descartes wants to apply it to his overall enterprise.

What is ultimately revealed to us at the end of the First Meditation are the criteria necessary not only for understanding the meaning of certainty, in the conceptual sense, but also where Descartes wants to direct this conception. With respect to the former, Certainty for the Meditator, in the most immediate self-given manner, can be defined as knowledge of some ontological truth - - knowledge of the existence or being of some 'thing'. When we look at the overall scope of the Meditator's method of doubt we see that his conception of certainty is one which he clearly aims to apply to the 'external' realm, the world outside of the subject. His focus is not merely internal indubitability but external knowledge. The Meditator wants to know that his hands are *externally* real, that the images he sees are *externally* real, that the eternal truths of mathematics and physics are *externally* real. Their indubitable givenness in mind is not a sufficient or even adequate description of his quest for certainty. Approaching the arguments of the Second and Third Meditation from this perspective, I examine the manner in which knowledge of Thought and knowledge of God, each allow for the realizability of the understanding of certainty proper. More specifically, I shall argue that each argument offers the Meditator

its own set of implications within the pursuit for grounding and understanding certainty in its full sense.

My overall conclusion is that, it is only through knowledge of the existence of God – as an ontologically real thing whose existence is outside or external to the self or to 'thought' – that the realizability of Descartes' full or complete conception of certainty becomes instantiated. In other words, it is knowledge of God's existence that makes the possibility of external certainty actualized. On the other hand, the *Cogito* argument – knowledge of the existence of thought or thinking – also provides him with an instantiation of the criterion necessary for the understanding of certainty but only in its most basic rudimentary sense which, I believe, is not compatible with an understanding of certainty as it applies to anything *other* than the existence of self.

With respect to the *Cogito*, in giving him an awareness of a necessary ontological truth – the being or existence of 'some' *thing* in reality – his immediate conception of certainty comes to life. If being certain, as I believe the First Meditation affirms, is not only a psychological-mental disposition, akin to our awareness of mathematical truths, but is rather a knowledge or an awareness of something that has its own independent being, in reality, then knowledge of the existence of a Res Cogitans most emphatically gives the Meditator a concrete instantiation of such certainty. It is knowledge of the existence of a thing – namely Thought, or a thinking thing in reality, and not just an idea or, as he calls it, a mode of thought. In transcending hyperbolic doubt, the criteria necessary for a remedial understanding of certainty has been met.

While this grounds or instantiates an understanding of certainty as knowledge of that which exists, the limited ontology of the said existent thing – Thought – and its utter

difference and metaphysical separateness from the 'outer' external world, constricts the applicability of this conception of certainty. In the richer and fuller sense of his pursuit for certainty the Meditator does not merely want to be aware of the being of the objects of his thinking as mere ideas or modes of thought, he wants to be certain of the objects of his thought, as things which are indeed *other than and external to thought*; that is to say, their ontological being is other than the being of thought.<sup>7</sup> He wants the things which his ideas are purportedly about to refer to actual things and not thought alone. The *Cogito* argument, I hold, only allows him to understand certainty with respect to the being of thought since for Descartes, the substance of thought shares no ontological resemblance to anything other than thought.<sup>8</sup> To have an understanding of certainty that pertains to such externality, the Meditator needs to bridge the internal domain of his ideas and an awareness of the existence of something other than Thought. This he accomplishes with knowledge of God's existence.

By moving from the idea of God, to God per se, ontologically separate from mind, the Meditator has the first moment of certainty in terms of linking Thought to an external 'other-than-thought' realm. Though God is of an utterly distinct ontological nature than the rest of the objects of his thought, which predominantly deal with corporeal things, since it is the first moment of knowing the existence of something other than thought it can be seen as a necessary precursor for materializing his conception of certainty that is to be directed to the empirical world. Whereas the *Cogito* proof, serves to

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<sup>7</sup> Whether this refers to a corporeal extended being or of some other ontological essence is only secondary to the fact that they are things which are other than self, other than thought.

<sup>8</sup> This distinction is echoed in the Sixth Meditation and more emphatically throughout *The Passions of the Soul* where Descartes draws a sharp ontological separation of mind and body. Though invariably linked the two are ontologically distinct in such way that ontologically they share nothing in common; there is nothing belonging to body which also belongs to thought or vice versa. See CSM I, 328-329



realize or materialize his immediate understanding of certainty as it pertains to ‘thought alone’, knowledge of God's existence makes his conception of certainty – as directed towards the external world – more concrete.

I thus see the argument for God's existence as a precursor to gaining the world back. Knowing that God exists, grounds the very possibility of external certainty, without which, a regaining of the corporeal world would have no meaning for the Meditator. The historical scholarship has commented extensively on God as a guarantor of the fact that our knowledge of the world actually corresponds to that world.<sup>9</sup> While this is most certainly the case as we move forward in the Meditation, what I would like to stress on the other hand is the earlier function which knowledge of God represents. Before he can know that the world is actually as he perceives it – when free of error – the Meditator needs to see the very possibility of external certainty materialized, that is to say, certainty about something other than Thought. Merely *knowing* that God exists at this point does not, guarantee that the Meditator's knowledge of the external world is true, but it does, I maintain, at the very least open the possibility for understanding that sphere of knowledge as potentially true since now he has an actual instantiation of something external. In the broad sense of the Meditations as a whole then, we can say that knowledge of God both gives the Meditator an understanding of the meaning of external certainty in general, as well as a more concrete specific guarantee of validity of my his actual knowledge of things in the world. The former is established by the end of the Third Meditation while the latter, by the end of the Sixth.

Descartes reveals through his work not only the pursuit for the certain and true,

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<sup>9</sup> See Martial Gueroult, *Descartes' Philosophy Interpreted According to the Order of Reasons*. Chapter V

but also his desire to know the criteria through which certainty can be grasped by the thinking self. What is more, by contemplating these criteria, Descartes concludes that it is only in and through a singular instantiation of a unity of the conceptual (the mental) to the externally-objective existent, that the understanding of certainty becomes complete. Finally, and most importantly, the comparative analysis of the nature of Ideas in general to the nature of the idea of God, reveals that it is our awareness of God's existence which represents that exact singular moment of the conceptual-concrete unity.

In order to develop my position I will be following the text and looking at the movement and progression of Descartes' own stance from the First to Third Meditations. I begin by looking at the Method of Doubt. I will here hope to show how the different facets or stages of doubt, taken together, show the reader, the type of certainty that Descartes is ultimately after with respect to his overall goals.<sup>10</sup> I then proceed to look at the emergence of the *Cogito* – the necessary affirmation of a real existent *res cogitans* – as it follows from the inevitable limitations of radical doubt. My argument will focus on showing that the *Cogito* argument, in so far as certainty is concerned, is a first and necessary step for there to be any epistemology whatsoever, by positing the necessary criteria for the possibility of knowledge in general – that is to say, by positing Thought. Yet with respect to knowledge proper, knowledge of the existence of Thought will not suffice; what Descartes ultimately wants is to establish the truth regarding the external reality of our particular thoughts, in so far as their representational objects are concerned.

As the move from idea to external reality is only accomplished when we look at the idea of God, I examine the Third Meditation, first elaborating on Descartes doctrine

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<sup>10</sup> Though this does not become more fully honed until the end of the Second or beginning of Third Meditation, the external dimension to the certainty Descartes is after is already affirmed by the conditions of doubt laid out in the First Meditation.

of ideas in general, and then focus on the uniqueness of the idea of God.<sup>11</sup> By appealing to Descartes' metaphysical stance on Causality and the manner in which he uses it to move from an idea of a thing to that thing itself, I argue that it is this knowledge which serves as the archetype for the psychological foundation of comprehending the meaning of certainty as it relates to all other ideas about the external world. In arriving at knowledge of God's necessary existence, the Meditator obtains an understanding of what certainty about our thoughts in general implies, in so far as our thoughts are about things which are taken to be, ontologically, external objects – objects which are other than thought.

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<sup>11</sup> The underlying current of my argument regarding knowledge of God's existence is focused particularly on the manner in which this knowledge is arrived at in the Third Meditation and not the Fifth. The overall concern and movement of the Third Meditation is what reveals the implications of knowledge of God's existence to the Meditator's conception of Certainty. The causal arguments of the Third Meditation are all rooted in linking the inner world of ideas (thoughts) to some external correspondence based not on mere conceptuality but on actual ontological external necessity. The Fifth Meditation however, in following the traditional ontological argument structure, is a conceptual proof – knowledge of God's existence is based on the fact that the idea of God is an idea of a thing which itself cannot be conceived as other than existing. The proof is anchored on the very 'mathematical-pure intuition-like' rationalist of certainty that I believe the Meditator wants to move away from in his initial pursuit. A detailed comparative analysis on the difference between the two Meditations to my overall thesis, would be fascinating in its own right, but is beyond the scope of my present argument and hence I merely clarify here my focusing on the Third specifically.

## Chapter I: Doubt and The Senses

### 1.1 Intro

In his methodological work, *The Regulae* Descartes had laid out strict rules and methods which were seen as steps in our pursuit of proper scientific discovery.<sup>12</sup> The rules laid out were seen as tools necessary for the proper direction of the mind on its ascent towards truth and discovery, in such way that it is to be free of technical and methodological error. While such rules would lead us towards true discoveries in the world of scientific exploration, Descartes nevertheless noted an inherent limitation to these rules. What is lacking in science and mathematics, even in the most rigorous and methodical application, is a ground of absolute certainty itself—not in the method of adequately directing our minds towards truths out there in the world but rather the very grounding of certainty and truth itself. The rules, by limiting the possibility of error, allow us to arrive at real and certain knowledge but they do not give us that initial moment that serves as the very defining and grounding of certainty and truth proper. What is missing then is not the process of arriving at *particular truths* but an original first ‘truth’ upon which science, in its pursuit for particular ‘truths’, can rest. For this endeavor, Descartes turns to metaphysics.

Descartes understood that for epistemology to be complete, the certainty upon which we can model our knowledge of the world in general must come not from empirical knowledge but through a rigorous metaphysical investigation regarding certainty proper. The Meditator, engaging in radical doubt, ultimately aims to find that

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<sup>12</sup> See *Rules for the Directions of the Mind*, CSM I, 9-76

one thing, concept, notion, idea (etc) whose existence is so apodictically and completely undeniable that it will serve as a grounding principle for the very meaning of certainty. In being free of any previously conceived beliefs, if he can arrive at an awareness or knowledge of the necessary existence of something he will find the first principle which will then serve as the ground for the conceivability of certainty as itself realizable. The Mediator's quest is, in a sense, twofold, finding that which transcends any possible doubt, no matter how extreme this doubt may be and, more importantly, once this is accomplished possessing an absolute model or type of certainty that will allow him to understand particular moments of certainty in the sciences once he obtains them.

The technical approach of the Cartesian project in the Meditations is explicitly stated from the very onset of the First Meditation. In order truly to build a foundation for all knowledge we must start with that which is absolutely certain. Descartes affirms that in order for him to arrive philosophically at any indubitable first principles it is essential to, first and foremost, suspend all belief in what he had come to accept as absolutely true, and place it under the rigorous scrutiny of his Method of Doubt. In examining the method of doubt in general, it is essential to understand both the initial starting point of the Meditator, as well as the overall scope of his meditative approach. The starting point is the continuously growing process of doubting the *things* that the Meditator has 'up to now taken for granted' as absolutely certain. What lies beneath this process and is, I hold, the ultimate goal of the First Meditation is the discovery of the very *meaning* of certainty. In this chapter I would like to examine the general assumption and development of Descartes' Method of Doubt in relation to the sensed corporal world. I will hope to show by the end of the argument that Descartes offers complete and explicit criteria for



certainty.<sup>13</sup>

The argument begins with the Meditator claiming that he wants to examine whether these ideas he had always considered to be real and true, are in fact susceptible to particular criteria that will render them doubtful. His approach from the very onset reveals that he may not, as Frankfurt at times argues, have specific criteria for certainty but is rather working his way towards such criteria by attempting to eliminate and transcend any aspects which can render them dubitable. The project, seeking absolute certainty, starts negatively – the Meditator does not elaborate on why the ideas he wants to inspect and scrutinize have been so readily accepted by him as true but, rather, looks at possible criteria for their fallacious nature. It is at the heart of the Meditation here to express what the Meditator is looking for in the pursuit for certainty. By following his constantly developing and expanding criteria for doubt, we come closer and closer to seeing why the Meditator believes certain types of beliefs are assumed or supposed to be true. The method he employs is thus aimed at reaching a conception of certainty that will be defined and understood in relation to the transcending of all possible criteria of doubt.

In order to facilitate the immense task of emptying all his beliefs, Descartes maintains that there is clearly no need to give examples of all opinions or ideas which are to be doubted and demolished; rather he groups all that can be known in the two categories of possible knowledge - a) derived either from or through the senses and, b) the purely mathematical and logical ideas we have about simple natures, independent of

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<sup>13</sup> With respect to the Method of Doubt, my aim is to examine the implications of its conclusions to the quest for certainty and not to defend or dismiss, as many have, the validity of commencing the search for certainty with skepticism. This is indeed a very rich topic, but one that, is far beyond the scope of my present argument. As we follow the progression of the First Meditation, we note that the pursuit for truth and certainty was to unfold through the rigorous discovery of the metaphysical and epistemological limitations of doubt, and thus the project must ultimately commence with the skeptical approach.

an external corporeal world.<sup>14</sup> The approach of the Meditator suggests that all knowledge falls into these two categories and that, taken together, they do in fact represent all that can be known. Knowledge is either of a perceived sensory kind or of an internal, logical, mathematical kind.

With respect to this division of all knowledge into these two categories, Descartes' skeptical attack was truly intended to be all-embracing; if any idea can be shown as dubitable or fallacious, then the entire category to which the idea belongs must be accepted as uncertain.<sup>15</sup> Any piece of 'knowledge', which satisfies even the slightest criteria for doubt, will place the entire category to which it belongs – either sensory or purely rationally intuitive – on shaky grounds and, in fact, as he tells us, will be treated with the same degree of skepticism as that which we have regarding things that are plainly false. The Meditator affirms, “I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. So, for the purpose of rejecting all my opinions, it will be enough that I find in them at least some reason of doubt.”<sup>16</sup>

Objections have naturally been raised regarding this radical approach of rejecting an entire category of knowledge if just one of its constituents expresses the potential to be

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<sup>14</sup> This includes all knowledge based on the synthesis of perceived concepts into abstract and imagined concepts as well as emotional qualities or properties, abstract entities, etc. Descartes, does not go to great lengths to offer concrete examples of these until the Sixth Meditation, yet presently one can see that as the Meditation progresses, such examples are not particularly necessary.

<sup>15</sup> Since, again, we are not given the criteria for certainty, we set out to weed any *uncertainties* from these two epistemological groups based on the different criteria of doubt; criteria which become more and more honed throughout the Meditation.

<sup>16</sup> John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (trans.), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volume II (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 12. Future references, to be cited throughout as [CSM/Vol/Page].

false.<sup>17</sup> Anthony Kenny asks, "...why should the fact that I have some false beliefs prevent me from being certain about any...Can none of my beliefs be certain unless all are certain?"<sup>18</sup> This is indeed a valid objection, for even if a group of ideas all belong to one category or set, an investigation into their falsehood or truth could be carried out on a case-by-case basis. While Descartes does not, sadly, clarify his approach here from the onset, a careful reading shows that his critique focuses not on individual beliefs but, rather, on the nature of the entire set – that is to say on the basis of any 'common properties' of its constituents.

If a particular attribute or characteristic of an idea or belief belongs to all members of the set to which that idea belongs, then the entire category can never be considered as certain, so long as that attribute is itself fallacious. If a salient character or property, say 'Y', belongs, or could belong, to 'all' the particular constituents of category 'X', and 'Y' is itself shown to be false or doubtful, then regardless of their other properties, these constituents can be taken as false by simple deduction. So it is not the case that a single false belief makes the set to which it belong false simply *because* it – the single belief – is false but, rather, Descartes is looking at certain characteristic of the entire domain which belong to all its 'particulars' or constituents. His examination, in respect to both the sense based knowledge and eternal truths of mathematics, implicitly suggests that his skepticism towards them is based on what he sees as the 'common ground' of all the individual elements of each category. To answer Kenny's objection

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<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere Descartes makes his rather infamous analogy between a false idea and a single bad apple amongst a batch of good ones – Just as the rotten apple can ruin the entire lot, so, claims Descartes, a false idea renders the entire category to which it belongs, as doubtful. See *Seventh Replies* [CSM II, 324]

<sup>18</sup> Anthony Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, (New York: Garland, 1968), 19.

then, while Descartes may give us the impression that 'none of my beliefs are certain unless they are all certain' his actual approach is that 'none of my beliefs are certain unless the features which belongs to all of them are certain'.<sup>19</sup>

## ***1.2 The Deceptive Nature of the Senses:***

### *1.2(a) The Historical Context*

The Meditator naturally begins his journey with knowledge gained from the senses. He tells us that that he will begin by looking at “the basic principles on which all my former beliefs rested”<sup>20</sup> and thus it is only fitting that he starts with the concrete perceived world as opposed to mathematics.<sup>21</sup> While the latter contains a much higher degree of self-given intuitive certainty than sense-based knowledge, (to be discussed in detail later), it is less immediate than knowledge derived from everyday experience. The first issue we face when confronting the senses, is to note what they are for Descartes and how significant a role they play within the Cartesian system of knowledge as a

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<sup>19</sup> In the Sciences (and in every day judgment for that matter) not only do we eventually assent, out of practical necessity, to truths that are at least very *probable* even if the slightest bit of doubt can be cast upon them, we are not necessitated to throw out an entire body of knowledge because one of its members is false. This systematic approach of dealing with an entire category of knowledge as opposed to individual constituents, on the premise of certain universally applicable attributes or properties, reveals a metaphysical guidance or approach which is not found in the rules of the *Regulae*. See CSM I, 9-76

<sup>20</sup> CSM II 12.

<sup>21</sup> I believe that starting with perception based knowledge is indeed the correct approach; mathematical and syllogistic truths such are, in a sense, secondary in their temporal givenness to us. It is the perceived and sensed world that we are most immediately aware of, and thus the basic truths we form from this immediate awareness, are more connected to our daily experience. Mathematical truths, while of a more pure intuitive nature are – at least from the vantage point of the detached Meditator – separate, distinct and even distant from the composite world about which we form the bulk of our knowledge.

whole. The importance of sense-based knowledge within the broader spectrum of Descartes' epistemology as a scientist can never be underestimated, regardless of the ruthless treatment they receive in the First Meditation. Scientific knowledge (and, knowledge in general for that matter) in its reliance and appeals to observation begins with sense-based knowledge. The Meditator commences by claiming that "Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true, I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses"<sup>22</sup> The senses are the vehicle through which we are immediately given knowledge of the corporeal perceived world around us.

Descartes' ensuing radical attack on the senses is well known by students and scholars alike yet what is at times overlooked is the historical context in which it is situated, specifically, in the context of Descartes' contempt for the Aristotelian epistemology embedded in the Scholastic philosophy of his time.<sup>23</sup> A question or an issue which has often been raised, recently by Broughton, is the identity of the Meditator whom Descartes wants us readers to join along on a meditative journey.<sup>24</sup> The issue of the supposed identity of the Meditator, finds its first niche here; the critique of the senses as the source for and, instantiation of, certainty. In his critique of the senses, is the Meditator taking the persona of Descartes himself, the brilliant mathematician, scientist and scholar, who is very well versed in the history of a Scholastic philosophy which he wished to challenge and revolutionize? Or, alternately, is it Descartes brought down to the bare bones intellectual level of the common individual– the lay person who, in

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<sup>22</sup> CSM II 12.

<sup>23</sup> A detailed look at Descartes' critique of what he saw as the Aristotelian dimension to the Scholastic philosophy of his time is, far beyond the scope of my current endeavor. I merely want to present it here as the background to the Meditator's approach.

<sup>24</sup> See Janet Broughton, *Descartes' Method of Doubt*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 22-26.



seeking the grounds and criteria for certainty in his knowledge of the world, questions the validity of the senses?<sup>25</sup>

There is an inevitable complementarity in the two positions here, I believe. On the one hand Descartes was most certainly appealing to the Scholastics whom he wanted to free from what he saw as the shackles of the 'tired old way' of thinking about the senses in epistemology. At the same time the relentless critique of the senses which sat at the heart of his entire approach was also to be understood as a necessary step for any intellectually inclined seeker of truth reading his work. The complementarity of the two sides here is this: Descartes' contempt for the 'common-sense' Aristotelianism. In the scholarly literature examining Descartes conception of the scholastic philosophy of his time, much attention has been given to the issue of sense-based knowledge. Gary Hatfield and Dan Garber for example, argue that Descartes saw scholastic philosophy as inheriting from Aristotle – via Aquinas – a strict empiricism which reflected a 'common-sense' approach that accepted all knowledge as sense-based. Things known in the intellect are reflections of empirical properties and qualities *out there* waiting to be grasped by the intellect.<sup>26</sup>

Commentators often note how for Descartes, the Scholastics had mirrored in their epistemology the standpoint of common sense as naturally adopted by the 'average person'. In so far as what constitutes a ground for certainty, the Scholastic thinker held

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<sup>25</sup> This question is in fact relevant to most, if not all, aspects of the Meditations and, I will continuously point out particular arguments where the distinction between the Meditator's stance and Descartes' own world view must be stressed for the sake of consistency and commitment to the philosophical method at hand - - presupposing nothing as true unless it is apodictically indubitable.

<sup>26</sup> In fact, even more transcendent and metaphysical truths which are not immediately and tangibly 'out there', so to speak, were to be thought as ones merely abstracted from other empirical and tangible knowledge.

the common-sense empiricist approach - at its heart lay an epistemology that accepts the givenness and immediacy of our 'perceived' world as its foundations.

Hatfield holds that,

...it was by shifting the status of the senses as sources of knowledge that Descartes effected his attack on Scholastic Aristotleanism....at the core of the Aristotelian conception of the knower lay a sense-based epistemology which was distilled into the slogan nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.<sup>27</sup>

Linking this type of empiricist epistemology to Descartes' portrayal of it as 'common-sense', Dan Garber further adds, "Given Descartes' conception of scholastic philosophy, it is not difficult to see why he often links the errors of Scholasticism with the errors of common sense...the scholastic world, as Descartes understood it, is simply a metaphysical elaboration of the world of common sense."<sup>28</sup>

Neither the Scholar nor the 'common person' can escape from the fact that they have been building their knowledge on a foundation that has, at its heart, a complete reliance on the senses. The Meditator then is the individual who for a long time has accepted the empiricist starting point as omni-present in all of her knowledge and is now seeking to question its validity.

### *1.2(b) On Immediate Sensory-Deception*

Now, returning to the argument itself, we see that Descartes' immediate grounds

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Hatfield, "The Senses and the Fleshless Eye: The Meditations as Cognitive Exercises". In *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 46.

<sup>28</sup> Dan Garber, "Semel In Vita: The Scientific Background". In *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Amelie Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 88.

for placing the senses under doubt is that they are often deceptive and, according to his method, we cannot accept as certain anything that can be deceptive. He says, "...From time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once."<sup>29</sup>

The main goal of Descartes' initial argument is clear; since the senses can, and often do, deceive us, the plethora of beliefs or ideas we have built upon what the senses have informed us are based on possibly false sensations.<sup>30</sup> Knowledge stemming from, or rooted upon sensory perception is dubious or at least possibly false since the senses in general can deceive us. Though, as is often objected, Descartes offers very little to explicitly clarify what is the nature of this 'deception', we note that what he is getting at here is physiological deception based on the bodily-physical character of the nature of sensation in general. Sensation for Descartes has a dual character; on the one hand Descartes' philosophy had completely internalized the act of sensing to a mental state, to a state of thinking and, thus, when he later elaborates on the nature of *Cogito* as Thought, he includes sensing, feeling, etc.<sup>31</sup> The seeing of the wax, the feeling of pain, the smell of the fire, these are all mental internalized activities – it is the mind that sees the wax and not the eye. On the other hand the sensory data which forms our sensations originates from our sense-organs. These are, so to speak, the vehicles that ground the very

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<sup>29</sup> CSM II 12.

<sup>30</sup> The concrete example he presently gives us of such a deception, is with respect to small objects or ones in the distance. It is at times objected that, Descartes did not focus on expanding and elaborating this issue, at least in so far as offering examples of sensory deception. One could maintain that it is not essential for Descartes to supply us as with great detail, for there are plenty of sense-deception occurrences that any reader will be well aware of. In his more scientific works, e.g., *Optics* and *Regulae* Descartes does explicitly deal with this aspect more extensively. Yet, as I shall momentarily argue, further clarification is due here, in order to understand his rather rash move towards the other dimension of cognitive sense experience that is not susceptible to physical deception.

<sup>31</sup> This is expanded upon and with great detail in *The Passions of the Soul*. See CSM I, 329-370

possibility of sensation, and it is thus here that the deception he speaks of in the initial stage of the First Meditation, takes form. It is the very mechanical physiological nature of the human eye, for example, that, under certain circumstances, it will yield inaccurate sensory data from which we form, internally, sensations that are in turn inaccurate. While it is the mind that ultimately turns the sensory data to a 'seeing-of-the wax' it is the eye that gives the mind that sensory data to begin with and, hence, inaccurate sense-datum will yield false thoughts.

The initial argument on the deceptive nature of the senses thus gives us here the first grain of an expressed criterion of doubt. Yet, more importantly, in doing so it also gives us the first hint regarding what certainty means to the Meditator. As I had mentioned in my introduction, the Meditator's quest for certainty does not commence with an immediate clear description of what certainty means to him. He wants to doubt until he can *be certain*, but since he does not explicitly tell us what that psychological condition or state – being certain – actually mean, readers are left to extract its meaning by seeing the underlying thread of the method of doubt in its different applications and stages. In this initial 'sensory-deception' stage we get the first taste of what he is after – external ontological truth. The doubt here is based on sensory-deception, but *of what* is this deception? Of the correspondence of our sensations – as mental thoughts about *some 'thing'* – to the external ontological existence of that thing in reality; in the present case of sensation, the non-mental reality of the *objects* of our sensations. This, of course, later becomes the salient theme of the Third Meditation. When he says our senses deceive us he simply means, that they deceive us about the accuracy that what they portray corresponds to actual real existing objects, qualities, or properties in external reality, that

is to say, in the external world. *To be certain*, here, means that sensations give me a portrait of a mental reality that corresponds to an external non-mental one.

Since the senses can be deceptive, this conception of certainty, as knowledge of the real and existent, cannot originate from the empirically sensed world. However, this criterion of skepticism based on the deceptive nature of the senses, notes the Meditator, is not all-encompassing in its scope. He immediately affirms that there are certain sense perceptions that we cannot call into doubt solely on the premise that the senses are often deceptive. These include objects of immediate sense awareness; that I am here, that these are my hands typing, that there is light above, that the coffee is hot, etc. He affirms: “There are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses.....how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine...?”<sup>32</sup>

The move here towards asserting the validity of, at least, a particular type of sense-derived knowledge, seems quite perplexing. If we are to follow Descartes’ own words and not trust any category of knowledge that possesses even the slightest possibility of deception or falsehoods with respect to any of its constituents, then the Meditator should thoroughly extend his doubt to the entire category of perception. Though he, of course, does extend the deception at a latter point of the argument one could expect him to do so within the framework of the sensory ‘deception’ argument alone. Yet the current argument suggests that not to trust *all* the senses and all the subsequent knowledge that we build upon them because they are *at times* deceptive, would be a mistake. In order to clarify the difficulty we must view the category of

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<sup>32</sup> CSM II 13.



sensory knowledge as divided into two sub categories.<sup>33</sup>

If the senses and the knowledge based on them were taken as just one whole category, or class, then Descartes' later argument that they are not 'always' deceptive would not hold much weight; it is irrelevant that they are not always deceptive, for, again, the Meditator insists that our search for certainty cannot rely on any faculty that is even partially dubitable. If there is one overarching category for all sense knowledge, and the senses in general have even the slightest potential of deceiving or tricking us, by the Meditator's prescribed method this category of knowledge must be discarded as the source of certain and true knowledge. Rather, what I believe Descartes, as a man of science, is engaging in here is a division of sense knowledge into two separate categories. One that is susceptible or prone to error, as is the case with say optical illusions and the likes, and then the category of immediate sense awareness where there is no possibility of such physical or physiological deception.<sup>34</sup>

The claim regarding the deceptive nature of certain sense-knowledge is a scientific-empirical claim, suggesting certain properties of things that could elicit some sort of physical deception, as when the eye, for example, is deceived about the proximity of an object. According to the Meditator then, this kind of external deception, within the framework of the present argument, cannot be applied to cases of immediate sense

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<sup>33</sup> It is here that we see, as mentioned earlier, the need for a more detailed qualification within the framework of this argument. While it may indeed be the case that within Descartes' different scientific investigations this issue is clearly explained and therefore Descartes saw no need to delve on it at any great lengths here, the transition, I believe, is still rather ambiguous as it stands unexplained. This ambiguity is less a matter of us knowing what makes a sensation possibly deceptive, but how we can move to affirm that there are cases where no error is possible. How does the Meditator himself know that the act of seeing the fire or the wax melt is not open to physical sensory deception?

<sup>34</sup> While this division is not made by Descartes, I see it as necessary for the sake of the Method of Doubt itself to proceed in a consistent manner. Descartes is well aware that his method insists on casting aside all that sheds even the slightest or partial doubt, and thus we cannot for the sake of the logical development of his argument regard all sense knowledge under one roof, so to speak.



awareness, even of faculties that may deceive us on other occasions. The eye may misjudge the size of a distant object but it cannot be deceived about what is immediately present to it, as say when Descartes sees the men walking outside his windows. He may be mistaken about an array of particular data pertaining to this specific sensation, but the very general perception – that there are men outside walking – is not something which is susceptible to deception, at least not one based on physiology. There is nothing in the *sensing* here that suggests that what is given could be possibly deceptive. In other words I cannot examine the sensation that these are my hands and find any empirical property *within* such a sensation, which implies the possibility of deception.

Hence he concludes that the argument from deception finds its limitations in such immediately broad and general sensations. This argument edges us closer to an understanding of the Meditator's conception of certainty as 'external truth' by further stressing that what he ultimately wants is to link the objects in his mind, the *ideatum*, to real external things. It is here that Descartes' Meditation takes its first big metaphysical leap, by positing the Dreamer Hypothesis. I proceed to look now at its main purpose, and more specifically its meaning within the broader spectrum of defining the criteria for Certainty.

### ***1.3 The Dream Hypothesis:***

The Meditator immediately moves his skeptical approach towards looking for a possible source of doubt regarding the sensed world within his own being but outside of the naturally deceptive character of the senses, which only beguile us on particular

occasions. Could something else about the internal mechanism of sensation be fallacious or dubious? If so could that place the entire sphere of external knowledge under jeopardy in so far as that sphere corresponds to a supposed external reality? Descartes approach here takes two very well known forms. He first attempts to suggest the possibility that he may be a delusional madman who cannot differentiate between reality and a fictional reality. Since he does not want to liken himself to a Madman, he allows the Meditator to pursue the argument with a more elegant venue of inquiry; the possibility of a dream state.<sup>35</sup>

Descartes brings forward the notion of insanity or madness to suggest a state of deceptive sense awareness that is so broad and extensive that it would apply even to immediate acts of perception. In turn, this is presented analogously to a madman who perceives himself as fully clothed while in fact completely naked. To separate himself from this radical deception of a deranged mental state – a state to which the Meditator is well aware he does not belong – Descartes suggests that reflecting on man's dream state will serve the same purpose, at least for the current investigation, for they share the same salient feature with respect to doubt<sup>36</sup>. It cannot be understated how strategically

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<sup>35</sup> Though a detailed analysis of the shift from madness to dreaming is beyond the scope of my present argument it is however crucial to understand why it is introduced as an alternative, that is to say, what they have in common that allows Descartes' Meditator to notice that they perform the same function. For the sake of the present argument I follow the position of circumscribing the Madman (Madness) Hypothesis within the Dreamer Hypothesis. While the inherent difference between them should not be overlooked, the dream hypothesis, for all intended purposes, serves the same *function* as the madness hypothesis. I will therefore focus on the implications of the latter more developed argument and keep the analysis of their similarity and difference to a minimum. For a detailed discussion on this see Frankfurt, *Demons Dreamers and Madmen*. Part I, Ch V, IX.

<sup>36</sup> Here, most likely, the Meditator takes the persona of Descartes the historical man and philosopher who most likely does not want to have his readers see him as conceiving of himself as a madman. If we should see the Meditator – even if only occasionally – as the common lay person, then an examination of the epistemological implications of a sleep-state would naturally seem much more practical and accessible than the possibility of dementia.

beneficial this move truly is. It allows the Meditator to proceed, not only without resorting to posit a hypothetical mental derangement, but also by offering a position whereby he can grapple with the task at hand using one of the most fundamental aspects of our conscious mental states: the dreaming state.

He writes: "...As if I were not a man who sleeps at night and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones."<sup>37</sup> The Meditator's investigation into the dream state leaves him with this possible well known dilemma; differentiating between the actual states of being awake and being asleep at any given moment. He knows that that the two states may provide him with distinct modes or types of perceived contents, but can he ultimately distinguish one from the other with absolute clarity? One may claim to be absolutely certain that they are awake, and moving their hands in a fashion not possible to one who is asleep, yet this absolute clarity may be none other than dream content itself. Thus the Meditator concludes "I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep..."<sup>38</sup>

What is truly the main affirmation here – and this is sadly not made explicit enough by Descartes – is the all-encompassing nature of the dream state. While there may be elements of a dream's subject matter that do not correspond to what I call real sense experience, there is nothing however in the latter- waking life perception- that emphatically indicates that it too is definitively not part of a dream state. In other words, it may be evident to us that a particular image or scene is part of a dream state because it represented something utterly fictitious with respect to what we consider possible within

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<sup>37</sup> CSM II 13.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

our 'waking-life world', but, there is *nothing* in waking life experiences that could not have also occurred in one's dreaming. All that occurs in my supposed waking life could also occur in the dream-state yet not vice versa, as there are things in a dream that can never occur in the (supposed) awake-state.

Since the dream-state is indeed much more comprehensive than a waking-state with respect to its potential content, then we can think of the latter as a subset of the former. Thus, one may be able to distinguish a dream state from a waking one but, not, the waking state from a dream and hence it is at least potentially possible that what the Meditator considers 'waking-life' is in fact part and parcel of the dream state. What this ultimately amounts to, for the Meditator at least, is that since there is no 'sure signs' that distinguish waking from sleeping, it may be the case that there is no waking-life out there at all but only mental internal images produced during sleep.

Thus, the argument here in fact appears to be less about differentiating the dream state from a waking one, and more about the *impossibility* of differentiating the latter from the former. It is this feature of the hypothesis that gives the argument its weight, for it allows the Meditator to affirm that it is at least conceptually possible that what is termed waking-life state is, ontologically, part and parcel of the dream state. This in turn then annihilates any quest for external empirical certainty with respect to the sensed world; what we believe is a waking life 'sense experience' – which purportedly has its intentional external objects actually in the world – has just been called into question. Since we are possibly in a constant dream state our sense-based-images may not originate from any activity which represents a dynamic of 'thinking' (sensing) and the external world but rather a purely internal activity. Thus, the Mediator firmly continues his

investigation under the assumption that it is in fact possible that the sensed world is indeed nothing but the vivid contents of a dream: "Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars- that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hand are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all"<sup>39</sup>

The significance of this skeptical move, within his entire pursuit, can never be overstated.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately the Dreaming hypothesis is used as a radical extension of the Deception argument whereby it is the first instance of complete doubt regarding the external correspondence of our sensations to their purported objects. All that which is sensed, including the body, can epistemologically be called into doubt at this point in so far as its ontologically independent existence is concerned. The previous argument from external sensory deception was only partial, at best, whereas now we can extend it to the perceived world in general and thus to any and all knowledge derived from these observations.

The importance of the argument here is not only with respect to the skeptical approach but also in terms of its function within the process of clarifying what certainty means to the Meditator. While in terms of the Method itself the external corporeal world cannot be the source for apodictic certainty, underneath this skepticism, we see that it is

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<sup>39</sup> CSM II 13.

<sup>40</sup> The dreamer hypothesis, is often criticized as unsophisticated, unoriginal, and serving no real new philosophic value. Yet most of these attacks assume the position that Descartes thought he was providing something novel and unique here. Descartes had emphatically stressed that he had not intended to present either the Deception or the Dreamer hypothesis as new approaches within the Skeptical methodology. On the contrary, he realizes that he is 'rehashing' positions taken by skeptics before him, but, also sees these as necessary steps towards pushing skepticism to its limits, before abolishing it. The inability of distinguishing real-life from a dream provides an essential move away from the corporeal world and thus an affirmation that apodictic certainty will not be obtained from knowledge based from or through the senses.

precisely that externality which he is ultimately is after. The method here implies, negatively, that what certainty means to him is knowledge of the existence of something real, something that has an independent existence in reality. The argument, in pushing aside the corporeal sensed world, mainly affirms that the composite world we claim to sense cannot provide us with actual proof of its own existence and thus any knowledge of the necessarily true and existent will not be based on any sensory-based external perception. Descartes wants certainty to arise from and, apply to, that external domain, but the method here will not allow him to accomplish this. It is here of course that Descartes' rationalist philosophy intervenes and lays down its own ascribed limitations of ordinary doubt by pursuing external truth from within the domain of innate rational, mathematical and pure truths.

#### ***1.4 Limitations of Ordinary Doubt/Skepticism: Mathematical and Simple truths.***

The Dreamer hypothesis within the Meditator's Method, serves its main function by placing the legitimacy of the senses, as the source for true knowledge, under fire. Yet, as vast and reaching as this type of doubt ultimately is, Descartes' inherent rationalism prevents it from spreading to all spheres of knowledge. Knowledge of the world *as it is sensed* may be false, but the external skepticism here has no bearing on any internal and innate knowledge we may have about the external world. The world I think of through 'sensation' may, in reality, be utterly different in a plethora of ways, but there are truths about the world, which are not sensed but are immediately available innate truths, always present to an attentive philosophical mind.



The Meditator lays this out immediately after expressing the implications of the Dreamer hypothesis; the images that appear in our dreams could be utterly imaginary or fictitious, but they implicitly express knowledge of at least something real. He says: "It must be surely admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real..."<sup>41</sup> Even if all the images that appear in his mind's eye do not refer to actual and real objects but are rather present in a hallucinatory or dream state, they do need to have some other source. The mind can conjure these images up but there has to be something else, something real, upon which these sensations are modeled. Thus we must affirm that they are *fashioned in the likeness* of something real.

The analysis Descartes offer here creates a breakdown or classification of dream-images into 'general' and 'universal' types of things. To illustrate, Descartes examines basic dream images such as his body in general and initially concludes that even such images of *general things* must refer to something real. He states, ".....At least these general kinds of things- eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole- are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist".<sup>42</sup>

In order further to refine his position, the Meditator pushes forward and examines more abstract and vivid images, such as the ones conjured up by the painter who creates an image of something that does not correspond to anything perceived in nature. Here too, as abstract as they may seem, these conjured composite images must refer to something real. Thus he says, "...when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the

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<sup>41</sup> CSM II 13.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects”<sup>43</sup>

What Descartes is ultimately attempting to accomplish here is to narrow this notion of 'something real', not to general things that are given to sense perception but rather to universal properties that apply to the very nature of the external sensation; in the analogical case of the painter, it is the colors used in the composition, that must be real.<sup>44</sup>

It is thus now not the case that images of general things in dreams, such as hands and feet, are real, but rather that the universal simple principles that underlie these images are real, i.e. cannot be dreamed or imagined. We can cast doubt upon all that is sensed, but not the simple truths that underlie the knowledge of these sensed images. The dream hypothesis affirms that the books I see in front of me may not be real or *actually existing in the manner given to my senses* but, nevertheless, the basic principles which underlie this sensation – such as extension, modality, change and place in time and color, must all be real. These are simple and necessary truths which are not externally sensed but rather internally known. Descartes, now, affirms that:

....although these general kinds of things-eyes, head, hand and so on- could be imaginary, it must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real....These are as it were the real colors from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thoughts.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> He continues from previous quote affirming “....Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before-something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal- at least the colors used in the composition must be real...” Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> CSM II 13-14.

The key issue here is that these simple natures could not themselves be fabricated by the mind or dream-state, nor are they sensed. That is to say, the simple truths of things like extension or dimension are not grasped by the mind via sensation. Nor can they be fabricated inside a dream state. These are properties inherent to reality as a whole. The dream hypothesis itself represents a radical expansion of the deception argument yet it does not however annul the truth of a reality out there; a reality of pure, absolute and non-sensed laws, rules and principles. A reality that is, above all, mathematical in nature.<sup>46</sup>

This transitional move from sensed knowledge to knowledge of absolute eternal truths that are naturally present in reason represents – textually – the first apparent collapse of the Meditator's character as a layperson. What we see here is Descartes' own explicitly rationalist interpretation of reality; his firm belief in the existence of pure absolute and eternal truths which reason itself had access to, completely independent of any empirical sensory cognition.<sup>47</sup>

The argument here shows Descartes' own staunch anti-empiricist rationalism working its way into the Meditator's method; though the corporeal world is 'sensed' there are pure simple truths about the world which are intuitively and innately present to the mind and not sensed. Within the present framework, the Meditator, echoing Descartes' rationalist epistemology, holds that the truths of mathematics and physics are indubitable

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<sup>46</sup> We see that while these truths at the roots refer primarily to mathematical and logical truths they also include a whole set of other epistemological and metaphysical assumptions about the empirical concrete world, such as extension in general, modality, shape, spatial and causal relations, etc. The actual scope and magnitude of what falls under the category of intuited truths, is not clearly stated by Descartes, but it is a recurring theme in all of Descartes philosophy.

<sup>47</sup> Unlike the radical or Pyrrhonian skeptic who admitted defeat in his quest for certainty once the world of the senses was abolished, Descartes had maintained that pure non-composite truths were entirely independent of perception or external cognition. These truths may be (and in fact are) applicable to our understanding of the world given through sensation, but knowledge of them does not depend on, or stem from sensations.

and absolutely certain and our knowledge of them is not susceptible to either physical or physiological deception *or* to the dream-state hypothesis. What this ultimately amounts to in the frames of the First Meditation, is that the Dream hypothesis may serve to cleave the correspondence of our sensations from their supposed object in the world but, the pure truths we know of this world, namely that it is extended with shape and form but, also, the plethora of laws of physics and mathematics that apply to all reality, are unaffected by the radical sensory skepticism since they are known *a priori* and not through *a posteriori* sense-based experience.<sup>48</sup>

Even if the skepticism employed here has endangered our appeal to the senses as an ontologically accurate picture of reality, universal underlying truths remain unscathed. We clearly see here Descartes' opposition to the rigid Aristotelian empiricism which affirmed all knowledge to be obtained from the empirically observed world. In short, as John Carriero eloquently writes, Descartes was adamantly "...defending the position that the human mind comes naturally endowed with a certain amount of substantive knowledge concerning the corporeal world..."<sup>49</sup>

The dream argument pushes the pursuit of the criteria for certainty towards purely innate intellectual concepts about, and of, the absolute truths, laws, and order of

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<sup>48</sup> These truths being part and parcel cannot be negated even within a dream states. For Descartes, no matter how vivid one's dreams may be, she or whatever character she may assume in the dream state could not doubt a mathematical truth in a cogent understandable manner. Or as Margaret Wilson has suggested, such violations of mathematical truths may be present in a dream, but, not in any way where they can be perceived or understood coherently. I will look at this aspect of certainty in the following section. See, Margaret D. Wilson, *Descartes*, (London ; Boston : Routledge & K. Paul, 1978) 17-31.

<sup>49</sup> John Carriero, 'The First Meditation'. In *Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays*, edited by Vere Chappell (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 9. To illustrate this point, Carriero further states, "...according to Descartes, our grasp of the essence of body is afforded by the innate idea of extension and is not extracted from the world through sensory interaction and abstraction. Our knowledge that the essence of body is extension forms a part of the mind's native equipment for understanding the world. As a matter of fact, we would still understand the nature of body is extension even if there existed no bodies from which such knowledge may be imported." Ibid.

our sensed reality. The initial section of this Meditation is, in itself, a picture of the Meditator's assent towards the immediacy of an inward knowledge; the laws and rules of reality with which the mind was naturally endowed. While he initially claimed that what he has learned and known, his beliefs and opinions, was given to him either through or from the senses, after having placed this entire sphere of knowledge under the microscope, he now reveals a sphere of knowing, of knowledge, that stems not from perception but from pure reason, these truths of natural light.

Thus far then, the Dream Hypothesis has succeeded in completing doubt regarding the sensed world and has placed the criteria for certainty within the intellect's capacity of recognizing these natural truths independent of any sensation. Whereas the Aristotelians, according to Descartes, saw the knower as receiving all her knowledge from the world itself, Cartesian rationalism gives back to the subject a wealth of intuited and absolute knowledge which she intrinsically and naturally possesses. The first stage of doubt is completed when the Meditator draws inwards and finds absolute truth in principles and law that are intrinsically given to reason itself. The move away from the senses is indeed not only the central theme of the method of doubt and the First Meditation as a whole but is in fact also seen by many Cartesians as the central theme of Cartesian rationalist epistemology; a defense of the natural light of reason. Yet, while this may very well be Descartes' own position, it is the persona of the Meditator that immediately resurfaces and challenges the ontological reality of these simple self-given truths.

The next step, the notorious Deceiving Demon hypothesis, represents the final stretch of the method of doubt. It is the most essential element of the Meditations because it is here that Descartes arrives at a definitive criterion for doubt. The Demon Hypothesis,

by challenging these pure-truths does so in a way that allows us to see what Descartes is ultimately after while simultaneously revealing its own limitations with respect to activity of 'thought' which yields Descartes sought after First Principle.



## **Chapter II: The Deceiving Demon and The *Cogito*:**

### **Hyperbolic Deception and the Certainty of Thought**

#### ***2.1 Introduction:***

In this chapter I examine the Deceiving Demon hypothesis and the *Cogito* argument which arises out of the limitations of hyperbolic doubt. I begin by examining the salient features of Descartes' move towards Hyperbolic Deception as they stand directly related to his pursuit for clear criteria of certainty. I attempt to clarify that what the hypothesis mainly allows us to see is that Descartes' project goes far beyond the scope of having the Meditator – and the reader as well for that matter – sever her reliance on the senses as the source and grounds for certainty. If this were the case then the Meditator would have been content with the simple intuited truths of natural light as the starting point for his foundationalism. That is to say, if the initial starting point of philosophy – its first principles upon which Descartes was to build his science – found its grounding for certainty in the immediately and innately given, non-sensed awareness, then the Meditations would need go no further than the truths of logic, and mathematics, and those other simple truths which involve no inference or deduction but are rather self-evident and purely intuited. The true scope of Hyperbolic Deception reflects Descartes' desire to have the grounds for understanding certainty based on knowledge of something concrete and actual, beyond the boundaries of self-evident conceptual truths.

I then examine the limitation of this Hyperbolic doubt with respect to the present condition of the doubter – the condition of *thinking* in general. My main interest here is

the type of certainty that an awareness of the *Cogito* argument provides our Meditator, and thus I focus my discussion on how it is arrived at and, more significantly, on what it ultimately is a certainty of. That is to say, what does the argument give the Meditator a certainty of? By reflecting on the nature of the *Cogito*, I argue for the position taken by Spinoza<sup>50</sup>, that the argument presented in the Second Mediation yields only a certainty of the activity of 'Thought' or 'Thinking' alone.

Awareness of the *Cogito*, of thinking, allows the Meditator to understand the first moment of ontological certainty, but not of the ontological kind that Descartes is after – scientific empirical knowledge. While the *Cogito* argument is indeed the foundation, the First Principle, which Descartes is so passionately looking for, it finds its limitation in the fact that it cannot ground an understanding of certainty that can be placed in the context of anything but thought itself. Due to the radically distinct and unique ontological essence or character of the substance of 'Thought', for Descartes, it shares nothing in common with any of the external *objects* of his thought. Thus the 'Certainty' provided by the *Cogito* argument can only be understood with respect to the existence of a thinking thing (or substance) alone and not certainty as could relate to the existence of anything outside of thought.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Spinoza believed that the 'I think therefore I am' ultimately amounted to saying 'I am thinking' or, 'there is thought.' [See Spinoza, Baruch. *Renati Descartes Principiorum*. Phil, I , Prolegomnon.]

<sup>51</sup> The Meditator is looking for the very condition which will allow him to understand the meaning of certainty about the external world, about something external to him. Knowledge of the necessity of Thought's existence only allows the thinker to understand the condition required to obtain knowledge in general, but with respect to knowledge proper, this will not suffice.

## ***2.2 The Deceiving Demon: From Dreaming to External Deception.***

The Dream Hypothesis has two salient features. The hypothesis serves as the pinnacle of rigorous scrutiny against the certainty we have of the sensed world being *as it is perceived*, but, it is also – simultaneously – the first move towards the realm of absolute a priori truths accessed by the intellect alone. However, as the argument progresses we note that though the Meditator adopts a rationalist stance, his persistence and tenacity bring out the limitations of accepting mathematical truths as the foundations of certainty.

It is in the nature of immediately given pure truths to be such that we cannot mentally-psychologically doubt them. That is to say, they are seen as indubitable, in so far as we cannot rationally doubt them using the natural disposition and mechanics of our thinking.<sup>52</sup> Yet within the present framework of the First Meditation, this only means that these truths may be indubitable to us when we think them, but, are they ontologically and externally true in the non-mental sense? That is to say, are they true only as mental thoughts or ideas or, do they have a real ontological existence outside of thought? This is ultimately the main concern for the Meditator here. He – unlike Descartes the scholar – while being aware of these truths of mathematics and logic completely independent of the sensed world, does not know whether they are actual truths about reality, that is to say a non-mental non-conceptual reality. In other words, do these immediate truths – which are said to be of laws and principles that underpin and underlie all reality – actually have a

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<sup>52</sup> I cannot cognitively (and coherently) doubt that the sum of two and three is five, I cannot cognitively conceive of a squared circle. The negation of these self-given truths is mentally impossible.

being outside of his mind?<sup>53</sup>

Within Descartes' own rationalism, it is not merely the case that eternal truths are mentally indubitable; for him they were of course actually true, representing concrete objective claims about reality, independently of any mental representation. The transparent truths Descartes speaks of, such as mathematics, modality, extension etc, do not merely refer to concepts in our mind that derive their certainty from the fact that they are psychologically indubitable, but rather because they are truths of and about reality *per se*. They are indeed grasped or understood or accessed by the mind, and with absolutely internal clarity, but, they are clearly for Descartes much more than that - they refer to something real and existent outside of mind. That is to say, they have their own ontological status completely independent of our psychological and intellectual intuition of them.<sup>54</sup>

This position reflected Descartes' own metaphysical stance which accepts God as the creator and guarantor of these universal and eternal truths. These are divine natural laws, for which God has endowed human reason with the capacity to know and contemplate. However, within the confines of the method set out by the First Meditation, the Meditator himself cannot afford to take such a stance. The intuitive self-evident status of the truths of natural light, produces, as it were, a mode of internal psychological certainty that is expressed and instantiated via the fact they are absolutely indubitable for him. Nevertheless in their immediate self-givenness they remain strictly conceptual, that is to say, he does not know that they have any being outside of mind.

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<sup>53</sup> This mind-to-externality correspondence also becomes the salient feature of his investigations in the Third Meditation.

<sup>54</sup> They are innately present in the mind but are not a creation or imaginative fabrication of the mind. This is a crucial point; mathematics and geometry have an existent reality outside my mind, and for that matter outside the dream.

If the mediator is to lead an investigation that attempts to be void of any metaphysical assumptions he must not *presuppose* that these truths have any ontological reality other than their presence in his thought, without any reference to a non-mental reality. The introduction of the Demon Hypothesis represents the Meditator breaking away from the 'self-evident' quality of simple truths as the grounds and criteria for certainty. Focusing on their actual non-mental existence or reality reveals Descartes' goal of grounding apodictic certainty not merely on something known to be real in the conceptual sense but, more importantly, real in the concrete external sense, that is to say, outside of mind.

The premise and structure of the Hypothesis are well known to all readers; the Meditator proceeds to posit the possible existence of a deceiving demon genius.<sup>55</sup> This entity will be powerful enough to have the ability to make Descartes' think of these transparent and indubitable truths that ultimately have no ontological being. In short he would make him think about laws and principles that refer to nothing externally real. The Meditator states:

....firmly rooted in my mind is the long standing opinion that there is omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no size, no shape, no place, while at the same time ensuring me that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now....may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square...<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> As before, my concern is not with the validity of his argument but with its conclusions and implication to the entire project. At this point of the argument such an assumption serves an explicit functional purpose – extending the doubt to its possible logical limits. Therefore the effects of the demon in terms of extending the doubt are completely independent of any need to actually prove that such a demon actually exists. If it is even plausible that such a being could exist then it is also plausible that our knowledge, our knowing, is in a state of deception.

<sup>56</sup> CSM II 14. And more explicitly stated; "...some malicious demon has employed all his energies in order to deceive me...I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things" CSM II 15.



It is not merely the case of a Being which rests above and beyond and happens, rather mysteriously, to deceive me. This is a Being who “made me the kind of creature that I am” and is therefore the cause, so to speak, of *how* man perceives, thinks, feels, emotes, etc. Descartes suggests that if this god is indeed responsible for my being the way that I am, he, in a sense, could make me in such a way that I *think* whatever he chooses to make me think, which could potentially entail the possibility of making me think utterly false concepts..

Yet, if the Demon could bring it about that my actual thinking, perceiving, and reasoning are false, what does this imply at the present stage of the argument? Does the possibility of external deception by this entity imply that I can now *coherently* doubt the truths of mathematics, of size, shape, extension etc? Furthermore, regardless of my cognitive ability or inability to doubt these truths, what is the external ontological status of these truths? These questions indeed represent the pinnacle of Descartes’ goal in employing the Method of Doubt – for one, it elaborates and clarifies the type of certainty he is after, and secondly it lays the groundwork from which the *Cogito* argument springs.

An examination of the true powers of the Demon Deceiver shows us both its limitation and strength within the Method of Doubt. The possibility of the existence of a Demon Deceiver *does not* imply that the Meditator can now exercise a coherent *act of doubting* the truths of say, mathematics, in their immediate givenness to mind.<sup>57</sup> Rather,

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<sup>57</sup> Just as Descartes holds that even in a dream it was inconceivable to *think of* the sum of two and three as being anything other than five, likewise, the Demon’s deceptive powers *are not* instantiated in now allowing the Meditator to conceive of the sum as equal to six. The deception hypothesis here does not introduce a scenario where our *ability to mentally perform an act of doubting* such pure simple truths is granted. For the Meditator, the self-given and self-evident nature of  $2+3=5$  can never be mentally negated and rather, what is at stake here is whether or not these pure and simple truths are *actually* true, in the external non-cognitive sense of the word regardless of whether they are true *for the Meditator*.



the doubt has now shifted outside of the subject, wherein our concern is with things as they are in themselves as opposed to their 'being true' in thought. The possibility of a radical external deception of this sort shows the Meditator that while the laws and principles of 'natural light' cannot be cognitively doubted, they may not have any external actuality or reality; no more reality than any of the marvelous ideas he has in his sleep. At this stage of his skepticism, eternal truths and mathematics may be called 'true' only in the sense that they are psychologically indubitable and self-evident, but cannot be called 'true' if the intent in calling them such is, to proclaim that they are concrete, actual, and existing elements of reality.

Absolute certainty of these simple truths, if it is to move beyond mere conceptuality and treat these truths as concrete and real in the non-mental sense, is unattainable if external deception has no boundaries. It is possible that a grand deceiver has made me the type of being whose thought contents bear no necessary resemblance to anything real outside thought, and this makes the self-evident nature of pure simple truths *externally meaningless*, so to speak. The conclusions and implications of the Hypothesis taken together with the Dream Hypothesis are, for the Meditator, completely all-encompassing at this point of the argument.<sup>58</sup> In terms of the actual ontologically concrete existence of any of the objects of his thoughts the, deception is conclusive and

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<sup>58</sup> It is important to note that I am here by adopting what Cottingham calls the 'extreme' stance regarding the devastating effect of the Demon hypothesis on eternal truths. Much debate has surrounded this topic in the literature and some scholars, Cottingham for one, do not take such a radical stance. (See Cottingham, *Descartes* pp. 66-70) Some choose to downplay the demon's powers by suggesting that *Descartes himself* did not actually believe that these absolute truths are malleable by such an entity. While I cannot at present explore this issue in great detail, I maintain that any approach that is uncommitted to the Demon's ability to threaten the Meditator's acceptance of eternal truths is ultimately based on a reading of the Meditation which does not give *the Meditator himself* the correct locus within the investigation. The salient feature of the Demon hypothesis is found in Descartes' relinquishing of his belief in these truths to the Meditator's rigorous approach. Descartes most certainly did not doubt the existence and reality of these truths, but as far as the supposedly unbiased Meditator is concerned, he does not yet have the means - namely the benevolence and omnipotence of God - by which he can be certain that these self-evident truths are *in fact* true.

fatal. He resigns himself to saying,

I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things that it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras. So what remains true? Perhaps just the one fact that nothing is certain.<sup>59</sup>

The Dream Hypothesis allowed us to cast away the domain of the sensed world as something externally real by internalizing it, by turning sensations into 'images in the mind' with no necessary correspondence to external reality. Yet with immediate intuitive self-given truths which are internalized by their very immediacy in thought, the Dream Hypothesis falls short and, what is needed is explicitly to show that something *external* endangers them. It may indeed be asked why Descartes has the Meditator go to such great extremes for this process of doubt to be completed. The Hypothesis should be seen as a type of mental exercise which furnishes Descartes with the ability of logically conceiving a possibility wherein the bond between these pure truths as they are grasped internally and their external correspondence is severed. Since for Descartes this possibility was so radically unlikely, he conceives of a very unlikely, *hyperbolic*, yet logically possible scenario.<sup>60</sup>

The Demon Hypothesis, by placing the source of doubt, external to the subject, shows us, albeit implicitly, what Descartes is ultimately after here, at least with respect to a complete criteria for certainty. Descartes seeks a certainty that does not merely rest on a principle or content of thought alone, but rather something that exists essentially and

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<sup>59</sup> CSM II 16.

<sup>60</sup> The possibility that it is his own intellect that fabricates the contents of his mind is not established until the third meditation when he examines the nature of ideas. I will look at this with much greater detail in the following chapter.

independently of any thought we have of it yet clearly corresponding to the mental image (an idea or thought) we have of it. He thereby, aims at bridging epistemological and ontological certainty. This in essence *is* the criterion of truth – it must stem from knowledge about some 'thing' which has an ontological being separate from its being present to mind as an object of thought. The search for truth is one that seeks to find that which is *indubitable* to the mind but also *certain* in the world outside of mind, that is to say, has an ontological reality and existence beyond thought. This, indeed, becomes the prevalent theme in modern philosophy for several centuries.<sup>61</sup>

The very presence of the Demon Hypothesis suggests that if there is a psychological paradigm of certainty – a paradigm that allows us to understand Certainty proper - it should be one that is applicable to the concrete world and not be just conceptual certainty. Even though that external world does not itself provide the grounds for that certainty, when we do arrive at it, we should be armed with a certainty that is built upon our knowledge of the existence of external things and not just ideas. This pursuit, indeed proves to be the main driving force of the Third Meditation. Yet prior to looking at that, we must follow the Meditator in his recognition of the most salient limitation of the Demon Hypothesis – the necessary existence of thinking.

As I have just claimed, for the Meditator, while the Demon can deceive him about the external ontological status of the truth claim  $2+3=5$ , it bears no relation to the fact that the thought  $2+3=5$  can never be epistemologically refuted. Furthermore, this applies to all

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<sup>61</sup> As P.J. Markie eloquently notes “Descartes goes on to define the central point of epistemology for the next three hundred years. How can we move from our certain knowledge of the content of our experience to a knowledge of its cause? How can we know whether our experience is caused by an external world that is basically the way the content of our experience represents it as being...?” P. J. Markie, ‘The Cogito and Its Importance’. In *Descartes' Meditations: Critical Essays*, edited by Vere Chappell (Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 34.

contents of thought, not just pure simple truths. The Demon's power, originating 'outside' the subject, only infringes on the non-mental validity of the intentional object of our thoughts but does not affect their ontological status as elements of thoughts or ideas. It is this of course which brings Descartes to the recognition of the self-revealing activity of 'thought' itself – which has accompanied his entire activity of doubt from the very onset of the Meditation.

While the Hypothesis drastically severs the correlation between our ideas/thoughts of things and the actual ontological external existence of such things, it does not challenge their ontological existence as actual ideas or thoughts. As the First Meditation reaches its zenith, the scope and limitation of the Demon Hypothesis already alludes to the inevitability of the *Cogito's* emergence. I thus now proceed to look at the *Cogito* argument, with the hopes of clarifying the type of Certainty it yields, and its incompleteness with respect to external empirical knowledge.

### ***2.3 The Cogito: The existence of Thought***

In his first moment of absolute apodictic certainty, the Meditator recognizes that the Deceiving Demon may deceive him about the a posteriori external validity of *any* of his ideas or thoughts, but he cannot deceive him that he has these thoughts to begin with. The true discovery behind the *Cogito* is the discovery of the irrefutability of thought, or thinking activity in general. When the Meditator says that as long as he thinks anything at all he certainly exists<sup>62</sup> – regardless of being deceived – he is reaffirming that all

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<sup>62</sup> See CSM II 16-17.

activity, including being deceived, is an act of thought. Since this is the first moment of absolute certainty, we need to look at the process of this discovery in the Second Meditation in order to understand what exactly the Meditator is certain *of*. I will first present the argument as it is given in the texts and then proceed to look at the type of certainty that this yields.

Descartes initial argument is well known.<sup>63</sup> The entire framework of the First Meditation revolved around the activity of doubt. The argument unfolds when Descartes questions the nature and implications of his previously accepted state of utter deception. His approach can, structurally, be broken into several main parts. First, he says: “But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something [or thought anything at all] then I certainly existed.”<sup>64</sup>

The Mediator recognizes that regardless of what the Demon may convince him that he thinks, believes or senses, there still must be the *subject* there *doing the thinking* and *doubting*. Clearly at this point, after he has doubted all bodily attributes, he does not yet know what this subject truly is and thus he is merely treating himself as the locus or hub for the activity of doubt. The main thrust of the argument here is that the 'doubting I' must exist regardless of the deception. The very activity of deception be it internal, or from some external cause – as is the case with the Demon Deceiver– is itself a thinking cognitive activity.

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<sup>63</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present work to engage in the different scholarly examination of the technical aspects of Descartes' argument. My overall focus here is the type of certainty the *Cogito* yields and not a critique of its logical validity. Thus I focus mainly on the tenets of the argument which help clarify what the Mediator is truly certain of and how this is situated within his broader enterprise within the Meditation as a whole – finding a first principle of certainty that will serve to ground all ensuing scientific empirical particular certainties.

<sup>64</sup> CSM II 16-17.

A false thought may be one whose purported object has no reality, but it is nevertheless a thought and hence it exists. Since all knowledge or knowing is an act of thought, then it is at least ontologically true (certain) that thinking as a concrete and actual activity exists. The Meditator continues: “But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me...and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something”<sup>65</sup>

The different layers of argument here have naturally spawned many interpretations throughout the history of modern philosophy. Some read Descartes as saying that since he cannot 'be nothing' (not existing) so long as he 'thinks he is *something*' it thus suggests that conceiving of oneself, in some way or another, is a stipulation for recognizing the existence of thought. That is to say, I am or, I exist *if* I conceive of myself as being a particular sort of thing, namely, with respect to what he can firmly recognize, a thinking thing. This appears to be an element of Jaakko Hintikka's 'performative interpretation' which claims that it is in the thinking or contemplating about the activity of thought itself that we perform a type of existential awareness of self.<sup>66</sup> Though Descartes invites this type of interpretation when, for example, he says that he exists 'as long as he thinks *that he is something*' I hold, along with Kenny, that this is not the impetus behind the Meditator's words.<sup>67</sup>

It is not in the thinking of oneself specifically as a thinking thing or even of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> For discussion on this see, Jaakko Hintikka, 'Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance'. In, *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Willis Doney (Macmillan: 1967) 108-137.

<sup>67</sup> For Kenny on Hintikka see Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, Ch. II. 42-45



thinking of oneself as this or that way, that one explicitly asserts her existence. It is not in 'thinking that *I am something*', but, rather it is in the thinking of anything - regardless if it is an existential claim about one's own nature or not - that I am something, namely, that which is doing the thinking.<sup>68</sup> It matters not whether the Meditator thinks of his own existence or whether he thinks about a golden triangle. What all 'thoughts of something' have in common is the instantiation of the thinking activity, of intellection. The performance of 'thinking' is not only accomplished or instantiated when we turn our minds eye to an inward reflection of the mental activity of mind itself – what I take to be Hintikka's position – but rather when we turn our minds eye onto anything. All mental activity involves 'thought' regardless whether the Meditator is turning his mind towards perception of a ball of wax or a mathematical equation.

Since for Descartes we are always aware of our thoughts, recognizing the existence of 'Thought' is self-evident at the moment we reflect upon what we are thinking regardless of what it may be. What the argument amounts to, is saying that; as long as I am thinking of something I am aware of that thought or idea and therefore aware that I am thinking it, therefore there is a thinking activity, thus thought exists. There are of course an array of other aspects to the *Cogito* argument that have been raised here but I am fundamentally concerned with expressing the position that the argument ultimately only affirms the existence of thought and thinking. However, in order to clarify my position I do want to discuss one historical aspect of the *Cogito* argument; is it an inference, or an intuition?<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> For Kenny's approach see Kenny, *Descartes*, 42-45.

<sup>69</sup> This is essential for several reasons. First, it clarifies certain aspect of Cartesian metaphysics with respect to intuition and thought. Second, with respect to the metaphysics, it points towards Descartes'

## 2.4 *Cogito and Sum: Inferred or Intuited?*

The argument of the Second Meditation starts with affirmation of the doubter's 'existence' in general, without ever knowing what this 'I' truly is, and only then moves to affirm the existence of the 'I' as a particular kind of thing, namely a thinking thing. Thus the initial conclusion itself is only "I am, I exist". The argument does not explicitly prove or deduce the existence of the 'I' from the existence of thought but, rather, the latter follows as a metaphysical description of the former. That the 'I am' argument arises out of awareness of the existence or being of thought or thinking in general has already been stated, but in terms of the formal argument in the Second Meditation the discovery is first and foremost an intuitive claim.<sup>70</sup> In the *Discourse* however, Descartes expressed what at least appears to be the 'inference' link between thinking and existing. Whereas the *Meditations* concludes 'ego sum, ego existo' the *Discourse* yields the much better known form of the argument "Cogito, ergo sum" - 'I am thinking, *therefore* I exist'.<sup>71</sup> The difference in these two formulations - though according to Descartes, ultimately expressing the same goal - has been taken by readers to suggest two approaches taken by

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conception of the proper order of epistemological discovery. Finally, and most importantly, by understanding the process Descartes is advocating here we can, I believe, gain an even clearer picture of where the *Cogito* fits within the pursuit for a grounding of certainty in general and, more importantly, certainty with respect to the external world.

<sup>70</sup> That the doubter is thinking, is instantiated in the activity of doubt, and so it is indeed an integral part of the initial proof of 'I am I exist'. Yet here it is not proved that he is essentially a thinking thing but rather only that the 'I' exists, which again, at this point of the argument is tantamount to saying only that the doubter exists.

<sup>71</sup> CSM I 127. I add the emphasis here on 'therefore' to stress the apparent 'logical-inference' characteristic of the argument.

Descartes; one relying on pure intuition, and one based on a logical inference.<sup>72</sup>

The 'I am I exist' of the Second Meditation<sup>73</sup> is taken by some readers, Curley notes, to be an affirmation arising out of pure intuition; an internal intuition that appeals to the act of 'doubting'. On the other hand while according to Descartes he had not wanted the argument to be perceived as an inference, the format which it takes in the *Discourse* – 'Cogito ergo Sum' – inevitably, albeit implicitly, takes the form of logical inferential argument. Is existence inferred *from* thinking? And, if so, what are the implications for our present pursuit?

To understand Descartes' position we must take a quick glance outside the Meditations at his division of knowledge into deduction and intuition. Descartes rigorously looks at this issue in the *Regulae*. Within his foundational system of knowledge, there is a set of immediately given self-intuited beliefs. These are not learned or taught but are naturally present to the mind and could be reflected upon by turning our attention to the 'light of reason'. Formally stated, by intuition Descartes means:

...the conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding...intuition is the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason.<sup>74</sup>

The knowledge that is built upon conclusions that follow these necessary first principles of intuition is an act of deduction through inference. Deduction, says Descartes, is "the inference of something as following necessarily from some other

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<sup>72</sup> See, Edwin Curley 'The Cogito and the Foundations of Knowledge', In *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, edited by Stephen Gaukroger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 30-47.

<sup>73</sup> CSM II 17.

<sup>74</sup> Descartes, René. *Oeuvres De Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983). Vol. X, 368. All future reference to this primary source will follow traditional citation format, [AT, Volume, Page].

propositions that are known with certainty.”<sup>75</sup> We form connections and conclusions from concrete established roots that are intuitive.<sup>76</sup> So, in general, conclusions that are formed via appealing to a chain of simple intuited truths are said to be inferred or deduced from these intuitions. In this way an inference or deduction is not intuited but rather learned. The matter however is not that simple.

Descartes held that while a series of conclusions drawn from intuition represent an inference, there is occasion to view a piece of knowledge as both inferred and intuited depending on how one relates the parts of a claim or a single piece of knowledge, to the whole. A pure intuition is itself always non-inferential, only known through a self-given, non-mediated thought activity, which appeals to nothing but internal rational reflection. If a conclusion was so intrinsically connected to a (previous) pure intuition, we could think of this conclusion as intuited even though, technically, it is inferred. Hence, when a conclusion is immediately and directly drawn from such an intuition, from a technical-methodological standpoint it is indeed inferred, but we can also think of it as special extension of the initial intuition, whereby it is so closely bound and linked to it that such a connection is intuited.<sup>77</sup>

Ultimately, the issue here is about drawing immediate – non-sequential –

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<sup>75</sup> AT X 369.

<sup>76</sup> Or, as P.J. Markie eloquently states “intuition is the faculty by which we gain the initial certainties that make deduction possible.” P. Markie, ‘The Cogito and Its Importance’. In V.C. Chappell *Descartes Meditations: Critical Essays*, 37.

<sup>77</sup> Markie suggests that Descartes is ultimately positing two types of intuition – the primary intuitions, appealing to immediately self-given truths of reason, and secondary or extended intuitions which are ‘immediately inferred’ from pure intuition. See Markie, ‘The Cogito and Its Importance’, V.C. Chappell *Descartes; Essays*, Ch II. pp 37-59

conclusions from purely intuited premises.<sup>78</sup> Taken in separation, the relation of the conclusion to the premise is one of inference, yet when we look at the one fluent movement in the order of discovery it yields a single unified mental act, which is intuitive. Markie states it as follows:

When we immediately infer a conclusion from an intuited self-evident premise, we are not aware of any movement of thought through a series of premises, so may describe our knowledge of the conclusion as intuitive. No extended series of intuition leads us to the conclusion; there is just one mental act in which the self-evident premise is intuited and the immediate conclusion is drawn.<sup>79</sup>

We can now return to Descartes' position with respect to the relation of the "I think" to the "I exist, in the '*cogito ergo sum*' argument of the Discourse. For Descartes the 'I think' is taken purely as an immediate self-evident intuition and the 'I am' or 'I exist' is inferred from it, but in such an immediately direct way that we can think of the interconnectedness of the two – the entire conclusion 'I think *ergo* I am' - as one mental act or claim which is in a sense intuited. That is to say, self-existence is the *immediate inference* drawn from an intuited awareness of one's particular mental state; thought or thinking.<sup>80</sup> Descartes has thus accepted that the 'I exist' is, in a sense, inferred from the "I think" but that the entire claim was more properly viewed as an intuition.

Descartes strongly dismisses any suggestions that the entire argument followed a syllogistic inference format with the hidden premise 'whatever thinks exists'. This issue surfaces in the Seventh Set of *Objections and Replies*. Gassendi insists that the premise is

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<sup>78</sup> So, if  $p(s)$  is immediately concluded from  $p(r)$  without any intermediate series or connections, then one can say that ' $p(s)$ ' was inferred from ' $p(r)$ ', but, the union of the two, producing 'if  $r$  then  $s$ ' is known intuitively.

<sup>79</sup> Markie, *ibid*, 37-38.

<sup>80</sup> Markie states this as follows: "...His knowledge that he thinks is intuitive in the primary sense of being self-evident and entirely non-inferential; his knowledge that he exists is intuitive in the extended sense of being immediately inferred from the simultaneously intuited premise that he thinks." *Ibid*.

implicitly assumed and is, in fact, what allows Descartes to make the bridge from thinking to existing. That is to say, for Gassendi, if the Meditator is inferring existence from 'I am thinking' or, even simpler, just that 'there is thinking' or 'there is thought' he is presupposing some sort of initial major premise about thought in general, namely, that existence clearly pertains to it.

Descartes argues that knowledge of his existence had stemmed from no previous premise other than the "I think". That is to say, the "I think", as an intuition, together with the conclusion that 'he therefore exists' precedes any knowledge of the general premise "everything that thinks must exist." To Mersenne he writes:

"When someone says 'I am thinking therefore I am, or exist' he does not deduce existence from thought by a syllogism, but, recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he was deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premise 'Everything which thinks is, or exists'; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing."<sup>81</sup>

It is only by appealing to this conclusion – that 'I exist because I think' or 'am thinking' that we learn the general rule that 'whatever thinks must exist' or 'whatever thinks *is*'. By looking at one's particular case where 'The I', is known to exist based on our intuition that there is "Thinking" we can conclude that whatever thinks exists or has being.<sup>82</sup>

Yet what does this debate ultimately amount to? Descartes wants the order to be as follows: 'I think; therefore, I exist; therefore, whatever thinks must exist' as opposed to 'I think; whatever thinks must exist; therefore I exist'. The scuffle, I hold, boils down to

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<sup>81</sup> CSM II 100.

<sup>82</sup> Thus the issue is not to downplay Descartes' appreciation for the statement 'everything that thinks must exist.' Descartes had clearly accepted this absolute simple truth, not because it was self-given but because it was based on a concrete example of an actual thinking thing that is real and exists.



differentiating between the particular 'I think' and the general 'whatever thinks'. For Descartes, *general conclusions* follow from an actual instantiation of what they are purportedly about. It is the *particular* that shows the issues at hand (be it existence, or any other metaphysical or logical property) actually and concretely embodied.

With respect to the *Cogito* argument we note the following passage from the *Principles* where he states that such truths as 'whatever thinks exists' and other general conclusions: "...are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists."<sup>83</sup> While Descartes assents to the truth of the general claim 'whatever thinks exists' he maintains that ultimately, *by itself*, the premise reveals nothing about actual concrete and real existence on its own, and in fact only gains its practical merit or usefulness in relation to the initial particular instantiation of existence proper, as expressed via the *Cogito* intuition.<sup>84</sup>

This is in fact the sticking point of the entire argument. A general rule or truth claim gets its actual power when it is taken with respect to a particular instantiation of the issue at hand, from which the general premise draws its broad universal conclusions.<sup>85</sup> In the *Principles*, Descartes argues that, general claims, regardless of how simple, immediate and, self-given they may appear to us, have no reality at all if they are not based upon or, deduced from, actual examples of that which the claim pertains to be

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<sup>83</sup> CSM I 196 [Principles I, 10].

<sup>84</sup> That is to say, the 'I think' offers a moment of 'instantiated existence', so to speak, and is the grounds upon which we can make general claims about 'things which think'

<sup>85</sup> Descartes appears to categorize eternal truths as *general conclusions*, which cannot be doubted without yielding a contradiction, yet, nevertheless, they are merely conceptual and, of their own accord offer us no conclusive reason to assume that they correspond to something actually existent outside of thought.

about.<sup>86</sup> It is not enough that the statement, 'whatever thinks exists' is strictly taken as an indubitable truth, for it is then only an abstraction, which does not actually prove that anything exists.

In the ontological sense, to understand such claim as indubitable and true is not meaningful unless have already a particular case of 'Thinking' from which the conclusion 'existence' can be drawn. It is once existence has been shown or proven in the ontological experiential sense then the general claim about 'things that think must exist' has any practical meaning.<sup>87</sup> What is at stake here for Descartes is the ultimate status of the claim 'I think' or 'I am thinking'. In stating that he concludes existence from the 'I think' as opposed to 'whatever thinks' Descartes is making an explicit claim regarding the status of the 'I think' as not just an intuition but a special kind of self-referring *existential intuition*, one which expresses the self revealing activity of some truly ontological existent thing – Thought.<sup>88</sup>

The true force behind the claim 'I think' goes beyond conceptuality. The key issue here is that, to the Meditator, the claim "it is impossible to doubt that I am thinking" reveals a truth that is not merely a self-evident and self-given one akin to, say, laws of

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<sup>86</sup> In the *Principles* he states, "...When we say that it is impossible for the same thing at the same time to be and not to be, that what has been done cannot be undone, that he who thinks cannot fail to be or exist while he think, and numerous other things of this sort, these are eternal truths and not things existing outside our thought" [*Principle I*, 49] CSM I 209.

<sup>87</sup> This brings us back to the argument regarding the external ontological certainty of eternal truths. If we say that it is an eternal general truth that 'what is done cannot be undone' we have, according to Descartes made a general claim that is established from an experiential case that proved or verified that a thing cannot be undone. Likewise, we take the statement 'Whatever Thinks Exists' as a basic simple truth only *because* we know that there is, at least a first particular instantiation of a thinking thing which *is* or *has being*.

<sup>88</sup> On the one hand the move from the 'I think' to 'I exist' is an intuition in the sense that it possesses an indubitable self-evident character. Yet, at the same time it does much more than that. The fact that I cannot negate the claim "I think" is, in itself, insufficient to prove or assert that there really is 'thought'. Thus, what Descartes is really positing here is not an intuition that refers to some detached eternal truth but one that actually yields the necessary ontological presence of Thought or Thinking activity in the objective sense.

mathematics and physics. While it most certainly is a simple self-evident truth, it yields something ontologically much greater than mathematical indubitability; by affirming the actual and concrete existence of 'thinking' or 'thought' as a particular real ontological thing, the statement yields not just an indubitable intuition, it yields external ontological truth. It is from this perspective that the affirmation gets its status as the absolute first principle that the Mediator is looking for.

Descartes' argument rests on two premises; that a) that there must a deceived subject as the recipient, so to speak, of the demons deceptive powers and b) one cannot doubt the existence of the thinking activity inherent in the 'deceptive' activity. However, it is traditionally objected that if we do indeed push the possibility for external deception to its most radical extent then it could be granted that nothing escapes the powers of the Demon deceiver and that there simply is no doubting at all and thus, ultimately, no thinking. If there is such a demon it may simply be that the entire activity of doubt that has led to all of these discoveries is itself not real; in which case he would need to know that a benevolent non-deceiving God exists to guarantee the very presence of thought.<sup>89</sup> While this is an inevitable difficulty in any radical skeptical approach, it is a far too extreme and almost nihilistic pyrrhonian reading of Descartes. The skeptical conclusions that are to be drawn from even the possibility of such radical deception, may be of extreme proportions, but do not and cannot affect the certainty instantiated in and through the ever present activity of Thought, revealed thus far through 'doubting'.

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<sup>89</sup> I am hereby merely acknowledging the difficulty arising from the 'Cartesian Circle' problem. Again, my endeavor here is neither to defend nor critique the validity of Descartes' assumptions or arguments but rather their implications to the pursuit for defining certainty.

## 2.5 Thought vs. 'Thinking Thing'

The 'I think' reveals itself as a special self-evident claim that emanates from that which is in actuality Thought proper. When the Meditator sees the 'I think' as the most immediate of First Principles, he understands it not as a truth in mind like a mathematical truth but a metaphysical self-evident truth about the property of a real existent thing – Thought. Before proceeding to express my position on the *type* of certainty the Meditator gains from such a profound knowledge, I would first like to clarify the true essence of that which he claims to be certain of.

That he is thinking, or that there is thinking in general going on, is Descartes' first principle. Yet what is Descartes ultimately certain *of*? The movement in the Meditations is from knowledge of Thought in general to knowledge of an 'I exist', or, better stated, the thinking *I* exists. What, however, is being posited other than Thought, alongside this 'I'? To say that thinking exists simply means that there is Thinking activity going on along with its thoughts, but is there anything more? There is a sense of appropriation here where thinking, belonging to me, implies *my existence*. I exist because thinking exists. But what is this 'I'? Given the stark conclusions of the First Meditation, can it be anything other than Thinking or Thought?

The Meditator's position in general, affirms that he can know nothing concrete about any "I" in either the psychological or ontological sense, other than Thought. Does it follow from this that there really is no 'I' at all? Or, better yet, does it follow that the Meditator cannot really speak of an 'I' at all, but only of Thought and Thinking activity in general? I believe that this is indeed the position that the Meditator should adopt, but instead he becomes, once again, a vehicle for Descartes' own inherent metaphysics of

Substance which does not allow a collapsing of the I to Thought alone. The 'I' itself represents a substance whose essential and necessary property is indeed Thought but is not collapsible, ontologically, to Thought.

The argument in the Second Meditation unfolds thus:

At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking? For it could be that were I totally to cease from thinking, I should totally cease to exist....I am then in the strictest sense only a thing which thinks.. I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of thing? As I have just said – a thinking thing.<sup>90</sup>

There is something else being affirmed here, ontologically, besides just thinking activity or Thought. By suggesting that 'thought' belongs to some *Thing* without which it could not be, we see that the argument here inevitably alludes to the existence of something other than just mere 'thought'. While the 'I' here may not be the man sitting there meditating, clothed and warm next to the fire, the 'I' is not to be seen, for Descartes, as collapsible, ontologically, to Thought *per se*.<sup>91</sup>

While this is not explicitly stated, the argument here channels through the Meditator –though rather subliminally- an essential feature of Cartesian metaphysics – first, a substance is not collapsible or identical to its essential feature(s) and, second we do not have any cognitive epistemological access to the actual ontological nature of the substance itself but, at best, can only know its essential property. The complete and whole nature of a substance is not one and the same as its essence. The latter, the essence of a thing, is how we come to know or be aware of that thing's being or existence, while

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<sup>90</sup> CSM II 18.

<sup>91</sup> Thought is an ontologically real thing but we only know it as the essential property of that to which it pertains the 'thinking *thing*'.

what the thing is in separation from its essence, is unknowable and is beyond any epistemological framework. Descartes' ontology expands the boundaries of the existence of Thought or Thinking activity, for it posits some substance *in which* thought resides. We only know thinking as a necessary ontological property of some other Substance.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, the Meditator himself makes no claim to possess such a metaphysical grasp of the nature of substance. If the Meditator's method only yields certainty of thought, why posit that there is a thinking '*thing*' at all? Why not state the first principle as 'Thought exists' or, 'There is Thinking'?'<sup>93</sup> In conformity to the method outlined from the very onset of the entire work, it seems that this is ultimately the position he himself must accept and Descartes' own metaphysics must be set aside. From a contextual standpoint the Meditator cannot and should not presuppose any external thing other than thinking and ultimately the thinking thing is in essence nothing other than thinking.<sup>94</sup>

Descartes' own attempts to clarify the issue of whether anything else *could* belong, actually, to the 'I' other than Thought are notoriously inconsistent. At times, Descartes insists that in the Meditations he merely speaks of those things that are clearly knowable to the Meditator as belonging to his being, that is to say his being as a Doubting Subject. Thus he insists that it is *possible* that there are other features that could belong to the 'I', yet he is merely not aware of them. Yet in other instances, namely the

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<sup>92</sup> This issue is of great complexity and, a detailed discussion of Descartes' metaphysical division of *substance*, *mode*, and *accident*, is far beyond the scopes and needs of my present topic.

<sup>93</sup> A position reflected in Spinoza's interpretation of the arguments in the Second Meditation.

<sup>94</sup> Descartes, in general, puts the Meditator in a very precarious and unnecessary position if he allows him to introduce a metaphysics that claims the 'I' as some ontological substance other than thought. Not only can we know nothing about the substance in the non-mediated direct way (beyond thought that is), but the very positing of such an ontological substance hierarchy appears to be out of place. I am merely affirming here that the position of the Meditator when not laden with this external substance-metaphysics allows us to omit the latter without sacrificing the true force of discovery present in the Second Meditation— the self-evident and self-reflective awareness of the activity of Thought.



Sixth Meditation, Descartes explicitly assures us that since he, that is to say the Meditator, is only aware of Thought alone as the essence of his being, it thus follows that in actuality nothing else belongs to this being other than Thought.<sup>95</sup> What lies implicit in the latter position is that, with respect to the subject's reflection upon his own essence as a substance, he will be aware of all that belongs to it. That is to say, there is nothing that can belong to the 'I' which the 'I' itself is not aware of.<sup>96</sup>

Which position is to be definitively adopted here is questionable. Yet, again, what is essential to our present argument is not what the Meditator *could* know but what he actually has proven beyond any doubt. If, explicitly, he can be aware of nothing else belonging to this 'I' other than thought, then the fact that there may be some pure essence to this Thinking Thing beyond Thought is not pertinent within the framework of the pursuit for certainty. At this point, the Meditator himself can only be certain of thinking, and thus we are left with Thought alone as the first principle.

The entire ensuing argument of the Second Meditation reveals that for Descartes, our awareness of anything is an awareness of thinking that thing; thinking as an omnipresent condition. Or as Descartes notes, to see (sense) something, say the wax in front of him, or to think that one sees the wax, is one and the same – it is a thought, namely about wax, regardless of the actual real presence or absence of wax. We can

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<sup>95</sup> The complexity of this issue is, far too great to discuss in depth here, nor do I see it as essential for the present argument. I merely want to raise this issue in order to further stress the problematic nature of the 'I' when it is taken, even in the early stages of the Meditation, to mean something more complete or at least more expanded than mere Thought. This further stresses the position that Descartes ultimately does not know, at this point, what this subject is, and should thus let the Meditator engage in a metaphysics that is strictly bound to what is immediately given and known – that is, Thought/ Thinking alone.

<sup>96</sup> Norman Malcolm in dealing with this exact issues states, "x is my essence, if it is the case that if I am aware of x then (necessarily) I am aware of myself and if I am aware of myself then (necessarily) I am aware of x". Norman Malcolm, 'Descartes' Proof that His Essence is Thinking', in *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Willis Doney, (London: Macmillan, 1968), 314 (312-38).

relate this directly to Descartes' answer to those had insisted that the *Cogito* argument could have been equally formulated with respect to any other activity and, not necessarily the 'I think'; for example *I breathe therefore I exist*.<sup>97</sup> Descartes states that, if we refer to breathing per se, as an actual concrete corporeal activity, our argument clearly has no meaning, for breathing presupposes a material domain which we have already lost. However if one is referring to one's idea or awareness of breathing, then clearly it is a valid argument since my awareness of breathing, implies a thinking that I am breathing which, at the very least, means that I am in fact thinking.

Even if there is no actual activity of any such kind taking place, it is still the case that I perceive the activity taking place and, for Descartes, believing and thinking are one and the same. In fact by affirming that all sensing begins with the thinking activity, the entire domain of sensation has been internalized – sensation as a whole has been appropriated as an internal activity of thinking. The senses themselves we recall are of the bodily domain and may not reveal anything real or true in the strictest ontological manner of speaking, but the unified act of sensation, of understanding and comprehending what the senses give us, regardless of their validity, is a purely internal activity of thinking.

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<sup>97</sup> See CSMK *Letter of March 1638* “If one wants to conclude one's existence from the sentiment that one breath even if this opinion is not true one concludes very well; because this thought of breathing appears to our mind before the thought of our existence, and because we cannot doubt that we have it. And in this sense to say, I breathe therefore I am is no other thing than to say I think, therefore I am”

## ***2.6 Knowledge of Thought and The Type of Certainty it Yields.***

What does this discovery ultimately give the Meditator in terms of the pursuit for certainty within the framework of his project? There are two crucially intertwined aspects to this; the certainty itself, that is to say, the condition of being certain itself, and the condition with respect to that from which it is derived – thought. In order to get the full scope of this issue, especially with respect to the latter aspect, I see it of paramount importance to contrast the current position of the Meditator to his argument for God's existence in the Third Meditation. For the moment then, I am only touching upon the issue now and will examine it in detail at the end of the following chapter.

The first issue is about the obtaining of certainty in general regardless of what the certainty pertains to. What does this do for the Meditator in regards to his current epistemological state? By finding that which is absolutely ontologically certain, in the sense that it yields an awareness of the necessary existence of something, the Meditator, in one single act, both transcends hyperbolic doubt and, by doing so, comes to have an understanding of the very meaning of certainty. As he transcends radical doubt, by encountering the ontologically real and existent, he comes to know the very condition of or, highest criteria for, certainty proper. His discovery, in a sense instantiates within him the '*condition of being certain*', arrived at through knowledge of the ontological reality and existence of something. Hence, in the most fundamental sense, knowledge of the existence of 'Thought' is the archetype for defining certainty, for it is ultimately this knowledge which first expresses an epistemological instantiation of unshakeable ontological truth. Thus it is through the discovery of the *Cogito* that the Mediator

recognizes what being certain, in its most immediate form, entails.

Now, in this respect, I am, again, treating the condition of being certain itself and not being certain about Thought/Thinking specifically. From that angle, the condition of being certain could have been fulfilled with discovery of any necessarily existing object, thing, principle, law, etc. It is in the encountering of and, arriving at, knowledge of the ontologically necessary, that certainty finds its platform for the Meditator. Yet as we return to his more specific endeavor, we are bound to contemplate what this condition of certainty gives him with respect to it being about Thought *specifically*. Being a certainty about the existence of Thought, what dimension of applicability does it give to Descartes' ensuing epistemological journey in general, in the more practical sense, that is to say beyond merely the condition of being certain?

After the *Cogito* argument has unfolded, Descartes concludes, as we have seen, that whether his thinking is of false non-existent objects or not has no bearing on the fact that he still has thoughts about these objects. Whatever is given to knowledge starts with Thought; with 'the thinking' of something. Awareness of the existence of Thought allows us to understand what certainty means with respect to the very possibility of there being knowledge in general, for all knowledge and all sensation, arise from within the intellect. The type of certainty provided by the *Cogito* is honed to establish the very possibility of epistemology to begin with, and does not correspond to any particular piece of knowledge proper, i.e., a particular element of knowledge actually known.

The *Cogito* argument not only affirms the existence of a particular thing, it affirms the existence of that from which all knowledge starts. Before he can have any knowledge of the actual truth of the things in the world, he must first affirm that such

knowledge is possible. The *Cogito* proof is the starting point of such an affirmation for it allows the Meditator to see that all knowledge of that world starts with thinking.

In affirming the existence of thought, he gains no awareness about any concrete and empirical qualities of the external world. Nevertheless, he is now at least in the position to affirm that since thinking or thought exists then external knowledge is possible. Yet, returning again, to the 'condition of being certain', when we look at the discovery here as a unity, that is to say the condition of being certain taken together with the fact this certainty particularly pertains to 'thinking' or 'thought', we then ask – to what extent does this condition apply to external knowledge? I have just claimed that with respect to the condition being certain about thought, the Meditator has opened the door to the possibility of knowing 'in general' in so far as he now is absolutely aware that the key initial ingredient for knowing – thought – is real and existent. However, can this condition apply to the comprehensibility of the existence of things outside the ontological being of thought? Does his capacity to understand certainty as knowledge of a particular thing's existence or being, transcend its applicability to thought alone? Based on Descartes metaphysics of substance as it applies to the uniqueness and 'otherness' of all other things, I contend that without an initial moment of absolute proof of something other than thinking, the Meditator's condition of being certain has no external dimension or applicability – it relates to thinking alone. It opens the door to knowledge of the outside world but, does not *apply to* anything within that domain (to be discussed in next chapter).

While the discovery of the *Cogito* yields a first moment of certainty it is not sufficient for establishing the archetype for understanding certainty as applicable to our

external-empirical knowledge proper. Of course, it is a given that at this point of the Meditations all he knows now as true and real is the existence of Thought. Thus, I am not claiming here that certainty with respect to its object only applies to Thought for that is simply stating the obvious. Rather, what I am looking at here is, again, the condition of being certain itself. From this angle, what I am suggesting is that the very comprehension of certainty here cannot be (psychologically) transposed to comprehending certainty as the real ontological existence of other non-thinking things. It is only once the Meditator has arrived at knowledge of a particular external instantiation of something other than thought that he can consequently understand what certainty in that domain actually represents. He needs to base this certainty in something ontologically certain, but something other than Thought.

In the order of discovery, this is reached when the Meditator arrives at an indubitable and certain knowledge of God's existence. I thus proceed to look at the argument of the Third Meditation which picks up on the very task of the First Meditation; linking our thoughts of things to those things as they actually are, ontologically independent from their givenness in mind. I first look at the issue of ideas in general, with respect to their givenness in mind as Thoughts as well as clarifying Descartes' stance on their possible *cause*. I then proceed to look at the Idea of God and the manner in which it yields for the Meditator the implied and necessary existence of God. I conclude the discussion by examining the type of certainty, once God has been shown to exist, that this gives the Meditator and its significance within the sphere of the entire project.



## Chapter III: Our Ideas and The Idea of God

### 3.1 Intro:

A few words to recap what has been achieved with respect to the pursuit for certainty will help before proceeding. The incremental levels of honing his approach and method in the First Meditation expressed what Descartes was ultimately looking for, not just indubitability in the conceptual, logical sense but rather knowledge of something that is in fact true – knowledge of what has external ontological being in and for itself. With knowledge derived from or through the senses, the Meditator found neither indubitability nor certainty proper. In the realm of mathematics, and other non sensory-based simple eternal truths, the Meditator found an ineluctable logical and psychological indubitability. Nonetheless, due to the possibility of radical external deception he concluded that the bridge between the perceived indubitability of such truths and their actual ontologically concrete existence in reality, that is to say beyond conceptuality, could not be established. In these truths he thus finds indubitability, but not certainty proper.

Knowledge of the existence of 'thought' moves beyond mere conceptuality; it is the first truth that is accepted as dealing with, and referring to, something concretely and decisively real in the fullest ontological sense of the word – the presence of Thinking or a Thought in reality. However, the *Cogito* argument is not only an affirmation of the existence of Thought solely as naked intellection, void of any concrete content, but also of particular individual thoughts as well. The entire empirical world has been called into question and the only thing left standing, ontologically, is the existence of Thought, yet

our individual thoughts are part and parcel of this Thinking activity<sup>98</sup>. Thus, while we may not have the external world we nevertheless at all times possess *ideas* of that world.

The backdrop of the Third Meditation then, is a synthesis of the conclusions of the first two Meditations. The First has left the Meditator aware that none of his ideas or thoughts are objectively true in so far as their contents actually refer to real, ontologically existent things or objects. The Second Meditation, in establishing the necessity of the existence of Thought, has affirmed that regardless of the external reality of what his ideas claimed to be about, it is absolutely certain that the Meditator has these ideas themselves, as particular parts of his thinking. Armed with this affirmation Descartes' Meditator now returns back to the path of the First Meditation, attempting to look more closely at the possible *cause* of his ideas. In fact the entire approach and scope of the Third Meditation reveals it to be as an investigation of the cause of our ideas.

### **3.2 Ideas in General:**

First and foremost we note that ideas are not things separate from the *Cogito*.<sup>99</sup> Rather, they are the particular moments of the *Cogito*'s instantiated activity of thinking; they are in essence instantiations of individual thoughts.<sup>100</sup> As Kenny points out, the

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<sup>98</sup> Again, it is this very presence of individual thoughts, of particular thoughts that allows us to see the *Cogito*, or Thinking, as a necessary ontological entity for the existence of any knowledge what so ever, for all knowledge of things begins with the Thinking of these things.

<sup>99</sup> I note here that I begin my examination of the Third Meditation at the point where the Meditator begins to explore the nature of his ideas. While Descartes opens the Meditation with questions regarding deception and the possibility of a God, these are raised as concerns that, as the Meditator recognizes, can only be confronted by explicitly taking apart the nature of his ideas. Indeed, since all he can cling to by the end of the Second Meditation is 'Thought', it is only natural that he begins his query in the Third by further analyzing the nature of the particular moments of instantiated thought – that is to say, his ideas or thoughts.

<sup>100</sup> At the end of the Second Meditations Descartes concludes, "...I see now that even bodies are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone and that this perception

accepted philosophical meaning of 'idea' during Descartes' time was very distinct from the way Descartes had used the term. Kenny says, "Before Descartes, philosophers used it to refer to archetype in the divine intellect; it was a new departure to use it systematically for the contents of the human mind..."<sup>101</sup>

Now, one of the key aspects necessary to understanding ideas as contents of the mind is to realize what Descartes means when he refers to their truth or falsity. An idea in and for itself – that is to say, just as a thought in the mind – is not something that can be true or false. Ideas are mere thoughts or representations of things and, as such, cannot be false within the frameworks of the *Cogito* itself and thus they are not susceptible to any claim of truth or falsity even if their purported objects are in fact non-existent. If I look at my idea of a ball of wax, whether the ball of wax is, ontologically speaking, externally a real thing or not, bears no effect on the presence of the idea in my mind.<sup>102</sup>

The actual truth of an idea stems from the correspondence between an object - that which the idea is about - and an actual external thing. This brings us back to the First Meditation; one does not doubt that he or she has ideas but rather whether the ideas of things actually correspond to something external in the empirical tangible world. Thus, Bernard Williams explains:

..... for the mind to be involved in any actual falsehood on the strength of

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derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood..." CSM II 22.

<sup>101</sup> Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of His Philosophy*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Regarding this issue Bernard Williams writes: "...An idea by itself does not contain either truth or falsehood, to have an idea in one's mind is just to think of something, and just to think of something does not involve any claim that can be either true or false..." Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 130-131. We have already seen this issue dealt with in the Second Meditation when the Meditator affirms that to see the wax and to think one sees the wax or, even further, to think that one thinks that one sees is, indistinguishable – they are all one and the same thing, namely a thought or, idea about wax.

these ideas it must do more than merely have the idea....The principle occasion of falsehood is when I affirm that an idea which I have corresponds to something outside itself, that is to say, when I judge that something really exists conformable to some idea that I have.<sup>103</sup>

A slight qualification is needed here in order to clarify what does and does not actually count as an idea an idea, regardless of it always being true when taken strictly in its ontological sense, as a mode of thought. One could claim that an idea in fact *is false* if it represents a logical contradiction or fallacy, for example the idea of  $2+4=7$  or of a squared circle. For Descartes however, it would be misleading to think of such claims or statements as false ideas for they are in actuality not ideas at all. Rather they are, if anything, a collection of intertwined words that form false concepts and are thus unintelligible and unthinkable.<sup>104</sup> An idea is a thought, and a thought must be intelligible in such a way that I – the thinker – have an understanding of what it means. Therefore I cannot say I have the thought of  $2+2=5$  for I do not have the power to understand the meaning of these words and hence it is not an idea at all.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 131 -132.

<sup>104</sup> Looking, earlier, at the method of doubt, I had raised this issue with respect to the powers of the Evil Genius. While the demon makes it possible that, for example all mathematical operations are false in and for themselves it nevertheless remains the case that I could not intelligibly understand them in another fashion; it is possible that  $2+2$  does not equal 4 and may in fact equal 5, but I cannot intelligibly comprehend the meaning of this. Hence, while I may utter the statement a 'Sara is the bachelor's wife' I am not forming a false idea here, rather I am not comprehending the meaning of the concepts and hence have a malformed or incorrect thought.

<sup>105</sup> Descartes writes elsewhere: "I cannot express anything in words provided that I understand what I say, without its thereby being certain that there is within me the idea of what is signified by the words in question." AT VII 160.

### 3.3 The Types of Ideas:

Descartes, having stated that ideas are thoughts about things, moves on to classify the different types of ideas. Here Descartes offers his well-known doctrine of the triadic classification of ideas. Ideas are, innate, adventitious, or fictitious (invented). An innate idea is one that has always existed in the mind and whose existence or being requires nothing but the internal activity, capacity and ability of the intellect. A fictitious idea is one that is the product of the mind itself, that is to say an invention of the mind, which does not refer to anything real but is rather an expression of the imagination through the combination and permutation of many other ideas. Finally, an idea is adventitious if it is an idea of something that is *perceived* as having its origin outside of the mind. As Descartes' concern in the Third Meditation (and for the entire inquiry) is to determine whether it is possible to move from a 'thing' or object given to the mind in its "idea-form" to the actual external existence of that thing outside of the mind, it is clear that his primary concern is with adventitious ideas. Nevertheless I would first like to clarify a few issues regarding the nature of the overall classification.<sup>106</sup>

In a sense, all ideas are innate for we only have the mind and its ideas. Thus, at a first reading, one may object to this classification if it posits a type of idea – namely adventitious ones – that makes an appeal to external experience and thus objects outside of mind. The point of contention, naturally, is that if adventitious ideas are those that, with respect to their object – that is to say, that which they are about – find their actual origin in external experience then these cannot be granted for there is nothing outside

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<sup>106</sup> I make note here that there is a plethora of issues concerning this division, most of which go far beyond the scope of my focus at the present moment. I am more concerned with the pursuit for external truth and thus my predominant focus here is to concentrate, as the Meditator himself does, on adventitious ideas.

thinking, at this point of the argument. Yet this is not what Descartes intended by the classification. The division is meant to represent how ideas *appear* to us in their immediate givenness within thought. The classification offers an account of the character of the ideas, that is to say, the descriptive properties of the objects of our ideas, yet it makes no presupposition about the existence of anything other than mind per se. The classification refers to our understanding of the various types of contents of ideas as they appear in consciousness- that is, in complete separation with any dependence on the natural world or sensation. It is, as it were, a phenomenological descriptive account of what the ideas *pertain* to be about. This holds for all three types of ideas.

Descartes' division here thus deals with the objects or contents of his ideas strictly as they are given to and for the mind. With respect to innate ideas, Descartes refers to them as ideas whose object appear to us as determined by the intellect alone and so they depend on no external cause. What this means is that an idea is not said to be innate solely in the sense that it is in the mind, for all ideas are innate from this perspective. Rather, the point is that, looking at the nature of such purely intellectual ideas, their character is such that we conceive of them as *originating* from and, *created* by the capacities of the intellect. Innate ideas are not only present in the intellect but are determined, caused or brought into being, by the power of the intellect alone.<sup>107</sup> An

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<sup>107</sup> For example, if we consider a purely intellectual idea such as the idea of extension, it is seen by Descartes as determined by the intellectual capacities of the mind. Again, that is not to say that the idea of extension (as an innate idea) does not correlate to extension qua actual object or thing in reality, for that is an entirely different claim. To use such ideas dynamically, that is, to actually think of them in some sort of *practical* and *applicable* manner, does indeed involve physical and tangible experience. Yet what we are looking at here, at this level of discussion is the fact that we *perceive* the objects of the ideas – that which they are about - as requiring no external causes, no causes at all for that matter, other than the mechanisms of the intellect's capacities. Williams writes that with respect to such innate ideas: "...While development, practice and experience may be needed for human being to be able to think *with* them, they do not really depend on corporeal causes at all and they could play a role in abstract thought for a creature who did not have a body and needed no external stimulus to elicit these ideas in the

innate idea is conceived as being born from the powers of the intellect alone, yet having an external dimension with respect to the reality of its object. It claims to be an idea about a thing that has a non-mental ontological reality. This however, is not the case with fictitious (invented) ideas.

The idea of a chimera is an idea of a thing that I perceive not only as originating from the powers of the intellect but, also, one referring to nothing ontologically separate from mind. It is perceived as having no reality outside the confines of the human intellect and imagination. The chimera is never assumed to have any reality outside of the imagination. An innate idea, in essence, though it arises from within the intellect, may with respect to its content, refer to a thing, property, relation, etc, which we *believe* has some ontological reality *other* than its presence in mind, while a fictitious one remains, ontologically, always as a thought or concept with no external status – has no otherness to it.

Adventitious ideas, on the other hand, are those whose intentional objects appear to originate from outside the subject, in so far as *their cause* is concerned. They are not only about things, objects, or events which we believe to have ontological existence other than the thinking self, we also perceive them as caused by that which they purport to be about. Descartes is merely describing here our standard natural disposition of assuming that the objects of our ideas not only correspond to their objects but are also caused by them; when I look at my idea of the wax, I am naturally drawn to believe that it (the idea) is caused by the wax itself as an actual concrete object in the world.<sup>108</sup>

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mind.....Descartes believed that these basically innate ideas could be developed without any experience at all". Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 134.

<sup>108</sup> This does not stand in opposition to the Meditator's conclusion of the Second Meditation where he affirmed that ultimately it is the mind that sees the wax. That still stands; we see with the *mind's eye* but



In examining the nature of adventitious ideas we presuppose a level of involuntariness here; they are infringed upon us, unwillingly, by that which they are about – the external sense objects. This of course is merely our belief or disposition or, as Williams eloquently refers to it, a *natural tendency* of the understanding. While most of these thoughts or ideas *claim* to be about a world or realm external to Thought, the external actuality or being of such a world cannot be granted at this point of the argument. Thus it is the task of the Meditator to resist such an assumption and search for the true and actual cause of these ideas. The existence of these “things” outside of the mind is exactly what Descartes is setting out to prove. This is clearly the point of contention that the Meditator confronts in the First Meditation.

The three arguments of the first Meditation have forced the Meditator to affirm that he cannot link the objects of his ideas to some sort of external ontological reality where they exist. Nevertheless, even if the source of these ideas is not concretely that which they are about, do they not, asks the Meditator, still need to have some origin? This is the first task which he faces as he returns to the grounds of the First Meditation – what is the origin or cause of his ideas, regardless of the fact that they may all be objectively false.

### ***3.4 Ideas and Their Origin***

The Meditator looks at ideas from two different perspectives; ideas taken strictly as modes of thinking, regardless of their content and, then moves to look at ideas in so far as they are ideas with particular objective qualities and character. As our main focus here

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the origin of what we see – *its cause* – is what we are so naturally biased to view as the object proper in the world, be it a concrete or abstract object.

is an attempt to bridge ideas to the world which they are supposedly about, the Meditator naturally concentrates on the latter.<sup>109</sup>

### 3.4(a) *The Cause of an Idea, qua mode of Thought.*

In looking for their cause, the Meditator first considers ideas in their pure naked ontological form, that is to say he looks at them as modes of thought, independent of their content – that which they are purportedly about. The immediate setup of the Meditator's approach here is already anticipated from the conclusions he has accepted thus far - since ideas, taken strictly as modes of Thought, require nothing but Thought to exist, then we conclude that ideas are caused by thought. From this angle it may seem quite peculiar to say that ideas are caused at all. If they represent singular moments of the instantiation of thought, then formally speaking they are not really *caused by* the *Cogito* but rather *proceed from* it.<sup>110</sup> Yet, in fact, this precise point appears to be the actual scope of what Descartes had in mind – ideas are caused by the *Cogito* in so far as they proceed from it.

Descartes' position here sheds some light on the ontological relation between Thought and Ideas. On the one hand, ideas, in proceeding from the *Cogito*, are not ontologically collapsible to it, but rather are a part of it. Ideas as 'particular' thoughts are in a sense facets or instantiation of the thinking activity but are not one and the same as

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<sup>109</sup> I therefore focus the core discussion on ideas of a particular kind, and thus merely offer a quick look at the cause of ideas taken strictly as modes of thought in order to clarify the loose ontological distinction between 'thought' and 'ideas'.

<sup>110</sup> In what sense does an idea need to have an origin, a source or a cause? This is raised by Caterus in the *Objections and Replies*. In the immediate strict sense it conveys Descartes' treatment of ideas as a type of a thing – namely, a mode of thought – that must have some origin, be it self-caused or externally determined.

that activity taken as a single whole – as Thought itself. That being said, ideas are not to be viewed as some new ontological entity, that is to say the argument here does not extend or expand the given ontology beyond what we presently have – thought. In so far as ideas are modes of thought itself, we cannot perform a complete ontological separation between ideas and thinking – ideas are ontologically part of the *Cogito*. Thus, as Descartes states, looking at the ontological nature of his ideas, he concludes that their being or existence, as modes of thought alone, require nothing but the existence of thought and are thus all equal in that respect; they can all be seen as caused by the *Cogito*, completely independent of their intentional object.<sup>111</sup> He affirms, “In so far as the ideas are considered simply as modes of thought, there is no recognizable inequality among them: they all appear to come from within me in the same fashion.”<sup>112</sup>

### *3.4(b) Ideas considered with respect to their intentional object.*

Ideas taken solely as modes of thought are then, as Descartes tells us, all equal in terms of their ontological reality or essence. However, as we have seen, our main concern here is about the *objects* of our ideas – the reality of that which our ideas are *about*. Ideas are not all the same when they are examined with respect to their apparent contents. We now take into consideration the degrees of complexity of the objects of our ideas - the complexity of their perceived attributes and properties. It is here that the discussion gets its true force. If something, ‘X’, is the cause of my ideas then that thing

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<sup>111</sup> In examining ideas as caused by the *Cogito* we are not looking at them as the existence of something formally and ontologically different from thought itself but rather as the instantiation of thinking activity.

<sup>112</sup> CSM II 27-28.

relates to the idea not only in respect to the idea's ontological form as a mode of thought, but, also in respect to the multitude of attributes of the objects of our individual ideas.

When we look at the strictly ontological essence of ideas, we see that since they are all static, we cannot relate the cause to any dynamic qualities or attributes, for ideas are only seen as analogous to thoughts, and all proceed from the same source. That is to say, all ideas, taken as just ideas, have the same attribute – they are modes of thought. Yet when we differentiate ideas on the basis of the attributes of their actual content, the notion of their cause itself becomes much more dynamic. Here again the Meditator's excursion is purely phenomenological; he will examine the characteristics of his ideas, solely as they are given in and to mind or thought alone.

The Meditator's approach in his quest to examine the descriptive and qualitative properties of what his ideas are about revolves around the notions of *objective* and *formal* reality.<sup>113</sup> An in-depth look at this issue is far beyond the scope of my present argument. I simply wish to clarify what Descartes actually means by these terms and how they are used in reference to our ideas and their contents. Briefly stated, by the formal reality of a thing, Descartes means its 'actual' reality, that is to say, what the thing is – in and for itself – and not as it appears in mind.<sup>114</sup> A thing's objective reality is its reality as given through 'representation'. Its objective reality is the thing as it appears to the mind's eye. In fact, Descartes appears to have the Meditator use these terms synonymously - where 'formal' and 'actual' are equivalent and, 'objective' and 'representational' are equivalent.

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<sup>113</sup> Since the Meditator does not elaborate on how, why or from where, he has obtained knowledge of such concepts we are left, again, assuming that Descartes is channeling his own metaphysical stance on the issue.

<sup>114</sup> Or, as it stands on its own, ontologically independent of any perception we have of it and, for that matter, ontologically independent of anything else. This division clearly echoes a Socratic/Platonic division of knowledge into *appearance* and *reality*.

The formal reality of say a ball of wax is its ontological essence – which, within Cartesian metaphysics, is its being an extended finite material substance. In this sense all corporeal things share the same reality.<sup>115</sup> However, although all such things share the same formal reality as extended things, they vary drastically with respect to the plethora of representational attributes we perceived about them. When we consider the representational characteristics of the objects of our ideas, we see *differences* from one thing to the next as no two things are objectively – that is to say representationally – fully alike. Now, all this is taken with respect to actual external extended things, within Descartes' broader system of physics/metaphysics. However in the present line of argument of the Third Meditation, seeing that the external corporeal and, mathematical world have both been abolished, it is only natural that the Meditator speaks of formal and objective reality specifically as it applies to our ideas.<sup>116</sup>

The formal reality of an idea is its actual reality, that is to say 'what it formally is'. Now we have already seen that an idea is, *formally* speaking, strictly 'a mode of thought'. Therefore, regardless of their representational content – the characteristics of that which they are about – all ideas are equal in so far as their formal reality constitutes modes of thought. Hence the idea of a fictional chimera has no more, or less, formal reality than the idea of a stick or the abstract idea of say, multiplicity; the content of the idea has no bearing on what it actually is, qua instantiation of Thought.<sup>117</sup> On the other

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<sup>115</sup> This is at the core of Descartes' metaphysics of substance; all tangible concrete things share the same substance-form – extended matter.

<sup>116</sup> While they are not extended material things, ideas for Descartes are nevertheless *things*, and hence this distinction of objective and formal reality is indeed as applicable to ideas as they are to golden triangles. In fact it is here that Descartes' use of the terminology takes a novel turn.

<sup>117</sup> For detailed discussion on this issue see Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, Ch.5 (115 - 47).

hand, an idea's objective reality (or being/essence) is its reality as a *particular* thought of a *particular* object or thing. The objective reality of an idea is thus its representational and objective content – the properties and attributes of that which it claims to be about.

In this sense, suggests Descartes, we can collapse the objective reality of the sun itself to the objective reality of our idea of the sun. Clearly we do not know that the objective reality of the sun itself actually corresponds to the idea of the sun, in the exact manner given to mind, for we do not know whether there is sun out there at all. Nevertheless since what we have now is the idea of the sun, its objective reality is still its characteristics, *as it is given in mind*. That is to say, just as the characteristics of the sun itself ( if say, there were a real existing sun) belonged actually to the sun, so, whatever attributes belong to the sun taken as an object of the 'idea-of-sun' belong to the idea itself.<sup>118</sup>

For Descartes, the objective reality of an idea is what objectively (via representation) belongs to the intentional object of the idea – that which the idea is about. In Descartes' own words, objective reality is : “....the being of the thing represented in the idea, as it is represented in the idea...Whatever we perceive as being in the object of our idea is in the ideas themselves objectively.”<sup>119</sup> That is not to say that an idea itself is ontologically equivalent to the actual representational attributes of the object of the idea, but rather, that the perceived attribute of the object of the idea belongs objectively to the idea itself. If I have an idea P which is about a thing, an object, that has attribute Q, we are not claiming that  $P=Q$  formally, that is to say that P is ontologically reducible to Q, but rather that Q is the objective reality of P; it is what P represents in terms of

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<sup>118</sup> See First set of *Objections and Replies*. CSM II 74-75.

<sup>119</sup> Second set of *Objections and Replies*, CSM II 113-114.



descriptive attributes.<sup>120</sup>

Now, with respect to our present discussion the most important element to draw out of the objective/formal distinction is its relation to causality. We are after the cause of ideas in so far as their objective reality is concerned; the relationship between the representational content of our ideas and whatever the cause of such content may be.<sup>121</sup> The entire approach to this question here rests on Descartes' heavy reliance on both the Causal Principle in general and its applications to the nature of ideas. The Meditator's approach here, is, again, channeling Descartes' own stance on the metaphysical criteria for causality, in terms of both his understanding of *the causal principle* in general, as well as its application to ideas in particular. This is perhaps the one single most important element of the Third Meditation for it not only clarifies his stance on the relation of ideas to their purported objects but, in doing so, it opens the door to the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the idea of God.

### 3.5 The Causal Principle:

Descartes conception of the relationship between cause and effect, in general, and in its relation to ideas – rests entirely on this principle; there must be at least as much – if not more – present in a cause as there is in an effect.<sup>122</sup> The cause-effect relationship is

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<sup>120</sup> Or, as Cottingham adds in a footnote to the text, we can think of the objective reality of Q as its 'Q'-ness. If Q, as the object of my idea, is the table, its objective reality is its table-ness that is to say, its attributes that make it a table.

<sup>121</sup> We are attempting to examine whether we have any idea that can allow us to move from that idea to the necessary cause of that idea based on the actual attributes of that idea, i.e. its objective reality.

<sup>122</sup> This affirms also that, from nothing only nothing follows, or, something cannot proceed from nothing. If something cannot proceed from nothing it must be the case that there cannot be anything in the effect that is not already present in the cause. Conversely, if the effect had some attributes that were not

one of transference; whatever is in the effect is there by virtue of receiving it from its cause. Descartes states:

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? It follows from this both that something cannot come from nothing, and also that what is more perfect--that is, contains more reality—cannot arise from what is less perfect...<sup>123</sup>

The Meditator's acceptance of the concrete and actual existence of such a causal principle in general, and even more so its applicability to the nature of ideas points to what some have taken to be one of the most serious problems in Descartes' supposedly presupposition-*less* endeavor. This view of causality may have been seen by Descartes and his contemporaries as a basic self-evident truth; a rule given from the natural light of reason, yet, Descartes makes no effort to have the Mediator defend or prove it, which appears contrary to the rigorous conditions laid out by the First Meditation.

Do we have absolute indubitable and *certain* knowledge or awareness that this principle is both conceptually *and* actually real? If one commits to the 'hard' stance on the implications of the Demon hypothesis – as I have in the previous chapter – then ultimately this principle suffers the same fate as all other simple and self-evident truths. We have already seen that eternal truths, such as this principle, may indeed be, for the Meditator, self-evident and certain in so far as psychological limits of doubt are concerned, however, what is at stake here is how he knows that this principle represents a true claim about reality.

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immanently present to the cause, this would suggest that these attributes, regardless of their variety and complexity, arose from nothing, which violates the initial premise.

<sup>123</sup> CSM II 28-29.

Insofar as the Meditator is concerned, we are never offered, even analogously, anything that bridges the 'conceptual-actual' gap with respect to this principle and thus we are forced to accept Descartes' metaphysics as a given presupposition. This is indeed, an insoluble and inescapable difficulty within the Third Meditation. Descartes subjects the Meditator's supposedly 'clean-slate' approach, to his own brand of metaphysics throughout the Meditation and we have already confronted this before. Nevertheless, nowhere in the entire work is it as prevalent as it is in the present context since the entire ensuing argument revolves around this principle.<sup>124</sup>

Returning to his pursuit, just as the Meditator applied Descartes' own notion of objective and formal reality when he examines the general ontological nature of ideas, he now subjects them to the causal principle. Whatever the cause of my ideas may be it must have at least as much if not more than what is present in these very ideas. As controversial as it may be for the Meditator simply to adopt the Causal Principle in general, Descartes may be seen as even less justified in applying it to ideas. There is no reason provided why this principle which Descartes would have most likely understood with respect to the physical corporeal world, could or should apply to the nature of ideas. This is indeed part of the difficulty at hand here, but, since the Meditator does not know concretely of anything else existing other than his mind, it is only natural, I hold, that he applies the causal principle in general to the one thing that he does in fact know exists – Thought and its ideas.

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<sup>124</sup> The Third Meditation is often accused of being a massive point of departure as it contains several metaphysical assumptions besides the causal principle. That being said, as my concern here is with the movement of the argument towards the pursuit for certainty, it is, again, not my concern to offer a detailed critique of either the validity of the principle itself nor the validity of presupposing it at this point. My focus here is the implications of this principle for the Meditator's grasp of the origin of his ideas. I merely point out the problematic element of Descartes' approach here and continue my examination of how it is used.

The Meditator expresses his stance on the ontological nature of ideas and their origin; whatever is the formal cause of my ideas must objectively and formally (eminently) contain whatever is objectively contained in my ideas. When we were just looking at the objects/content of our ideas without considering the cause of these ideas, Descartes had maintained that the objective reality of the idea is analogous to the objective reality of its object. That is to say, the descriptive and representational reality or quality of our ideas is analogous to the objective-representational property of the intentional objects of our ideas – that which they are about. Descartes now pushes this further, applying the causal principle and thereby affirming that whatever the actual cause of an idea may be, it will, ontologically and actually, contain what is objectively present in the idea. Whatever the idea has objectively, it receives from its cause which has it formally and concretely. Therefore, the causes of the idea of the sun will formally or, actually, possess the qualities that are present in the idea; in short it will be something that itself, in reality, contains or possesses whatever the sun possesses. Whatever is the original cause of our ideas is what transfers to these ideas their objective reality, and hence actually has these properties, in the formal eminent sense.

In looking at their cause, the Meditator insists that while ideas can spawn off other ideas, there can never be an infinite regress of idea-upon-idea. There must be an original point, a source which is itself not an idea but rather something that possesses the objective qualities we see in our ideas. This brings us back to the Meditator's original temptation expressed in the First Meditation; that ideas correspond to their purported object(s). The crux of the argument here is that the causal principle of ideas does not, on its own, allow us to make that jump. The principle only affirms that 'some-thing' must

have these properties or qualities of the objects of our thought as they are given to thought, but, it is ambiguous as to what that may be.

Hence, Descartes sees two options here; either I am the cause of the idea or, it is something outside of me, that is to say, outside of thought. If my mind is the origin of the idea of the sun then as such it is the source and foundation for supplying all the qualities I attribute to this particular object as it is given to thought. In other words, if this were the case with respect to all of our adventitious ideas, the *Cogito* would formally contain the attributes which are objectively present in all of our ideas. If, alternately, it can be shown that the mind cannot formally or eminently contain what is objectively present in the idea, we would need to conclude that the cause of these attributes (the idea's objective reality) is something external to the subject. Thus he says,

If the objective reality of my idea turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me....hence I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessary follow that I am not alone in the world but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea necessarily exists.<sup>125</sup>

We have earlier lost the world and anything external to the subject due to the Demon Hypothesis, yet we now see that regaining it, or at least gaining an instance of it, is possible if we can show that thinking itself cannot, based on its own essence, furnish the necessary conditions for causing this or that idea, when we take into consideration the qualities or attributes of the objects of our ideas. As the Meditator proceeds to see what is common to all his adventitious ideas his decisive conclusion is that he sees nothing in them (ideas of corporeal things) that could not arise from his own mind. He explicitly states, "...as to my ideas of corporeal things, I see nothing in them which is so great or

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<sup>125</sup> CSM II 29.

excellent as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself...”<sup>126</sup> The claim here is that all his ideas could have as their cause the ‘thinking thing’ itself since, it is at least possible, that the Thinking Thing could ‘formally’ possess all the properties and characteristics of the objects of his ideas. What however does this actually entail? In suggesting that the entire gamut of descriptive and qualitative properties which describe the contents of his thoughts, can ‘originate from myself’ Descartes is making an explicit claim about the possible ontological nature of the ‘thinking thing’; namely that these properties could belong to the essence of the thinking thing.<sup>127</sup>

The self of the Second Meditation was reduced, strictly speaking, to this distant and almost non-discursive ontological being, a pure, thinking thing. Nevertheless now we have a much richer vision of the possible nature of self, one that can include the totality of all properties and qualities. We now no longer need to doubt the external existence of that which our ideas are about solely due to the possibility of radical deception, but rather due to the possibility that the mind alone is the sole origin of the entire contents of our ideas. Hence the quest for certainty regarding the content of our ideas with respect to the objects (content) of our ideas – in so far as this certainty means establishing the connection between an object in mind and its corresponding object in the realm of non-mental reality – is now facing its toughest obstacle.

In affirming that it is actually I who can formally possess all the properties the objects have, I am at once annihilating the necessity of any object-of-thought having any

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> In the previous chapter I raised the problem of whether the essence of the thinking self could be more than just thought or thinking. Descartes’ ambiguous stance on the matter is especially accentuated in this present context. Since he ultimately does not know what this *Res Cogitans* truly is, it is at least *conceptually* possible that it could contain these myriad of properties and qualities.



being or reality external to thought. This is the heart of Descartes' theory of ideas; they do not need to correspond to or, originate from, anything other than thought. On the one hand this raises and elevates the ontological status of the *Cogito*, yet at the same time it radically pushes us further away from obtaining the certainty I claim Descartes is after – the move from an indubitable certainty in Thought, to its actual ontological reality outside the self.

### ***3.6 The Idea of a Perfect and Infinite God***

In this context the idea of God at once surfaces as something radically different from all other ideas. Amongst my ideas, states the Meditator, is one of a perfect and infinite being. Following the same scrutiny placed on other ideas, the entire argument here is a causal one – expressing the move from an idea of God, to the origin or source of the idea as it stands in relation to the criteria stipulated by the Causal Principle. In accordance to the principle, the Meditator naturally concludes that this idea itself could not exist were it not the case that its cause – whatever it may be – actually and formally possessed these attributes of perfection and infinity, as they are objectively (representationally) present in the idea. His conclusion is that, since nothing more or, even as perfect or infinite as God could exist, the object of the idea – God – must correspond to that alone in which perfection and infinite actually reside; in short it is God itself.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> As I have earlier explained with respect to the *Cogito* argument, my concern is not with the methodological validity of the proof itself but rather the type of certainty it gives the Meditator. I thus do not, in the remainder of the chapter, focus on either defending or refuting the mechanics of the proof itself. Rather, I would like to focus on those core issues inherent to the argument which clarify the significance of this discovery to his overall pursuit for an archetype of certainty.

### 3.6(a) *The Idea in Thought:*

The Meditator, at first, presents the idea of God as an idea that is in fact present to his thinking; when he reflects upon the various ideas in his mind he finds that one of them is of a supremely perfect and infinite being. At this level of the argument, Descartes merely treats the idea of a God as something that is as immediate and given as any other idea he has thus far treated; it is simply provided as a given to him; when he looks at his ideas he sees amongst them one, whose intentional object is a *perfect* and *infinite* being.<sup>129</sup> Since at this point of the argument the Meditator is only certain of the existence of Mind or Thought and its content – ideas – it is only appropriate, that he explores the objective reality of this idea as it is immediately intuited within Thought and not appeal to any external metaphysical or theological principles.<sup>130</sup> It is here that he finds that the idea is that of a being which is complete, self caused, omnipotent, the cause and guarantor of all – in short it is the idea of an infinite and perfect being.

As it is these very attributes of perfection and infinity which distinguish this idea objectively, from all other ideas, the Meditator at first sets out to clarify several key issues or points with respect to the actual presence of the idea of God in mind. The first is

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<sup>129</sup> More explicitly stated: "By the name God I understand a substance that is infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself and everything else, if anything else does exist, has been created." CSM II 29-30. It may be objected that, not proving that he has the idea to begin with is problematic. Yet this line of critique does not, I believe, adequately grasp the grounds already laid out by Descartes. We have seen that the affirmation of the *Cogito* (Thought) inseparably accompanies the affirmation Thoughts/Ideas and thus it is superfluous for Descartes to offer any proof for the *presence* of any of the ideas present in his 'thinking. The *thinking* of an idea is in a sense a self-evident proof of its existence or being.

<sup>130</sup> Descartes' own personal and theological conception of God's essence or being may have stretched far beyond these few descriptive qualities or characteristics. Yet within the framework of the Meditation, approaching these would not do justice to the philosophical approach at hand here; he thus correctly only focuses on the immediately given elements or attributes of the idea as it appear to his mind's eye.

the problem of the intelligibility of this idea to begin with. Do we actually have a true clear understanding of what this idea means, or, is it a confused one or even blank and *non-rational* to the same degree that the idea of a squared circle is? If the entire argument of the Third Meditation is to move from the idea of God to the idea's cause, then Descartes must be firm that this idea of God is indeed a rationally coherent one. The second issue is that the idea is not a *negative* one; an idea that is an abstraction or negation of some other idea present to thought.

### *3.6(b) The Idea of God: Its Intelligibility - Grasping Vs Understanding*

An immediate point of difficulty which Descartes confronts is directed towards those who maintain that the full and true meaning of the idea of a perfect and infinite being is ultimately incomprehensible to the human mind. If he has the idea in his mind it must meet the criterion of what constitutes an idea which, as we have seen, is not just collection of words but of course words whose meaning I rationally understand. A finite being, one may hold, is incapable of adequately grasping the idea of the infinite, the complete and the perfect. Descartes' response here, often misunderstood or misinterpreted, rests entirely on a differentiation between *grasping* the nature of God in its completeness, versus having an *understanding* of God as infinite and perfect. Descartes agreed with those who asserted that a complete grasp of God's essence – as pure substance – was not possible for a finite being.<sup>131</sup> Such deep grasp would demand

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<sup>131</sup> Or, to echo the Neo-Platonist claim – to fully understand the infinite - its full essence and being - implies *becoming one* with it, having a form of ontological merger between the understanding subject and the infinite itself.

some sort of ontological unity between the thinking substance and, the infinite and perfect being itself. This was not only impossible insofar as our own ontology was concerned but, more importantly, was contradictory to the unique and singular ontological being of God himself.

That said, Descartes is clearly against the claim that our inability to fully grasp the complete essence of the infinite implies that *nothing* can be known about God. While a higher level of knowing or grasping God is beyond the cognitive abilities of a finite being, Descartes maintains that when we think of God as that which is infinite and perfect, we clearly and distinctly know what these words or concepts mean. One does not need to have a complete grasp of *what it is like to be infinite and perfect*, in order to comprehend what is meant by these terms.<sup>132</sup> While ‘understanding’ may very well be lower on the epistemological ladder than ‘grasping’, such a complete and comprehensive grasp is not necessary for a basic comprehension of the significance and meaning of the terms at hand.

In short, it is sufficient, claims Descartes, that I understand the concept of the infinite and perfect even if I cannot fully grasp it.<sup>133</sup> He states: “It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought...It is enough that

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<sup>132</sup> That is to say, we can never fully grasp the instantiation of perfection and infinitude as it is ontologically present through and within God, yet we understand what the idea of perfection and infinitude mean. In short, we do not *grasp* the manifestation of the infinite and perfect, yet we do comprehend and understand what these mean, at least conceptually.

<sup>133</sup> To Mersenne, Descartes writes; “...just as we can touch a mountain but not put our arms around it. To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something, it suffices to touch it with ones thought” (Letter to Mersenne, 26 May, 1630)” CSM II 32-33.

I understand the infinite...”<sup>134</sup> In fact, the Meditator insists that not only can one understand the idea of God but that it is in fact the most understandable, clear and distinct of all his ideas.<sup>135</sup>

### *3.6(c) The Idea of God: Its Intelligibility – Not via negativa:*

While a detailed exposition of the concepts is not provided, the Meditator does however attempt to somewhat clarify his use of the terms by contrasting them with his own essence. He presents the idea in relation to the nature of the one thing whose essence he is absolutely certain of; Thought. The contrasting of the idea of the infinite and complete in relation to the nature of the thinking self as a limited, finite, lacking and incomplete substance, expresses the most crucial point regarding the intelligibility and significance of the idea of God.<sup>136</sup>

The Meditator immediately denies that idea of God is a negative one, arrived at by a negation of the nature of self as finite and limited. If the concept of God were to be known through a *via negativa*, the comprehension of the concepts ‘infinite’ and ‘perfect’ would be dependent on and, secondary to, comprehension of the finite. God would then only be understood in reference to what it is not as opposed to what it actually is; God is

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<sup>134</sup> CSM II 32.

<sup>135</sup> It is in the nature of Thought in general to be embedded with the idea of the infinite and perfect, and hence it is utterly clear and present to the mind’s eye. “... the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas.” CSM II 32. The concepts of infinity and perfection are so clear to the Meditator, that he does not elaborate at any great length about their specific meaning, which is purely intuitive to him.

<sup>136</sup> This is beautifully worded in the Fourth Meditation; “...when I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, and idea of God” CSM II 37.

that which the finite thinking-self is *not*. Though the idea of the infinite and perfect stood in opposition to the nature of the self as finite and imperfect, for Descartes it was in fact the latter – the *Res Cogitans* – that was understood as imperfect and finite by means of an abstraction and negation of the original and, 'positive' attributes of the former.

For Descartes, as Williams notes, the positive term always precedes the negative; it is through the negation of the positive that we arrive at our understanding of negative concepts.<sup>137</sup> If the concept of God, as infinite and perfect, was derived negatively from our concept of the self as finite and imperfect, it would imply, as Descartes' claims, that the idea of the infinite and perfect is only understood in abstraction from his understanding of the essence of Thought. Since a negative term is abstracted from the positive, the former is naturally, for Descartes, far less clear and distinct than the latter. This cannot be the case with the idea of God - the order is obviously reversed; it is only because *we already have* an idea of the infinite, complete, and the perfect that we understand ourselves *as* finite and lacking.<sup>138</sup>

One of the points of difficulty regarding this issue, stems from the fact that the

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<sup>137</sup> Here, the negative is dependent on the positive and not vice versa - that is to say, we understand the negative *only* through an abstraction from the positive but the positive is understood in and through itself. For example, in the Third Meditation, Descartes suggests that our understanding of 'darkness' is derived from our primary understanding of 'light'. I need an awareness of the concept 'heat' to know what 'cold' is, whereas the concept of 'heat' itself needs not be contrasted with its opposite for it to be intellectually understood. The negative idea as an abstraction from something else clearly cannot be understood in isolation from that thing. (See CSM II 31) This stands in opposition to a philosophical stance which maintains that opposite concepts are understood as a *unity*; a concept and its opposite are understood simultaneously – each is defined and understood in relation to its opposite and the two are thus inseparable. From this approach, unlike the Cartesian stance, there is no one initial primary positive concept from which we understand its negation, rather, the order is irrelevant; each concept represents that negation of the other and thus, they are, in a sense, dependent on each other.

<sup>138</sup> From Descartes' epistemological position here, it is logically inconceivable that the infinite and complete be understood as an abstraction from something that is much lesser – the incomplete and finite. This would make the former subordinate to the latter, which would imply that I derive my understanding of the infinite, whole, complete, and perfect, from something that is epistemologically of a lesser reality (both objectively and formally).



chronological movement in the Third Meditation is indeed from the negative – the Res Cogitans – to the positive – God – which has often lead to confusion regarding which one is actually antecedent for the Meditator. We first examined that which is finite and imperfect and only then move to the perfect and infinite. Yet it is Descartes' position however that while he *first* recognizes his own condition of doubt and desire, he could only *now* - in looking at his idea of God - understand these as negative imperfections *if* and *because* he is already equipped with an innate awareness of what it means for something to be perfect, complete, infinite and flawless. Doubt, want, desire, anguish and all other corporeal and mental constraints can only be seen as a lack or an imperfection *in relation to* the idea of something that is perfect and does not lack or want or desire, etc. The Meditator asks, “how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there was in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison.”<sup>139</sup>

It is, in fact, not merely a matter of negation and opposition that is at stake here. The idea of God does not need to be contrasted with any other idea in order to be clearly understood. Through the eyes of the Meditator there is an internal, intuitive non-discursive character to our understanding of the concepts at hand that makes it essentially impossible to fully and adequately contrast it with anything else. From this perspective, his intuition of perfection and infinitude not only precede and define our understanding of the *Cogito* as limited and finite, they are also the most immediate, independent and clear ideas he can have for they are self-given in a manner that requires appeal to no other idea – abstract or otherwise.

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<sup>139</sup> CSM II 31.

### 3.7 *The Cause of the Idea of God.*

#### 3.7(a) *The cause of the Idea itself.*

Having established the existence of a clear and distinct idea of a perfect infinite being, the Meditator now places this idea under the same scrutiny we have seen all other ideas subjected to – establishing the true relation between the idea and its cause.<sup>140</sup> The Meditator has just affirmed that with respect to all other ideas, there was nothing in them, objectively (by representation) that could not – even if only as a distant possibility – belong to the *Res Cogitans* formally or, actually. The question now, naturally, is whether the same could be said regarding the idea of an infinite and perfect God; could this also proceed from Thought alone and, if not, can it proceed from anything else that is not God? Descartes' well known first argument for the existence of God stems from his emphatically denying both of these possibilities.

With respect to the objective attributes of the idea of God, namely perfection and infinitude, the Meditator treats two separate claims; first, the *Res Cogitans* cannot be the cause of the idea of God and, second, nothing else other than God can potentially be the cause of the idea of God. Though the two fall under the same domain of the implication of the Causal principle they are ultimately distinct claims. The Meditator says: "...these attributes are such that the more carefully I concentrate on them, the less possible it

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<sup>140</sup> Descartes raises here two separated, yet conceptually connected, issues. First is with respect to the idea itself - what is the source or origin of the idea? Then, he questions the origin of his own existence in so far as he is a *thinking thing that has the idea of a perfect and infinite being*. The first question is essentially what is asked about ideas in general from the very onset of the Third Meditation – an investigation regarding the cause of our ideas in so far as they are ideas of a particular kind. Is the objective reality of this idea of perfection and infinitude something that could proceed from my own essence as a thinking thing or must it have its origin outside me, be it the object of the idea itself or some other thing? If the latter, then what is this thing? The second question attempts to examine the link between the cause of the idea itself and the cause of that which has the idea – the *Cogito*.

seems that they [the idea I have of them] could have originated from me alone....So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.”<sup>141</sup>

The argument here follows a familiar line of reasoning; since there can be nothing in the effect (the idea) which is not formally (actually) in the cause, the cause of the idea of the infinite and perfect would be something that is itself infinite and perfect, in the strictest ontological sense. Or, to follow the terminology of the Third Meditation even closer, whatever is the cause of the idea of God would formally possess what the idea possesses objectively. This, as we have just seen, is not compatible with the essence of a thinking doubting thing.

As we have seen, considering the possibility that thinking thing is the formal cause of all other ideas, Descartes had drastically expanded the possible essence of the *Res Cogitans*. Yet no matter how grand this *Res Cogitans* is, it could never formally possess what is objectively present in the idea of God; perfection, infinitude, completeness. The very act of learning, doubting, searching for truth, all represent some sort of lack, a growth, and a need – not attributes that pertain to something complete and whole and in need of nothing.

Turning the discussion towards a type of self examination, the Meditator persists in attempting to find some reasonably possible scenario in which his essence could in fact contain the attributes he has ascribed to the idea of God. He has already affirmed that his present condition, one of utter doubt and uncertainty, are 'sure' signs of imperfection, but, could these perfections of God rest within him *potentially* and unrealized so that, as he develops and expands, he may come to possess them?. If this was the case, and his potential were to be actualized could the idea of God not proceed from him then:

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<sup>141</sup> CSM II 31.

But perhaps I am something greater than I myself understand, and all the perfections which I attribute to God are somehow in me potentially, though not yet emerging or actualized. For I am now experiencing a gradual increase in my knowledge, and I see nothing to prevent its increasing more and more to infinity. Further, I see no reason why I should not be able to use this increased knowledge to acquire all the other perfections of God.... if the potentiality for these perfections is already in me, why should not this be enough to generate the idea of such perfections? <sup>142</sup>

Descartes immediately however sees that this is clearly an impossible scenario and, is in fact contradictory to the nature of a perfect and divine God. An utterly perfect being does not *arrive* at a *perfect state*, so to speak, through some sort of growth or expansion; it is wholly actualized perfection. In such a being there is no growth, increasing and expanding to become something. We see here Descartes' own metaphysical stance on the immutable nature of the divine God; if it is perfect and infinite, then it is so not in virtue of any potentiality; its attributes are wholly and permanently actualized. With respect to his own potentialities he says "...this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains nothing that is potential..."<sup>143</sup> In a perfect, infinite and complete being all ontological properties, are omnipresent and actualized and thus nothing can pertain to it in potentiality. Such a potentiality implies a growth, a becoming, an evolving, all of which are signs of imperfection. On the other hand, since his own essence expresses this type of potential for growth it is thus not perfect and whole and thus consequently, according to the causal principle could not produce the idea of the perfect and whole.

What does this amount to? In its immediate form the claim here merely asserts

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<sup>142</sup> CSM II 32.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

that the *Res Cogitans* itself cannot be the source of the idea of God. What about the cause of the idea of God being some other thing yet unknown to him? It may seem natural at this point of the text to assume that since the 'thinking I' is not the cause of God, it then follows that nothing else could be the cause of God. After all, the only thing the Meditator can cling to now with absolute certainty is the *Cogito* and its ideas and, thus, if it is not the *Cogito*, there is nothing else, hence naturally it must be God. This however, as tempting as it may be, is not the route taken by Descartes.

The mere assertion that the 'thinking thing' is not the cause of the idea is not a sufficient ground to demand that nothing else could be, for even though he knows of nothing else, it is still logically possible that there are things – ontological entities – whose nature and essence are yet unknown to him. It is not the very fact or premise that the *Res Cogitans* cannot cause the idea of God, which directly necessitates God as the sole cause of this idea but, rather, this latter assertion arises out of the same principle that lead to the initial conclusion, namely the causal principle

However, the very reason *why* the 'thinking thing' cannot be the cause of the idea of God, equally applies to all other potential things<sup>144</sup>; any other thing, be what it may, by virtue of containing the attributes necessary to bring about the ideas of perfection and infinitude is itself perfect and infinite and thus it is, formally, what we mean by the term God. It cannot be anything but God, since the cause of the infinite and perfect must be the infinite and perfect according the causal principle.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> The Meditator at this point is well aware that he knows of the existence of nothing but Thought or Thinking. Therefore, in considering other things being the cause of the Idea of God he is merely speaking in the hypothetical; *if* there were non-mental things could they have the potential to be the cause of the idea of God.?

<sup>145</sup> See CSM II 34-35

3.6(b) *The cause of the Cogito in which the idea of God exists.*

Armed with the knowledge that the idea of God can only be caused by God alone, Descartes now proceeds to look at the cause of his own essence in so far as he is a thinking thing *with* the idea of God present to it. What Descartes is ultimately after, is "...whether I myself, who have this idea, could exist if no such being existed."<sup>146</sup> The real issue at hand here is whether it could be that God is the cause of the idea of God but not necessarily the cause of the 'thinking thing' *in which this idea resides*? Or stated more directly, could the two – the idea of a God and the Thinking thing that has the idea – have separate and distinct causes?

The argument here, takes us once again into Descartes' metaphysical milieu as he considers the possibility that the 'thinking thing', is a *causa sui*, self-caused, depending on nothing but itself.<sup>147</sup> If it were self caused, Descartes argues, it would be capable of supporting and sustaining its own existence in and through the inherent powers of his own essence. If it were capable of this then it would clearly be endowed with all the same perfections he sees in God, and would not be enduring such a state of doubt, desire, and want; again, all signs of a *lack*. In Descartes' metaphysics then, a thing which is its own cause is in fact that which is wholly complete and perfect. In this respect clearly only God is a 'causa sui'; he gives himself all actual perfections and is thus lacking nothing. "...if I derived my existence from myself, then I should neither doubt nor want nor lack anything at all; for I should have given myself all the perfections of which I have

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<sup>146</sup> CSM II 33.

<sup>147</sup> Or, in the French translation, a thing is self-caused if its power to be or exist is 'independent of every other thing' [Ibid]. The issue of God as self-caused will become a central theme in the Fifth Meditation

any idea, and thus I should myself be God.”<sup>148</sup>

He therefore at once moves to suggest that maybe he has always existed. Expanding on the previous metaphysics, Descartes insists that whatever is, or exists, requires something to preserve its being from one temporal moment to the next. Thus if he had always existed, in the sense of not having a cause at all, he would still need something to preserve his existence. Descartes' main claim from this approach is that, if such a power had existed in him, as part and parcel of his essence as a Thinking thing, he would be aware of it.<sup>149</sup> Since he sees no such power within him he concludes that he cannot preserve his own being and that he thus depends on some other being

Descartes at once brings us back to the argument affirming that whatever is preserving his being is preserving the being of a thing that has the idea of God in it. It is here that Descartes makes the link between the cause of the idea and the cause of thinking in general more cohesive. With the causal principle in mind, he affirms that whatever would be the cause and preserver of this Thinking thing, which *thinks* of perfection and infinitude, must itself be a thing which possesses these properties itself; that is to say, the property of 'thinking' in general but also, and more specifically, the properties pertaining to the attributes inherent to this particular thought of and about God; perfection and infinitude.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> CSM II 33.

<sup>149</sup> This is in accordance to Descartes' position that whatever is in Thought is such that it can be known to us.

<sup>150</sup> It could be that I am preserved and caused indirectly by something that is not explicitly God itself, and is thus not the original cause of the *thinking thing*, but rather an intermediate cause. Whatever it is that could preserve my being may not formally contain the properties of perfection and infinitude but only have them objectively in the sense that we do, but, the causal principle demands that we cannot perform an infinite regress here -- there must be the original cause that formally and *actually* possesses these attributes if they are present to my thinking.



According to the causal principle whatever is the original cause of the *Cogito* must itself formally possess whatever belongs to Cogito objectively (in Thought). It thus cannot be that the cause of the idea of God, and the cause of the thinking self which has the idea embedded within it, were two different things, for they both point to a cause which must itself be perfect and infinite of which there must be one alone.

Taking the two proofs together Descartes concludes by stating that God, in creating and preserving 'thought', places within it the ability to not only reflect upon its own essence, but also find within it the very idea of God itself, its creator. The Meditator eloquently states: "...it is no surprise that God, in creating me, should have placed this idea in me to be as it were, the mark of the craftsman..."<sup>151</sup>

### ***3.7 The Demon Hypothesis and The Idea of God***

Earlier, I looked at the Demon hypothesis as, amongst other things, a methodological tool allowing Descartes to hone the Meditator's approach towards a particular direction: the metaphysical pursuit of real concrete truth and not mere internal psychological certainty – a certainty based on logical self-givenness or self-evidence. The Meditator has already claimed to arrive at such truth when looking at the necessary existence of 'Thought' or 'Thinking' and has now arrived at his second concrete truth; the necessary existence of God. The former was claimed not to be susceptible to the powers of the demon deceiver and indeed neither should the latter. It is thus essential to understand why the possibility of a demon deceiver does not place strain on the force of

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<sup>151</sup> CSM II 35.

Descartes' argument in the Third Meditation.<sup>152</sup>

The possibility of a Deceiving God had earlier severed the correspondence between the reality of things – both corporeal and mathematical – as they were given in mind and their external existence in reality.<sup>153</sup> The Third Meditation itself on the other hand confronts this issue with respect to the powers of the intellect; the intellect is said to possess potentially the power to be the sole cause and origin of all of its ideas except the idea of the infinite and perfect. Yet can a Demon God not make all this false? In what sense is it that God's actual existence is not subsumed or engulfed under the same ruthless blow struck by the ruthless deceiver? The answer to this problem also finds its grounding in the ever present causal principle – now examined in relation to the limitations of hyperbolic doubt.

Even though the Demon's powers represent a serious hurdle for the Meditator's journey, we saw that it's *deceiving powers* were limited to the outside non-mental world and not to thinking or ideas. Regardless of the Demon's power of deception, he cannot make it the case that I do not have a thought about this or about that when I am clearly thinking it.<sup>154</sup> Since the Meditator is firm on having a clear idea of the infinite and perfect, the issue here is thus not a question of the Demon Hypothesis threatening the

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<sup>152</sup> This question not only reaffirms the main essence and function of the Demon Hypothesis but, more importantly, with respect to the pursuit for archetypes of certainty, it shows us the true distinct metaphysical character of the idea of God as it stands in relation to all other ideas. The Meditator himself does not raise this issue in the Third Meditation. Descartes was so convinced that the move from the idea of God to his actual existence based on the causal principle was impervious to hyperbolic deception that he saw this venue of inquiry unfruitful.

<sup>153</sup> The Demon in this respect can make all things externally false, even to the extent of mathematics and other pure eternal truths. We recall that even though psychologically one cannot perform an act of doubt with respect to mathematical and other *eternal truths*, and therefore for us it is certain – this only yields an internal epistemological certainty and not a kernel of non-mental actual truth, outside of mind.

<sup>154</sup> We always recall that in the Second Meditation it is in fact this very limitation that brings forth the *Cogito* argument. As Descartes says, as long as in my mind's eye there is present and given an idea of some 'X', the Demon can never bring it about that I am not thinking about this 'X', independent of 'X's' actual non-mental existence. Hence, I am always 'thinking'.

existence of the 'idea' of God in my mind but, rather, threatening the actual existence of the object of that idea- God itself – regardless of me having the idea of it. The very existence of our ideas is safe, at least at this point of the Meditation and thus, if the Demon has any say in the matter, it is with respect to external ontological being of God – his existence *per se*.

However, since the core claim of the Third Meditation is that knowledge of God's existence *per se* is arrived at *from* the idea of God, then we cannot claim that the Demon threatens God's actual existence while at the same time leaving the idea of God intact in our minds. We *could* say this, with respect to all other ideas; the Demon can crush any certainty regarding the actual ontological existence of their purported objects while leaving their existence as 'ideas' unscathed. This cannot however be the case with the idea of God.

Ontologically, it may not be necessary for the idea of God to exist in order for God himself to exist, and neither is it necessary that we could only arrive at this knowledge of God via an idea of it. God does not depend on us having the idea of God, but, it is necessarily the case that if the idea of God exists then God necessarily exists as the cause of that idea. It is contrary to the conditions laid out by the Causal Principle that God does not exist while the idea of God exists. The idea of God, as Descartes' metaphysics shows, implies his necessary existence. Therefore, as long as he is aware of having the idea of God the possibility of some Deceiving Demon cannot undermine the Meditator's commitment to his proof.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, if we give into the force of Descartes' use of the Causal Principle as a foundational principle of and about the nature of reality, we see that it can also never be said that the Demon places the idea of God within me. Even if the demon deludes me, I still have in my mind's eye the concepts of perfection and infinitude. It would be impossible for the Demon to be the cause of this idea, for then it

By understanding that the very idea of God is not possible unless God formally and concretely existed *as its cause* the Meditator finds in his Thinking the first kernel of bridging the 'concept-object' gap, with respect to something other than self – other than Thought. I want to suggest that this discovery completes the first phase of the Meditations; grounding the Meditator's conception of certainty. In the Second Meditation he gained an understanding of certainty in general, and now he gains this understanding of certainty in relation to a world outside of the Res Cogitans. That there is a 'thinking thing' defined for him certainty in its most immediate pure sense, as knowledge of that which is ontologically actual and real. Yet the missing piece here is a broader conception of certainty, one that is to be, in due time, applicable to scientific knowledge; certainty understood as knowledge of something real other than and outside of thought. I would like to conclude now by elaborating on this conception of certainty.

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would be the Demon itself – according to the causal principle – that formally and actually possessed the properties of perfection and infinitude in which case he would not be such a malevolent deceiver but, rather, a divine and non-deceiving God.

## Conclusion

### Certainty of God: The Meaning of External Certainty

Though Descartes' initial metaphysics, even prior to the Demon hypothesis, pushes the Meditator away from the sensed-empirical world in his quest for certainty, the overall enterprise of the Meditations as a whole, in its attempt to ground science, is not complete until he regains the world back; until he can philosophically demonstrate that ideas in general – that is to say, ideas of particular things – actually do correspond to their purported objects. In other words, he must regain the knowledge that what he senses (thinks about) actually does exist, separate from mind.

For the Meditator, the world out there does not, as it were, prove its own non-mental existence through and by our awareness of it. Yet the scientific endeavor of the entire project aims to ground and justify the very understanding we have of that world not as a mental construct but as a separate extended ontological dimension. Thus, the second part of the Meditations (Fourth to Sixth) follows a path whose end goal is not only to free our understanding of any error with respect to our understanding of a 'supposed' or 'assumed' world – a world given to thought alone – but to show that such a world is indeed real in the material/extended sense. Only then can radical skepticism be abolished completely.

The world remains a product of thought, until we can find some other thing that can ground its *actual* existence. This includes the concrete actual existence of any mathematical, logical or physical principles or laws in reality. Even though these are not extended material corporeal particulars, the Meditator wants to view them as actual or

real principles of, about and in reality. The Meditator explicitly regains both of these worlds – the mathematical and corporeal – in the concrete sense only once he has shown that God is not a deceiver but rather a benevolent guarantor, asserting that the objects inherent within the thinking activity correspond to objects or things that are in fact external to ‘thought’. Yet this argument is far beyond the scope of the Third Meditation, which does not offer a focused discussion on the implications and significance of God’s veracity and benevolence as it pertains to hyperbolic deception.

At the end of the Third Meditation we are clearly far from such a feat. The Meditator at this point is ontologically certain of two things alone; the existence of ‘thinking’ or ‘thought’ in general and the existence of a supremely perfect and infinite God. Simply knowing that God necessarily exists from the fact that we think of him is, insufficient for the Meditator to acknowledge that anything else external to thinking exists, besides God. Nevertheless, knowledge of God’s existence alone can be viewed as a necessary first step towards an understanding of external certainty, from a different perspective.

I suggest that, prior to regaining the world back the Meditator first needs an archetype or paradigm of certainty upon which he can ground the understanding of what certainty about the *external* world actually entails, and this, I believe, is what the Meditator obtains via his knowledge of God’s necessary existence. That is to say, knowledge of God is a necessary condition for the comprehension or understanding of any ensuing certainty with respect to and, about external ‘particulars’. It is this very claim I would like now to further explore.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> The scholarly literature deals extensively with the different aspects of the proof of God’s existence as well as its implications to actual knowledge of the world – that is to say, looking at God as *guarantor* of



I have argued that one of the salient features of the first three Meditations is the Meditator's journey towards understanding certainty itself; that is to say, understanding what it means for him to be certain to begin with. The entire skeptical approach is an expression of the Meditator working his way, so to speak, towards a solid grasp of what certainty entails. By not allowing certainty to be pinned down to the epistemologically self-given character of mathematical and logical truths, the Meditator reveals by the end of the First Meditation that what he is ultimately after – in his understanding of certainty – is not internal immediate self-givenness but rather knowledge of that which is ontologically and externally real. To be certain is to have awareness of the truth of some particular existence and, placed it in the context of the overall project here, to know that our ideas of things actually correspond to ontologically real, non-mental entities.<sup>157</sup>

In this regard, knowledge of the *Cogito* does indeed offer the Meditator that first moment of certainty proper; giving him knowledge or awareness of a first principle of and about reality – the actual existence of 'thinking' or 'thought'. Yet for the overall scientific underpinnings of this work, the ultimate question is whether his understanding of certainty born from awareness of the fact that 'Thought' exists, is *in itself* sufficient to ground his understanding of certainty with respect to anything other than the *Cogito* and, more specifically, certainty as it could apply to the empirical world in general? Does the awareness of this existent thing – thought – establish the meaning of certainty (in the understanding) as an awareness of existence or being of anything whatsoever?

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the external correspondence of my thoughts to their object in the world. While this of paramount importance, what I am suggesting here is looking at *knowledge* of God as a necessary criterion for the comprehensibility of external non-mental certainty.

<sup>157</sup> The Meditator has come to understand what he means by certainty when the actual ontological existence of a thing (or principle) becomes instantiated; when he is aware that something is concretely and actually real – in short, when he has transcended radical skepticism.



The Second Meditation establishes a very focused, honed, and contextual conception of certainty, one that is only applicable to understanding the existence of one particular thing; thought alone. Knowing that there is 'thinking' is indeed a mode of understanding certainty with respect to knowledge of some existent thing. Nevertheless it is the very ontological nature of this thing – thought alone - which limits the Meditator from practically comprehending the possibility of certainty with respect to the existence or being of anything external to or, other than this thinking; a certainty that could apply to the knowledge of externally existent entities which our thoughts claim to be about.<sup>158</sup>

The intuitive and internal character of this discovery - that thinking exists - paired with the ontological nature of the *Cogito* as thinking alone, makes the present condition of being certain one that can only be understood in reference to the existence of thought. Since the substance 'thought' is of such a radically different ontological nature from anything which is other to it, our awareness of its existence – in so far as this serves as an archetype for understanding the meaning of certainty - cannot serve as a backbone for the meaning of being certain about anything else. The Meditator cannot, at this point, begin to comprehend what external certainty means for that would imply understanding that something other than Thought exists or, has being. This is a luxury he cannot presently afford, for he is not yet aware of an ontological essence other than thought – nothing else has yet to be instantiated at this point of the argument.

The ontological nature (the essence) of that which we claim to be certain of – that

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<sup>158</sup> Again, my approach here precedes actual knowledge of the existence of the world, but rather focuses on the epistemological conditions necessary for such a regaining to occur. The task of eventually regaining the external world requires that the Meditator has an understanding of external existence to begin with. Otherwise his task is incomprehensible; he needs to first comprehend the concrete possibility of external (other-than-thought) existence before he can proceed to specific external things. My claim is that knowing the *Cogito* as a thing, precisely because it is not an ontologically separate-to-thought thing is in itself incomplete as a grounding force for his ensuing endeavors.

which we are aware exists in reality – serves to color and shape the very characteristic of the condition of being certain. To be aware that something exists, is to be aware that something of a certain quality or character exists. Hence, knowing that thinking or thought exists produces an epistemological condition of certainty that is comprehensible with respect to whatever is ontologically parallel to thinking. That is to say the condition of certainty can only be extended towards an understanding of the existence of things whose essence is thinking or thought. Since the purported objects of his ideas are wholly ontologically distinct from the *Cogito* – he cannot extend his understanding of the existence of the latter to the former. The inward intuitive awareness of Thought is bound specifically and solely to the ontological nature of that particular substance – 'thought'.

With knowledge of the existence of 'Thought' the Meditator gains knowledge of the possibility of *actual existence*, but, this knowledge is bound to the very essence of that thing alone, and does not give him an adequate conception of what the possibility of actual *external* existence means as it applies to anything but Thought. Thus, as far as an archetype or paradigm for grounding certainty is concerned the Meditator's first discovery lacks the force for grounding an understanding of a broader and fuller sense of certainty; one which at its core yields an epistemological and psychological awareness of existence in general and thus of the existence of things other than thought.

Hence by the end of the Second Meditation we are left with a dimension of certainty that does not have any external 'outward' character. A more comprehensive conception of Certainty in the understanding, one that adequately functions as an archetype about certainty in a broader sense, must stretch beyond the confines of the mental alone, it must possess an external and non-mental dimension. It is only through

the movement from Thought to God that he can understand Certainty with respect to the reality (or being) of things as they stand outside of and, independent from, thought.<sup>159</sup> It is upon this move alone that the mediator can have an understanding of certainty proper as it pertains to actual things outside of his mind. This move is first instantiated through his awareness of the necessary merge between the idea of God and God's existence.

When the move from the object of an idea to the object itself is materialized, we have the first instantiation of external truth.<sup>160</sup> As Williams earlier noted, the truth or falsity of our ideas is taken to be their correspondence (or lack thereof) to that which they claim to be about. In this respect the idea of God is by and by the only true idea the Mediator can metaphysically arrive at, for it is the only thing whose existence can be apodictically affirmed, at least within the framework of the metaphysical method the Mediator chooses to employ. Only here do we see an *external* correspondence which renders an idea, actually true.

Only through the knowledge that the idea of God necessarily implies its actual existence, does the Mediator become subjected to the first instantiation of something other than thought. This knowledge presents the Mediator with the first ontological movement from a thing in mind (as an object of an idea) to its actual existence in reality. However, this bridging of mind and external-object, offers him something much more

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<sup>159</sup> When we look at the progression from the Second to Third Meditation, we see that the conditions of such external certainty are fulfilled by establishing the link between thinking and external non-thinking existence - the concrete and actual existence of something 'other' than thought, yet given and presented to and in Thought. In short, to truly understand what it means to be certain of something conceptually and concretely we need a particular instantiation of this move from a thing being given in thought to its necessary existence outside of thought.

<sup>160</sup> We recall that knowledge of self is not born from this move from idea in mind to its correspondence. While some approaches, such as Williams', often speak about 'the idea of the Cogito', this is I believe a mistaken approach; we do not prove the existence of Thought through an *idea* of 'Thought' or 'Thinking'. The move from an object of an *idea* to its non-idea non-mental existence only becomes materialized in the Third Meditation via the *idea* of God.

than knowledge of some particular existent 'other'. It is this movement, I would like to suggest, which not only grounds in the understanding the very conception of external certainty in general but, in doing so – in allowing the Meditator to grasp externality – it functions as the necessary first step in regaining the world he had earlier lost to hyperbolic doubt.

Being aware that something other than thinking or thought exists, serves to broaden his previously established grasp of certainty by opening and expanding its applicability to the actual objects of his knowledge; the ideas in his mind, in so far as they are ideas of things which are indeed taken to be *other than Thought*. Through this discovery - that the object of a particular idea in mind necessarily corresponds to that object proper, not as an object of an idea but an actually separate object – the Meditator can visualize the very meaning of a realm outside of thought. In turn, this singular moment of comprehending what it means to be certain of something other than the *Cogito*, establishes a general and broad archetype in the understanding about the very meaning of external existence.

Since the process of coming to know God's actual existence is the only philosophically justifiable instantiation of the move from idea to object, it in effect represents the sole moment of unshakable external truth – a truth about something other than thinking. As such, it is a process of internal discovery not just about the object whose existence has been asserted but, more importantly, about the overall meaning and significance of existence outside the realm of Thought. It is this principle – that God exists – that (albeit indirectly) allows the Meditator to adequately grasp the meaning of

the 'otherness' of the objects of his ideas of anything.<sup>161</sup>

This paradigm of comprehending the very meaning of otherness is, I hold, an epistemologically and psychologically necessary element of his endeavor to regain the world. Before he has any certainty about the individual existence of specific 'particular' things outside of him - things his ideas claim to be about – the Meditator needs to be armed with a mode of understanding that can grasp external existence in general; an understanding of what it means for there be an 'other-than-thought' reality. The world of particular things – be they corporeal extended objects or mathematical abstract entities – cannot be concretely regained by him unless he is epistemologically equipped with the condition of understanding 'existence' as it relates to things outside of thought.

It is only at the very moment in which the possibility of externality becomes actualized, that he becomes fully aware of an 'other'. Knowing that some particular thing other than himself (as pure thought) necessarily exists, the Meditator can now draw a general mental picture of external existence in general. Without knowledge of God's existence, the Meditator could not make sense of the notion of existence with respect to anything but 'thinking'. Furthermore, it is not merely knowledge of something external that allows the Meditator to grasp the meaning of externality but, rather, that this external object actually corresponds to the idea we have of it.

Thus, if awareness of God's necessary existence was derived not from the idea of God but from some other source, the strong sense of connection between mind and

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<sup>161</sup> Clearly the Meditator speaks of the external existence of things earlier on, but, he can only do so in a very vague and, at best, symbolic manner, for both the Demon Hypothesis argument and his view on the nature of ideas (that they could all proceed from him alone) have in a sense deprived him of the very understanding of what it means for something to be outside of thought. The only ontological framework he can be familiar with is Thought and its ideas. It is only when the possibility of moving from mind to world becomes actual and real, that he can grasp what this correspondence of idea-object and actual-object means.

externality would not be explicitly established.<sup>162</sup> By moving from the idea of 'X' to knowledge of the necessary existence of 'X' the Meditator establishes the internal-external correspondence necessary to make sense of his endeavor to regain the world – a world which is now only in mind.

This brings up a very important aspect of the Meditator's knowledge of God's existence; since the main issue at hand is the actual activity of external-correspondence, the specific *ontological nature* of God is not explicitly relevant here. The idea of God serves as a grounding principle for understanding external certainty not because it is an idea of a thing with this or that ontological character but, rather, strictly due to the fact it is the only idea from which we can actually step outside thought into an external realm through that very process of mind-object correspondence. Thus, it is the process itself – moving out-of-thought – that grounds our understanding of general otherness and, not, any particular attributes or properties of the thing in question.<sup>163</sup>

It is the activity of knowing some other 'in general' – and not otherness with respect to some ontological character of the actual thing known – on which I focus here as the necessary condition of understanding external existence. The ontological character

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<sup>162</sup> That is not to say that the object causing the idea of this object is exactly *identical* to its representation in the mind. With the causal principle guiding us here, an affirmed linking of an object in thought to its corresponding object proper in reality does not exclude the possibility that the object per se could be more than its representational content in mind. Nevertheless, since all we have in cognition is this representation, the object that refers to my idea of it formally and actually has, *at the very least* the properties that are given in the mental representation.

<sup>163</sup> In effect, the Meditator could have obtained this from any idea, if indeed external-correspondence could have been proven with respect to that idea. Clearly, the arguments of the Third Meditation show that this is not possible. Yet my concern at the present moment is no longer with the ontological essence of God in terms of proving its existence, but rather the affect that knowledge of its existence has on the Meditator's grasp of Certainty – the effect of being certain of something other than thought, regardless of the actual nature or essence of that thing.



of the idea of God is what allowed us to move outside of mind in the first place<sup>164</sup>, but it is the effects of the movement itself that gives the Meditator a broad understanding of otherness. It is by virtue of possessing knowledge of some externally existent other - regardless of what that other is - that the Meditator can begin to grasp certainty in a different light than the inward certainty of thought or thinking which he gained in the Second Meditation. Thus the nature or character of the object which the Meditator knows as existing outside his mind is not of essential importance when the focus is on the implications of this *movement*. His certainty about the reality and being of some 'thing' that is not 'thought' is in itself what grounds the notion of 'other-existence', irrespective of what this particular other actually is.

Essentially, knowledge of God's existence allows the Meditator to become intellectually acquainted with two core principles. First, knowledge that there is one particular thing that actually has a being or reality outside of his mind and, second, knowledge of the specific essence or character of the thing in question. The former establishes an overall grasp of otherness while the latter gives that 'otherness' a specific qualitative content. I focus here on claiming that the former - otherness in general - is the necessary starting point for regaining the world back for two main reasons. First knowledge of the particular characteristics of things in the world is secondary to knowledge that there is indeed an 'other' to begin with. Before he can examine the character of the things in the world, the Meditator must first be aware that he grasps them as other than thought, which is exactly where we are at this point of the Meditation. That is to say, he starts with the foundational knowledge that there is an 'other-than-thought'

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<sup>164</sup> Again by this I refer of course to its objective reality, the reality of the object of the idea as it is given in the idea - the infinite and perfect.



and, only then can he proceed to examine the characteristics of such non-thinking things. Second, with respect to the formal qualitative properties of God, they are ultimately only ontologically applicable to God alone and not the external world which our thinking is about.

Without the grasp of otherness, the possibility of knowledge having a real and concrete external dimension vanishes and all knowledge remains knowledge of ideas alone. In so far as the Meditator is concerned with the existence and nature of the objects of his ideas – the concrete world he senses – the grasping of 'otherness' serves as a precursor; it allows him to ontologically distinguish their essence, whatever it may be, from his own essence, thought. Regardless of what the world may actually be like, he can now grasp the meaning of it being other than thought.

Nevertheless this broad understanding of 'otherness' in general is simply the starting point of his ensuing endeavor in the remaining Meditations. While knowing or grasping the meaning of otherness is a necessary condition for the Meditator's movement towards the world, it most certainly is not a sufficient one.<sup>165</sup> Thus the Meditator's grasp of otherness, with respect to the nature of the world as 'other', has ultimately only provided him with a purely negative knowledge of the external world's essence – he knows that it is '*not* thought' but he does not yet know anything descriptive or qualitative about its actual ontological essence. In short, his gain here sheds no positive light on the nature of the world outside him but merely allows him to understand it as ontologically distinct from 'thought'.

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<sup>165</sup> Since the Meditator is far away from actually gaining that world back at this point of the Meditation, it is then the necessary condition of otherness which he must first obtain in order for that journey to have any comprehensible meaning. It is in this sense that I view the otherness as the starting point - first knowing the meaning of an actual existence other than thought and only then expounding on its properties.

In order fully to regain the world, the Meditator will clearly need to know something more concrete and descriptive about its essence than merely understanding it as “other”. It is here that we see the second aspect of focusing on the specific nature of God; the ontological incompatibility between God's essence and the essence of the external world. When we consider what the Meditator actually knows about God's essence, does this actually assist him in providing a description or even a clue about the essence of that world in so far as its characteristic or properties are concerned?

Stepping again outside the confines of the Meditator's realm and looking at Descartes' own broader views, we note within his metaphysics of substance an insurmountable ontological difference between the substance of God and the substance of the world outside of mind – extended corporeal reality. God's ontological being, as a substance, is radically distinct, in its qualities and attributes, from those of the external world Descartes wants to regain; the extended world he senses.<sup>166</sup> Even though the Meditator does not yet know what the world he wants to regain is ultimately like with respect to its formal reality, it is inevitably neither infinite nor perfect. These properties of God cannot tell the Meditator anything descriptive about the external world. At most, this too, only provides a negative knowledge about the general 'other' world he is after by affirming what its essence *is not* rather than telling him what it is.

This stands in is in direct relation to the ontological nature of the *Cogito*. I have claimed that in its complete ontological difference and uniqueness from the external world – corporeal or mathematical – Knowledge of Thought in essence is applicable only

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<sup>166</sup> Though the Meditator himself may not explicitly express this metaphysics of substance it nevertheless comes out implicitly in his discussion of ideas in general and how the idea of God drastically differs from all others. In terms of both objective and formal reality, the idea of God shares nothing in common with the objects of our other ideas.

to that particular ontological being. The same can be said of our knowledge of God, when taken in relation to his essence. Knowledge of God's attributes of perfection and infinitude present us with a substance that is also utterly distinct from both thought and that which is external to thought. Hence knowledge of God as 'other' is utterly distinct from knowledge of the rest of the world as other. However, in its very being as an 'other' it lays the grounding of non-mental otherness which is necessary for us to step beyond the confines of the mind. Even if from an ontological-descriptive approach, God shares nothing in common with the external world and thus, knowledge of his existence tells us nothing positive about the ontological richness of that world, knowledge of God, for us, is nevertheless knowledge of some 'other-than-thought'. It is this awareness of God as 'other-than-thought' that will allow us to grasp the meaning of external otherness which will later be applied to the world, even if that world is utterly different from God.

Again, I point out that knowledge of God at this point of the argument does not actually serve as a guarantee that my ideas of corporeal things do *in fact* correspond to their object, formally and actually 'out there'. At the end of the Third Meditation the Meditator has not gained any of his actual particular knowledge of the sensed-perceived world back. God as a guarantor of my knowledge is indeed an issue much discussed in the literature. However, this element of Descartes' discussion in the Meditations is completely separate from my present argument.<sup>167</sup> What I am presently suggesting is something much more subtle and less dramatic, albeit immense in significance; knowledge of God's existence as the necessary condition for 'thought' being able to grasp the essence of the external world as something other to itself, other than thinking.

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<sup>167</sup> Though it is, I believe, complementary to it. The issue I look at here only confronts the internal effects that awareness of God's existence bears on the Meditator's capacity to know anything else.

The Meditator could only arrive at an understanding that the objects of his thought refer to real concrete things if they are in fact understood to be ontologically separate from thinking. Thus, prior to anything external actually being regained, Knowledge of God's existence provides the internal mechanism which allows the Meditator to step outside his mind, for he now can grasp the existence of something distinct from him.

Furthermore, knowledge of God in a sense embodies the highest degree of external certainty we can have about *anything* and as such all other things known to exist outside of us, must borrow, so to speak, from this archetype or, highest mode, of external certainty. That is to say, once things are proven to exist in the world, through whatever means he employs, the Meditator only understands his certainty that they do in fact have an existence separate from him, in relation to, and on the basis of, the one primordial pure move from thought to concrete existence, which he has in God alone. We already know, even if at this point of the Meditation, that establishing the move from idea to the existence of the idea's intentional object, based *solely on the nature of the idea* alone, can only be accomplished with the idea of God. No matter what proof he will later provide for the actual correspondence of his 'other ideas' to their purported external object, it – the proof – will require something other than what is solely present in the ideas. That sense of immediate concrete connection between an idea and its object based on nothing but the idea itself is what gives the idea of God urgency and thus represents for Descartes the truest of all our ideas.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, when I claim here that knowledge of God's existence is an internal paradigm for all external certainty, I do not mean in the sense that, once we have proven the external reality of our ideas and regained the external world back, we can be certain of them to the same degree that we are certain of God's existence. The *res cogitans* can never have such absolute knowledge of the existence of any of its ideas to the degree that it knows that God exist. It is only God that we can know as *necessarily existing*, in the 'Cogito-external sense', and it is precisely in this respect that it stands as the highest criteria of external existence. As we have seen, we could never move to the external existence of the

The movement of the first three Meditations thus expresses the pursuit for certainty in two facets; the archetype for certainty with respect to the possibility of knowledge in general, and the archetype for certainty with respect to actual concrete knowledge – knowledge of an external reality. The former deals with understanding what it means to be certain that knowledge or knowing (thinking) is possible, whereas the latter deals with understanding that particular elements of our knowledge are externally certain, that is to say, that they have a real ontological non-mental existence – an existence independent of thought. The former is revealed through the limitations of doubt and the argument for the necessary existence of thinking in general and, the latter, is instantiated through knowledge of God's existence.

The internal psychological function that each one of these certainties serve are two complementary sides of the same coin, together laying down the very possibility of external scientific knowledge. Awareness that there is in reality Thought or Thinking grounds the possibility of external knowledge in so far as all knowledge of things begins with knowing or thinking them. Awareness that God exists, as an ontologically real entity, separate and other than thought, not only allows us to see that the move from thinking to externality is possible but more importantly it grounds in us the very grasp of the 'other' as distinct from thought.

The Meditator at this point does not know what the 'other' world is truly like or whether it in fact even exists. Awareness that Thinking and God exist does not actually

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contents of any of our other ideas strictly based on the nature of these ideas - that is to say, their attributes – and thus, it is the case that in so far as something existing external to the subject is concerned we can never have as pure and absolute awareness of this existence as we do when we reflect on God's necessary existence. Even when we consider Mathematics and other pure Eternal Truths, while their self-given and innate certainty may be parallel to the certainty we have of God's necessary existence, the Demon Hypothesis has demolished any necessary external-dimension to these truths and they can only be thought of as true in Mind and not beyond the scopes of the *Cogito*. It is existence of things beyond mind or thought that is at stake here.

lead him to the concrete world his thoughts are about. Rather, it grounds both the possibility and comprehensibility of the endeavor to begin with. The *possibility* rests in the fact that there is thinking – the foundation of knowledge – and the *comprehensibility* stems for the ability to grasp the meaning of our knowledge being directed towards things that are in fact distinct from it, distinct from thinking. It is thus the ensuing task of the remaining Meditations to move beyond the mere possibility of external empirical knowledge and towards knowledge of its actual and concrete existence.

The ontology of the Meditator's world by the end of the third Meditation consists of Thinking and God alone. Nevertheless, it is knowledge of God's existence that ultimately provides him with a type of certainty that truly opens the door towards external knowledge. Awareness that Thinking exists grounds the possibility of knowing in general but it, naturally, cannot give any external character to knowledge; even though his ideas are of things or objects that are thought of as being distinct from thinking, the limited ontology here - consisting of Thought alone – prohibits the Meditator from even comprehending the meaning of an existence outside of thought. Certainty here can only pertain to an awareness of the necessary existence of Thought.

With knowledge of God, even though the objects of his ideas still have no reality outside of mind, he nevertheless can comprehend the possibility that they could have such a reality. The Meditator, by having knowledge of the existence of an actual external thing – God – has grounded the possibility of *external knowing* by making it comprehensible to begin with. Since the possibility of moving from thought to externality has become actualized in his knowledge of God, he can now move on with his pursuit to regain the world back, for he is now capable of comprehending the very meaning of

knowing something as other than thought. In so far as Descartes' main goal is finding the foundation for empirical sciences, what he is after is a moment of truth that can ground the very meaning of instantiated certainty as it applies to the contents of our knowledge. The discovery of the Third Meditation opens the door towards regaining the world, for now the Meditator is armed with such a conception of certainty made concrete; the very meaning of external certainty is no longer something abstract and unrealizable but, rather, has been fully actualized through his knowledge of God's existence. Knowledge of God's necessary existence has expanded the Meditator's epistemological-psychological condition to one that can exhibit an *understanding of certainty* as it pertains to the existence of objects or principles as things which are ontologically external to thought. Certainty, without this dimension, would leave the Meditator confined to an epistemology centered on an understanding of the ontology of Thought alone.



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