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# Descartes on Theological Knowledge

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Arnauld charged Descartes with circularity in his theological proof.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Arnauld was correct. I also make suggestions about why Descartes fails to see the circularity. Both points are important. Many are uncomfortable with the view that Descartes' system is circular. They do not see how Descartes could make such a mistake. I think one should not presume either that his system is or is not circular. If, as I do, one argues that the system is circular, then I think it is also important to try to explain how Descartes could lapse into such an error.

The theological proofs of the third and fifth meditations appear to be quite different. Yet there is a structural similarity between them: both aim to establish a correspondence between the idea of God and God Himself. Establishing that some of our ideas accurately represent things outside the mind is a major point of the *Meditations*. Establishing such correspondence in the theological case is both an instance of this point and, as Descartes orders the situation, a prerequisite for establishing it in other instances.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. and trans. by E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1955), II, 92 and *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery, 12 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1897-1913), VII, 214. Hereafter I shall refer to these works as HR and AT; subsequent references will be to Volume I of HR unless otherwise noted by 'II'.

Arnauld is strikingly blunt when he raises the circularity problem. Gassendi raises the same kind of consideration in a more muted way. See HR, II, 152.

A survey and critical discussion of attempts to rescue Descartes from the charge of circularity may be found in T. Attig's "Descartes and Circularity: The Precipitous Rush to Defense," *The Modern Schoolman*, Vol. LIV, No. 4, pp. 368-78. Still more recently, J. Van Cleve in "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXXVIII, No. 1, pp. 55-91 and M. Wilson in *Descartes* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) have discussed difficulties with the traditional rescue efforts. They have also offered alternatives and pointed the discussion in new directions.

One of the obstacles to success is Descartes' insistence that one not take for granted claims that ideas represent things. Another is Descartes' frequent contrasting of how things are in his mind with how they might be outside the mind. By means of the demon possibility, for example, he tells us two things: that he might retain his commitments to the existence of a physical world corresponding to some of our simple ideas and his commitments to the truths of mathematics; and that he might be wrong on both counts. In proving that the idea of God accurately represents an existing God, Descartes must, if consistent, respond to these two features of the demon possibility.

At least at times, Descartes sees clearly that the way in which he draws the idea-thing distinction, and the way in which this distinction figures into his doubt, enables one to doubt that the idea of God corresponds to something outside the mind. He makes this point most sharply in the fifth meditation. There he goes so far as to raise the objection that a connection among the ideas composing the complex idea of God does not determine anything about what the idea purports to represent. In the third meditation, Descartes is aware of the point of the objection: he aims to prove, and thus not assume, that the idea of God is caused by something outside his mind. He also responds to his earlier doubt about claims so compelling as mathematical ones by introducing the natural light. Descartes believes he meets successfully the earlier doubts. I do not.

The reason he believes his proofs are successful is that in the fifth meditation he maintains that doubts associated with the idea-thing distinction may be overcome by showing how the essence-existence distinction breaks down in the case of God. In the third meditation the use of the causal principles may look safe because of the conditional, neutral character of the principles themselves. Ironically, it is Descartes himself, by means of his insistence on the idea-thing distinction and attendant doubts (including his insistence on "doubting the indubitable") who sometimes sees the difficulties with his proofs. Yet he also seems oblivious to the difficulties at key junctures.

## I. The Fifth Meditation Proof

I begin with the fifth meditation discussion because the issues are, I believe, clearest there: the proof, the objections, and the responses are clear and concise. They are also intermingled. So we need to look at several passages at the outset. The gist of the proof is as follows:

- (1) One cannot conceive of God except as existing. That is, existence is a necessary component of the conception of God. In

still other words: the idea of existence is necessarily connected with other ideas which, jointly, constitute the idea of God.

- (2) Because of (1), we may say that existence is a part of the nature of God.
- (3) Thus God necessarily exists. (Cf. HR, 180-81; AT, VII, 65-66.)

Descartes imagines an objection to this proof:

But although I cannot really conceive of a God without existence any more than a mountain without a valley, still from the fact that I conceive of a mountain with a valley, it does not follow that there is such a mountain in the world; similarly although I conceive of God as possessing existence, it would seem that it does not follow that there is a God which exists; for my thought does not impose any necessity upon things, and just as I may imagine a winged horse, although no horse with wings exists, so I would perhaps attribute existence to God, although no God existed. (HR, 181; AT, VII, 66.)

The views Descartes relies on in defending himself are relevant to the proof's success. So it will be helpful to look at what else he says about his conceptions and what he says in response to the objection just raised.

About his conceptions, he says:

. . . I clearly see that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a (rectilinear) triangle, or the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley; and so there is not any less repugnance to our conceiving a God (that is, a Being supremely perfect) to whom existence is lacking (that is to say, to whom a certain perfection is lacking), than to conceive of a mountain which has no valley. (HR, 181; AT, VII, 66.)

About the objection, he says:

But a sophism is concealed in this objection; for from the fact that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that there is any mountain or any valley in existence, but only that the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or do not exist, cannot in any way be separated one from the other. While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that He really exists; not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity which lies in the thing itself, i.e. the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think in this way. For it is not within my power to think of God without existence . . . though it is in my power to imagine a horse either with wings or without wings. (HR, 181-82; AT, VII, 66-67.)

Descartes makes numerous points in these passages and I shall divide those points into two groups, those having to do with our conceptions themselves and those having to do with the correspondence of our conceptions to things outside our minds.

Descartes distinguishes between conceptions which can be varied and those which cannot be varied. The distinction parallels that between ideas which we do and do not assemble, respectively. For Descartes, conception is a mental activity which includes drawing an idea from what Descartes calls a storehouse of ideas.<sup>2</sup> In the mountain-valley, triangle, and God cases the conceptions cannot be varied: the ideas involved are so united that one cannot think one part of the complex of ideas without at the same time thinking of the other parts.<sup>3</sup> One cannot draw the idea of God from Descartes' storehouse without thereby drawing with it the idea of existence. So, too, one cannot draw the idea of a mountain without at the same time drawing the idea of a valley. Connected siamese twins or barbells with the weights permanently attached would be appropriate analogues: one cannot have one of the relevant parts without having the rest of them. Further, we do not form these complexes of ideas. They are permanent residents of our storehouse without our having made them.

Descartes contrasts such invariant ideas with ideas which are variable because of our role in making them. For example, we can create the idea of a horse with or without wings, with or without a saddle, with or without a rider, etc. Habit might lead us to think of such ideas as always connected, but both in principle and in practice we could vary these ideas. Here the analogue of drawings or models of objects which can be varied in accord with the different possibilities in question would be appropriate. The contrast between necessarily connected, and thereby invariant, complex ideas and variable ideas is central to the fifth meditation proof.

The other important distinction is between those invariant complex ideas which include existence and those which do not. Only one invariant idea includes existence. It is the idea of God. It alone provides us with an example of such an idea; no other ideas both include the idea of existence and do so necessarily. When I speak of the idea of God as special, I shall have in mind its distinctive character of being both invariant and having existence as one of its components.

We have seen Descartes provide four examples of complex ideas: the idea of a horse (with or without wings), the idea of mountains and valleys, the idea of God, and the idea of a triangle. The idea of a winged

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. HR, 182 and AT, VII, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Kenny and Russell both seek formulations of this fact about ideas which involve existence. For Descartes, the only invariant idea involving existence is that of God. One way to express the connection among the different parts of the idea is to say that one cannot think of all but one of the parts of the invariant idea without thinking of the remaining part.

horse is the sole variable idea on the list: the connection between the idea of a horse and the idea of wings is contingent (variable). The other complex ideas all consist of necessarily connected ideas. Among these, only the idea of God includes the idea of existence. Thus when we conceive of God, but only when we conceive God, we must conceive something as necessarily existing. This distinctive feature of the conception of God plays an important role when Descartes discusses the correspondence of our conceptions to things outside ourselves.

Descartes tells us that from the fact that he cannot conceive a mountain without a valley (because the relevant ideas are necessarily connected) “it does not follow that there is such a mountain in the world.” (HR, 181; AT, VII, 66.) However, what does follow is “that the mountain and the valley, whether they exist or do not exist, cannot in any way be separated from the other.” (HR, 181; AT, VII, 66-67.) Descartes tells us several things: our conceptions, even our necessary conceptions, are one thing; there being things which answer to, correspond to, fall under, etc., our conceptions is another thing. There are different ways in which things can correspond to our conceptions: are there the things we conceive (Are there mountains? Valleys?), are they connected in the ways our conceptions represent them as being connected (If there are mountains and valleys, do they accompany each other)? Descartes maintains that our inability to think of mountains without valleys leaves open the possibility of whether or not there are mountains or valleys. He also maintains that *if* there are mountains and valleys they are connected as we think they are: mountains always occur with valleys.

One could put Descartes' view in terms of essential and existential truth. On the one hand, there is the generality or essential truth that there are no mountains without valleys. We may understand this essential truth as the conditional claim that *if* there are mountains and valleys, then there is no mountain without a valley. In terms of our conceptions we can say that our ideas are so connected that we cannot conceive of a mountain without a valley. But the existence outside the mind of mountains and valleys, and their being connected as we conceive them to be, is another matter. Descartes may thus be said to distinguish between essential truths and existential truths.

Essential truths specify necessary connections. They are, in Kant's phrase, eternal and unalterable for the reason that the connections on which they are based are eternal and unalterable.<sup>4</sup> Our knowledge of

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<sup>4</sup> For Descartes, the connections among invariant ideas are, like all connections, ultimately of God's making. God could have made them differently. He tells Arnauld: “But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about

such truths is based solidly and solely on the ways in which we are constrained to think about the world and things in it. Existential truths deal with what there is in the world and how the contents of the world are arranged. These truths, at least so far as things outside the mind go, are not generally determined by the ways we think about the world. These distinctions are important in understanding Descartes' response to the objection about his theological proof. They enable him to accept the objection in a general way without accepting it in the special case of God.

The objection is as follows: although it is true that one must conceive something in a certain way, it does not follow that there is an object, item, or thing outside the mind which accords with our conception. Thus although we cannot conceive God except as existing, it does not follow that there is an object, etc., God, which exists. Our conceptions are one thing; the existence of things corresponding to them is another thing. Descartes accepts the objection in the mountain-valley case but not in the God case. Why does he accept the objection in the one case but not the other? It will help if we understand how he thinks the objection applies to the one case.

Descartes allows that it is true that we cannot conceive of a mountain without a valley. He allows also that it does not follow from this fact that there are mountains and valleys. I presume that the mountain-valley case is offered as prototypical and hence that Descartes believes generally that it does not follow from the necessary connections among ideas and conceptions that things must exist and exist as we conceive them. This point is a recurrent one in the meditations and reflects the two components of the demon possibility: the possibility that there may be no things corresponding to our ideas (because there are no things at all or because they are not arranged in ways paralleling our ideas); the possibility that even our most compelling thoughts may be false.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the meditations Descartes is prepared to admit, on the one hand, that there are truths which are indubitable in that we cannot think their denials. But on the other hand he doubts just such claims, sometimes by questioning the correspondence of our conceptions to

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by God. For since everything involved in truth and goodness depends on His omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or that one and two should not be three. I merely say that He has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or an aggregate of one and two which is not three, and that such things involve a contradiction in my conception." See Anthony Kenny, *Descartes — Philosophical Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 236-37 and AT, V, 223-24.

<sup>5</sup> For helpful elaboration of this issue, see E.B. Allaire, "The Circle of Ideas and the Circularity of the *Meditations*," *Dialogue*, Vol. II (1966), pp. 131-53.

things outside our minds. Indeed, Descartes emphasized in the earlier meditations that we ought to proceed as if there are no things which are as we conceive them unless and until we have proven otherwise. But in the fifth meditation he moves the contrast between essential and existential truths to the fore.

Descartes is prepared to grant the objector that as far as existential truths go, one may not draw conclusions on the basis of essential truths. Essential truths are known solely by studying ideas. Because of this, one is unable to draw conclusions about things outside the mind: given the contrast between essential and existential truths, essential truths do not determine existential truths. In the mountain-valley, triangle, and horse cases, we distinguish the two kinds of truth. And Descartes accepts the objection in these cases. But suppose one cannot draw the distinction between essential and existential truths across the board. Then, perhaps, one may be able to make inferences about how things outside the mind are on the basis of how things are conceived. Descartes bets on this possibility.

Recall that the God case is special. Not only is the claim that God exists an essential truth but it is a distinctive essential truth in that it involves existence. For Descartes, this distinction makes all the difference he needs.<sup>6</sup> According to him, the objection applies in every case but that of God. My educated guess is that he believes that the contrast between essential and existential truth cannot be drawn in the God case. And he believes that because this is so one cannot make the distinction between thinking God exists and God's existing. Loosely put, one cannot parse off God's existence from His essence.

Descartes' point is this: where one can distinguish between what something is like *if* it exists and whether that something exists, one may distinguish between how we conceive something to be and how it actually is. But where existence is part of what something is like, one cannot draw that distinction: existing is a very part of what the thing is like and hence the thing exists. The pertinent case is, of course, the case of God.

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<sup>6</sup> Descartes says at HR, 182 and AT, VII, 68: “. . . There is a great difference between false suppositions . . . and the true ideas born within me, the first and principal of which is that of God. For really I discern in many ways that this idea is not something factitious, and depending solely on my thought, but that it is the image of a true and immutable nature; first of all, because I cannot conceive anything but God himself to whose essence [existence] necessarily pertains. . . .” Here we see Descartes telling us that the distinctiveness of the idea of God shows that God exists. Notice also that he states his view in terms of an idea's being an image of something. This shows his interest in seeing the proof in idea-thing terms.



I grant the difference Descartes emphasizes between the God case and the others, but I deny that the difference makes a difference to the objection in question. As I see it, the idea-thing distinction cuts across the essence-existence distinction. Even if the idea of God is *sui generis* in being the one and only conception involving existence necessarily, this is a fact about the idea and conception themselves. To be sure, it is a distinctive fact. But, as such, it permits no inference about the nature of things outside the mind. In the end, this is the point of the objection.

In short, Descartes believes that the difference he emphasizes between the God case and all others is decisive and so he believes that the objector has been disarmed. He believes, correctly, that he has shown a difference between the God case and all others. But he overlooks the distinction between ideas and things and the doubts he has raised by means of that distinction. Those doubts still apply to the God case, notwithstanding the special feature of that case. The objection stands, as I see it. Why does Descartes fail to see this point?

What I have suggested thus far is that he fails to see the force of the objection because he focuses on the essence-existence distinction when the objection turns on the idea-thing distinction. Two other considerations come to mind. One is that Descartes does not develop his view of essential truth in light of the idea-thing distinction. The other is that Descartes tends to presume a kind of correspondence between ideas and things which is generally innocuous given his program but is problematic in the God case.

When I say that Descartes does not develop his view of essential truth, what I have in mind is this. In the passages we have considered, he quite unself-consciously talks of the essence of God and the essence of triangles. What is not specified is whether the essences of which he speaks are those ideas which are in our mind, some other kind of thing outside our mind, or both. But that he means at least something in our mind is, I think, clear from those passages. He says: "I clearly see that existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than can its having its three angles equal to two right angles be separated from the essence of a (rectilinear) triangle, or the idea of a mountain from the idea of a valley." (HR, 181; AT, VII, 66.) I presume that the three cases are intended to be viewed on a par and hence the transition from talk of separation of essences to separation of ideas establishes that Descartes' views about essences are at the same time views about ideas. This being the case, when Descartes tells us that existence is a necessary part of the essence of God, we may take him to be telling us that the *idea* of existence is such a part of the *idea* of God. And while this may be so, that

fact alone does not determine anything about the nature of God as an object, thing, or item outside the mind. In order to make such a connection, Descartes would have to develop his views on essential truths in light of the idea-thing distinction.<sup>7</sup>

What Descartes says about the mountain-valley case illustrates what I call an innocuous presumption about the correspondence between ideas and things. He presumes a correspondence between necessarily connected ideas and the corresponding things *if* there are such things. To presume that much is not to presume that there are any things. The presumption yields essential truths without yielding existential truths. In the case of God, the idea of existence is necessarily connected with the remainder of the idea of God and Descartes seems to conclude from this that the essence-existence distinction is obliterated. He seems to conclude further that he may assert a correspondence between the theological idea and things. By making the innocuous presumption he may grant the objection in a general way by pointing out the essence-existence distinction. But by also dwelling on the special features of the God case and what looks like the obliteration of that distinction, he may deny the objection applies in the God case. This is, for the reasons I have given earlier, a mistake. Once one invokes the contrast between ideas and things, it is always relevant for a Cartesian to ask: how does one know that things exist in conformity to ideas and conceptions?

Descartes is not so single-minded in dismissing the objection as my discussion thus far suggests. He goes still further in accepting the objection when he says in one of the passages cited earlier:

While from the fact that I cannot conceive God without existence, it follows that existence is inseparable from Him, and hence that He really exists; not that my thought can bring this to pass, or impose any necessity on things, but, on the contrary, because the necessity which lies in the thing itself, i.e., the necessity of the existence of God determines me to think in this way. (HR, 181; AT, VII, 67.)

One point, again and in effect, is that facts about ideas do not determine facts about things. But rather than denying that there is any correspondence between ideas and things, Descartes maintains that there is such a correspondence: in some way, the very basis of the specialness of the idea of God is determined by the necessity of the existence of God. The

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<sup>7</sup> I assume that Descartes does not avail himself of Malebranche's commitment to seeing things in God. And I see no reason to maintain that Descartes believes we see God's nature itself as opposed to a representation, in the mind, of that nature. Alan Gewirth's effort in this area bears study. See his "The Cartesian Circle Revisited", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 67 (October 5, 1970), pp. 35-57. See also Harry Frankfurt, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 86 (January, 1977), pp. 36-57.

correspondence is between ideas and things but directionally, as it were, the determination is in the direction from the thing to the idea. This claim supports my attribution of a presumed correspondence. It also shows that Descartes may be prepared to accept the objection to his theological proof after all.

He concedes that his thought cannot “bring to pass” the existence of God or “impose any necessity on things” and I take these to be ways of granting the import of the objection.

At the same time, the remarks we are now considering turn us in another direction. If their upshot is that it is not that God exists because I think, and think necessarily, of Him as existing, but, rather, that I think of Him as existing because He necessarily exists, then we are confronted anew with the question of how do I know that He exists and exists necessarily? Descartes must establish independently of the discussion we have considered that God exists. The only other attempts in this direction occur in the third meditation and hence it will be appropriate if we turn our attention there.

## II. The Third Meditation Proof

The third meditation proof is complex and complicated. But I think that its gist may be captured relatively easily. Imagine an inventory of two sorts of things, ideas on the one hand and things outside the mind on the other. Imagine, also, arranging the items on each list according to the perfection, putting the most perfect things and the ideas of the most perfect things at the top of the respective lists. The notion of perfection is never spelled out by Descartes, but one gathers that it has to do with “nearness to God” in nature: men are more like God because they share more of his characteristics than other things such as horses do; then again, horses are more like God than stones are, etc.<sup>8</sup> A thing’s place on the list of things is a function of how closely the thing’s nature resembles the nature of God whereas the place on its list for an idea is a function of the place of the thing the idea purports to represent on the list of things. Our two lists will in fact be very similar, although it is very important to emphasize that the one is a list of ideas and the other is a list of things.

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<sup>8</sup> HR, 161-66; AT, VII, 40-46.

<i>Ideas</i>	<i>Things</i>
God	God
angels	angels
man	man
plants	plants
stones	stones

It is also important to emphasize that one may draw up such lists hypothetically. That is, one need not know of the existence of such things in order to list them. This is precisely Descartes' situation in the third meditation where he has denied knowledge of things and yet nevertheless wants to talk about hierarchies of things and correlative hierarchies of ideas.

The third meditation leaves no doubt that Descartes sees the proof of the existence and goodness of God in idea-thing terms. That is, he makes it clear that what he hopes to do, and what he thinks he succeeds in doing, is to demonstrate a correspondence between the idea of God and an item, God Himself, outside his mind. The crucial moves then are determined by the ways in which Descartes establishes connections between ideas and things generally and between the idea of God and God Himself in particular.

Descartes proceeds by presenting certain causal principles and discoveries about ideas.<sup>9</sup> The combination of the two enable him to argue that God exists. The causal principles are that every idea has a cause and that every idea ultimately has a cause which has at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. In terms of our lists, the second principle becomes: every idea must ultimately be caused by a thing at least as high on the list of things as the thing the idea purports to be about. For later purposes, it is worth restating the claims as conditionals: if there are ideas, they have causes, and if there are ideas and if they have causes, then their causes are things at least as high on the list of things as what a given idea purports to be about.

Another important element in the third meditation proof has to do with the existence and nature of ideas. One gathers that Descartes introspects, or discovers with his mind's eye, items which he categorizes as ideas. Among ideas, he draws distinctions on the basis of their representational character: ideas purport to represent different kinds of things, things varying in perfection. Those ideas purportedly representing the least perfect things are those which represent mere material things. In between, as on our list, are ideas of things intermediate

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

between mere material things and God. Of course the idea which purports to represent the most perfect thing is the idea of God.

The proof of the existence of God goes as follows. Having discovered items which he categorizes as ideas, and having ranked them according to what they purportedly represent, he invokes the causal principles. So doing, he is in a position to proclaim that the idea of God must be caused by something and, more specifically, it must be caused by something at least as perfect as what the idea purportedly represents, namely God Himself. In other words, the only thing capable of causing the idea of God is God Himself.

The gist of the argument is thus quite simple: Descartes discovers specific ideas in himself, applies causal principles to the ideas, and infers that God must exist as cause of the idea of God. As I see it, the difficulty with the argument is the acceptance of both the causal principles and the implications of their application. As far as I can tell, the earlier doubts apply to the use of the causal principles and the implications of that use. At the least, Descartes does not show us how he overcomes his earlier doubts. In effect, he presumes he overcomes them. In order to make my case, I shall rehearse his earlier doubts and then comment on their applicability to the third meditation proof.

In the first meditation, Descartes doubts mathematical truths even though they “contain some measure of certainty and an element of the indubitable” and even though “it does not seem possible that truths so clear and apparent can be suspected of any falsity.” (HR, 147; AT, VII, 20.) The mechanism of doubt is the demon possibility, the possibility that mathematical claims are as just described but nonetheless false as well as the more general possibility that he has all his ideas and judgments without there being any corresponding mind-independent objects at all. Doubt of claims like mathematical ones in their compelling character occurs in the second meditation.

In the wax example Descartes maintains that he may have a clear and distinct perception of the wax which is false. This emerges when he announces having arrived at a clear and distinct perception (HR, 155; AT, VII, 31) of the wax but then reminds us of the previous doubts about bodies. In context, he takes the important point to be that even if false a clear and distinct perception establishes the existence of himself as a thinking thing. For my purposes, the important point is the possibility of a false clear and distinct perception. Descartes returns to this point at the outset of the third meditation.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I discuss this doubt in “The Importance of Descartes’ Wax Example”, *Ratio*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, pp. 73-84. For the third meditation doubt, see HR, 158-59 and AT, VII,

He begins the third meditation by pointing out that if he establishes a truth in the second meditation, as he thinks he does, then he ought to be able to extract some sort of standard of truth which, it is hoped, he can use elsewhere to expand his knowledge. He introduces clear and distinct perception in this regard. But as soon as he introduces the standard, he raises serious questions about it. He reminds us of the demon possibility:

But when I took anything very simple and easy in the sphere of arithmetic or geometry into consideration, e.g., that two and three together made five, and other things of the sort, were not these present to my mind so clearly as to enable me to affirm that they were true? Certainly if I judged that since such matters could be doubted, this would not have been so for any other reason than that it came into my mind that perhaps a God might have endowed me with such a nature that I may have been deceived even concerning things which seemed to me most manifest . . . . I am constrained to confess that it is easy to Him, if He wishes it, to cause me to err, even in matters in which I believe myself to have the best evidence. (HR, 158-59; AT, VII, 35-36.)

I take Descartes' thought to be: mathematical truths "pass" the criterion of truth by being matters of clear and distinct perception. But the demon possibility led him to conclude that even matters which seem "most manifest", matters involving "the best evidence" and mathematical truths may be doubted. Thus at least some clear and distinct perceptions are once more rendered doubtful.

This position is awkward. Doubting matters that are "most manifest" or that involve "the best evidence" naturally raises the question of what would or could count as a certainty. Indeed, one wonders about the conviction that attends such matters. Descartes shares this wonder, for he responds to the doubt of the last passage by moving a kind of indubitability to the fore:

And, on the other hand, always when I direct my attention to things which I believe myself to perceive very clearly, I am so persuaded of their truth that I let myself break out into words such as these: Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or some day cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction. (HR, 158-59; AT, VII, 36.)

Descartes thus tells us that the degree of conviction which attends such matters, matters which he now tells us are such that their denials involve manifest contradictions, is great enough that he is tempted to cast the demon aside and maintain the indubitability of the kind of claims in question. But, he reminds us in the sequel to the above passage, there is the earlier demon-inspired doubt. The only way to eliminate this doubt is to prove the existence of a good God.

The awkwardness of Descartes' position remains: he has doubted claims that are "most manifest," that involve "the best evidence," claims whose denials involve "manifest contradictions," and which, nonetheless, have some sort of indubitability associated with them. The doubt that he raises is based on the possibility that in some way he may be wrong about compelling thoughts. This is one possibility that the demon represents. How does Descartes respond to this conundrum?

Initially he sharpens the nature of his position: he knows of ideas in his mind and various attendant attitudes (HR, 158-59; AT, VII, 37). The immunity to error here seems based on some sort of direct, nonrepresentational awareness of the content of his mind. He wonders about knowledge of things outside him. Are there any ideas, and if so, which represent such things? He rejects several factors which cause him to believe in things outside him on the grounds that they are not responsive to the earlier doubts. Next he introduces both a causal principle and a means of knowing its truth: "Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in its effect" (HR, 162; AT, VII, 40). What is the natural light? Does it enable Descartes to navigate around his earlier doubts?

Descartes says astonishingly little about the natural light. We need an explanation of how the natural light validates the causal principle, of how he may overcome the earlier objection that a demon may have created him with just such principles that he accepts as true but are in fact false. To point out that the causal principle, as well as the more specific forms of it which are used in the theological proof, are compelling thoughts is insufficient. Just such thoughts were doubted earlier. We need some reason for supposing that the causal principles are more than compelling thoughts. Apparently Descartes believes that introducing the natural light is helpful here. I fail to see how this is so.

He does, in the third meditation, suggest that the natural light is a form of clear and distinct perception or else a catalyst for arriving at clear and distinct perception.<sup>11</sup> For example, he tells us that the natural

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<sup>11</sup> In the *Principles* Descartes explains that God is not the cause of our errors and then says: "*And consequently all that we perceive clearly is true, and this delivers us from the doubts put forward above.*"

Whence it follows that the light of nature, or the faculty of knowledge which God has given us, can never disclose to us any object which is not true, inasmuch as it comprehends it, that is, inasmuch as it apprehends it clearly and distinctly. (HR, 231; AT, IX, 38.)" Here also Descartes appears to assimilate the natural light and clear and distinct perception. In another place, he tells us that: ". . . In the case of our clearest and most accurate judgements which, if false, could not be corrected by any that are clearer, or by any other natural faculty, I clearly affirm that we cannot be deceived.

light causes him to “know clearly” that ideas are representations which may be subsumed under general causal principles:

And although it may be the case that one idea gives birth to another idea, that cannot continue to be so indefinitely; for in the end we must reach an idea whose cause shall be so to speak an archetype, in which the whole reality [or perfection] which is so to speak objectively [or by representation] in these ideas is contained formally [and really]. Thus the light of nature causes me to know clearly that the ideas in me are like [pictures or] images which can, in truth, easily fall short of the perfection of the objects from which they have been derived, but which can never contain anything greater or more perfect.

And the longer and the more carefully that I investigate these matters, the more clearly and distinctly do I recognize their truth. (HR, 163; AT, VII, 42.)

In other places, clarity and distinctness itself seems to carry the day:

And we cannot say that this idea of God is perhaps materially false . . . for . . . as this idea is very clear and distinct and contains within it more objective reality than any other, there can be none which is of itself more true, nor any in which there can be less suspicion of falsehood. The idea, I say, of this Being who is absolutely perfect and infinite, is entirely true. . . . This idea is also very clear and distinct; since all that I conceive clearly and distinctly of the real and the true, and of what conveys some perfection, is in its entirety contained in this idea. (HR, 166; AT, VII, 46.)

Indeed, the third meditation proof is replete with appeals to clarity and distinctness, and relatively few appeals to the natural light, once the natural light is introduced. But appeal to clarity and distinctness is not by itself helpful because such appeals were doubted earlier. Some additional factor must be introduced and explained if we are to see how clarity and distinctness may be employed after all.<sup>12</sup>

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For, since God is the highest being He cannot be otherwise than the highest good and highest truth, and hence it is contradictory that anything should proceed from Him that positively tends towards falsity. (HR, II, 40-41; AT, IX, 113.)” Here Descartes does not assimilate the natural light and clear and distinct perception. Rather, what he tells us is that clear and distinct perception is the best (natural) faculty of knowledge that we have available. Presumably the natural light is no better than it.

<sup>12</sup> Descartes recognizes this in several ways. One way is to tell us how trustworthy our clear and distinct perceptions are provided we have knowledge of the existence of a good God. He says of the atheist: “That an atheist can know clearly that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, I do not deny, I merely affirm that, on the other hand, such knowledge on his part cannot constitute true science, because no knowledge that can be rendered doubtful should be called science. Since he is, as supposed, an Atheist, he cannot be sure that he is not deceived in the things that seem most evident to him, as has been sufficiently shown; and though perchance the doubt does not occur to him, nevertheless it may come up, if he examine the matter, or if another suggests it; he can never be safe from it unless he first recognizes the existence of a God. (HR, II, 39; AT, IX, 111.)”



In sum, the third meditation introduces and employs a general causal framework. Descartes does not tell us why this framework has immunity to the earlier doubts about even claims which he found compelling. In other words, he does not tell us how the grounds for accepting the causal framework are better than the grounds for accepting claims he has doubted. Nor is it obvious that this is so. It is obvious that the causal framework, if accepted and applied to the idea of God, implies a relation between the idea of God in the mind and God, an item or thing outside the mind. Yet earlier Descartes doubted the correspondence of ideas to things outside the mind. He does not explain why this implied relation is above those earlier doubts. In the absence of such explanations I conclude that Descartes presumes that his causal framework and its implications overcome the earlier doubts. But he does not make it clear why he should presume this. This is one form of question-begging. Further, if the natural light is a form of clear and distinct perception (or even merely a catalyst to induce such perception as a decisive part of the proof), then I believe Arnauld's specific charge is sustained: clear and distinct perception is employed in the process which also is alleged to validate just such perception.

If what I have been saying is correct, it is pertinent to ask: why does Descartes not see that his argument fails? Or, to ask the same thing differently, why does Descartes not respond to the serious earlier doubts? My answer here is similar to the one I gave about the fifth meditation proof. Descartes dwells on presumptions he does not make and so overlooks the ones he does make.

The earlier doubts are essentially two: doubt about accepting claims which appear intellectually compelling, doubt about the correspondence of ideas to things. Descartes is more responsive to the idea-thing doubt. He goes to great lengths to introduce this issue and show that, consistent with the points of earlier meditations, many of his ideas may fail to represent things outside himself and that he may himself be the cause of them.

Descartes insists in the third meditation that there are many ideas which do not require the kinds of thing they purport to represent for their causes.<sup>13</sup> As a thinking thing, Descartes may cause the ideas of stones, dogs, chairs, trees, and fish. He is a thing at least as perfect as these things, indeed, he could be the cause of a majority of his ideas. He calls attention to this fact in the meditation as if to reassure the reader (and himself?) that he does not commit "the principal error and commonest which we may meet with in them [ideas] . . . my judging that

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<sup>13</sup> HR, 164-65; AT, VII, 43-44.

the ideas which are in me are similar or conformable to the things which are outside me.” (HR, 160; AT, VII, 37.) There is a solid core of truth to this position: there are many correspondences which he does not take for granted. To dwell on these is to focus on the doubts about idea-thing correspondence, to highlight cases in which such correspondence is not taken for granted.

When Descartes offers his conclusion that God exists, we may ask why this idea-thing correspondence is not subject to the earlier doubts. No doubt Descartes thinks that he validly deduces the conclusion and so, for this reason, the earlier doubt is answered. Here it would be pertinent to ask about the introduction of the causal premises which lead to the conclusion, to ask about the soundness of the argument. There are several reasons the introduction of the premises might seem innocuous.

One is that, as in the fifth meditation, I believe that Descartes sees the causal principles as expressive of necessary connections among ideas: he is compelled to think causally in certain ways, the causal principles express essential truths. Descartes never questions the knowledge he has of his own ideas. So the causal framework may appear indubitable, just as other essential claims are indubitable.

The introduction of the causal principles may look safe to Descartes for another reason. They may be understood as conditional in character: if there are ideas, they have causes; if there are ideas and if they have causes, then their ultimate causes have at least as much formal reality as the ideas have objective reality. The principles may be understood as not requiring the existence of any things, or even ideas (other than the ones required for Descartes’ causal thoughts), much less idea-thing correspondence. So viewed the causal principles are again like the essential truths of the fifth meditation: conditional truths based on necessary connections known to obtain among ideas. So viewing the principles enables Descartes to avoid presuming idea-thing correspondence in introducing the principles. Thus Descartes may see himself as avoiding that particular doubt.

Descartes, by focusing on the idea-thing correspondence issue and doubt, neglects to tell us why the causal principles may be seen as more than mere expressions of how he thinks. That is, he neglects the other doubt associated with the demon, the possibility that the causal principles are merely demonic implants. In turn, he neglects to provide an adequate justification for viewing the causal principles as more than such implants.

I have pointed out several reasons Descartes may not see the problems with his third meditation procedure. One is that he focuses on the idea-thing correspondence issue and moves to the fore the presumptions he does not make here. The others have to do with the seeming safety of introducing and employing the causal principles. Because they are conditional in character, they too appear to avoid idea-thing presumptions. And because they express necessary connections among ideas, they are indubitable by that very standard.

### **III. Summary: Parallels Between the Fifth and Third Meditations**

I think it is fair to say that the third meditation is structured around the issue of whether we can know that any ideas represent things and the effort to prove that the idea of God is “similar or conformable to” a mind-independent God. The objection from the fifth meditation, with its question of whether necessarily connected ideas represent things, raises the same issues. Thus although the proofs, e.g., the premises, differ, the general concerns are the same.

In both meditations, Descartes indicates that facts about our thinking do not suffice to determine facts about things outside our mind or, more accurately, knowledge of facts about thought does not suffice for knowledge of facts about things. In the fifth meditation he denies that his thought imposes any necessity on things; in the third he mentions that “The principal error and commonest which we may meet with in them [ideas], consists in my judging that the ideas which are in me are similar or conformable to the things which are outside me.”

In both meditations, the idea of God is held to be special. Its specialness is different in the two cases: in the one it is the necessary inclusion of the idea of existence which is taken to be significant, while in the other it is the representation of something more perfect than himself which is the decisive factor. The former difference allegedly undermines the distinction between essential and existential truths, while the latter difference allegedly entitles Descartes to conclude that the cause of the idea of God had to be God Himself.

Such differences notwithstanding, Descartes’ own point from several places in the meditations that one may not infer facts about things from facts about thoughts remains. Descartes recognizes the need for what might be called a bridging principle, a principle spelling out the connection(s) between such facts in both proofs. To that extent he continually adheres to his own point. In the fifth meditation he believes the connection can be made when one realizes that the idea of God is such a special case that the contrast between essential and existential claims breaks

down. In the third meditation the causal principles are bridging principles.

I maintain that in spite of Descartes' responsiveness to his earlier doubt, in particular the idea-thing correspondence doubt, he never fully overcomes that doubt. Rather what he does is to emphasize the errors he does not make: he does not take many idea-thing correspondences for granted, the causal principles (like the essential truths of the fifth meditation) do not make existential commitments, etc. By presenting an array of cases in which his earlier objections are not applicable he can convince himself and some others that he meets such objections. I believe that he wrestles with them without defeating them.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to G. Georgarakos, R. Gibson, D. Huff, P. Markie, and a referee of this journal for helping me to rethink points of this paper.