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Descartes's Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being

ANAT SCHECHTMAN*

THE *MEDITATIONS ON FIRST PHILOSOPHY* PRESENTS us with an alleged proof for the existence of God that proceeds from the existence of an *idea* of an infinite being in the human mind—an idea of God—to the existence of God himself. Insofar as we have an idea of an infinite being, an idea with “infinite objective reality,” we can legitimately ask whence it came to us. The only possible cause of this idea, claims Descartes, is an infinite being, namely, God. The occurrence of just this idea in the proof is essential. In fact, Descartes maintains that any such causal proof for God’s existence crucially relies on this idea: “it seems to me that all these proofs based on his effects are reducible to a single one; and also that they are incomplete . . . if we do not add to them the idea which we have of God” (letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644, AT IV.113/CSMK III.232).

There is a tendency to understand Descartes as simply assuming that the meditator (the narrator of the *Meditations*) is entitled at the outset of the proof to the premise that he has the requisite idea: an idea with infinite objective reality. As Bernard Williams says in his seminal study, Descartes proves God’s existence from the “idea of God, the existence of which (in his view) requires no proof.”¹ Alternatively, Descartes (and the meditator) is sometimes said to rely on the reach of introspection and the transparency of thought: to wit, an idea with infinite objective reality is there, simply waiting to be noticed.² Either way, starting with Hobbes and Gassendi, readers of the *Meditations* have found this crucial premise unconvincing and many, like Williams, do not take Descartes to provide any argument for it.

This paper aims to show that Descartes does present an argument in the Third Meditation, beyond mere appeal to the alleged transparency of thought,

¹Williams, *Descartes*, 146.

²Such an interpretation is offered in e.g. Wilson, *Descartes*; Broughton, “Skepticism and the Cartesian Circle”; and Nadler, *Arnauld*. We will return to this line of interpretation in section 2.

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for the premise that the meditator has the requisite idea of God. I develop this interpretation in two stages. First, I argue that by Descartes's (and the meditator's) lights the meditator is not entitled to this premise at the outset of the proof.³ Although he does in fact have an idea of God (as reported in e.g. paragraphs 5 and 13 of the Third Meditation), he may misconceive the idea in a way that undermines his entitlement to certain claims about it—in particular, the crucial claim (initially emphasized in paragraph 13) regarding the objective reality of his idea. And so, by Descartes's own lights, the meditator must somehow correct his misconception in order to be entitled to this premise. Second, I identify and explain the argument or reasoning by which the misconception is subsequently corrected. This is done when the meditator turns his attention to other ideas that he possesses at this stage of his inquiry (paragraphs 17–24), specifically, his idea of his own finite self (as revealed by the *cogito*). In so doing, he comes to realize (in paragraph 24) that (i) having an idea of a finite being depends on—and is therefore posterior, rather than prior, to—having the requisite idea of an infinite being; and (ii) since he has the former idea, he must have the latter idea as well.

This interpretation, if correct, allows us to view this aspect of the Third Meditation proof for God's existence in a more charitable light. Insofar as the interpretation connects this aspect of the proof to the result of the *cogito*, it also shows how the proof can be seen to fit naturally within—and, indeed, to be an indispensable part of—the overall progression of the *Meditations*. More generally, and equally importantly, the interpretation seeks to highlight an important and unexplored way in which epistemic progress is putatively achieved in the *Meditations*, namely, through a process of correcting misconceptions. Whereas at the start of the inquiry the meditator may have misconceptions of, for example, the nature of mind, body, and God—and hence he is not entitled to certain claims about them—at subsequent stages of inquiry he corrects these misconceptions in a way that improves his understanding of these and other elements of “first philosophy.”

I. THE PROOF

Although the proof for God's existence in the Third Meditation is generally well-known, it is nevertheless instructive to take the time to identify the main premises in a way that will lay out a common ground for the ensuing discussion.⁴

The first premise of the proof is that the meditator has an idea with an infinite degree of “objective reality.” This idea is, naturally, the meditator's idea of God,

³There are in fact two proofs for God's existence in the Third Meditation; I will discuss only the first of them, presented in paragraphs 5–27 of the Third Meditation (AT VII.36–47/CSM II.25–32). Accordingly, expressions such as ‘the proof’ or ‘the proof of the Third Meditation’ are to be understood as referring to the first proof. (It is widely thought that the second proof is not completely independent of, and is rather an elaboration on, the first; Descartes himself says, in the letter to Mesland of 2 May 1644, that “it does not make much difference whether my second proof . . . is regarded as different from the first proof, or merely as an explanation of it” [AT IV.112/CSMK III.231–32].)

⁴Detailed reconstructions of the proof are offered in e.g. Kenny, *Descartes*; and Curley, *Descartes against the Skeptics*. Nolan and Nelson offer a two-premise reconstruction (in “Proofs”) that is similar to the one I will suggest.

an infinite being (or, as Descartes sometimes says, an infinite substance). The meditator seems to report this much in the following passage, from paragraph 13 of the Third Meditation; let us call it *the self-report passage*:

[T]he idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances. (AT VII.40/CSM II.28)

It is tempting to read this passage as one in which the meditator already takes himself to be entitled to the first premise, without need for any further, special reasoning or argumentation. This temptation will be the topic of much of the following discussion, beginning in the next section. But first, let us clarify the notion of objective reality and see how the proof proceeds from the indicated premise.

Descartes distinguishes between the “formal reality” of things and the “objective reality” (or representational reality) of ideas of things. Whereas formal reality is the mode of being by which a thing is or exists, objective reality is “the mode of being by which a thing is objectively in the intellect through an idea” (AT VII.41/CSM II.29).⁵ (Ideas are of course also things—namely, modes of a thinking substance—and so they, too, possess formal reality, in addition to objective or representational reality.) Both types of reality allow for degrees. Descartes writes in the Second Replies:

There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than an accident or a mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance. Hence there is more objective reality in the idea of a substance than in the idea of an accident; and there is more objective reality in the idea of an infinite substance than in the idea of a finite substance. (AT VII.165–66/CSM II.117)

As this passage suggests, formal and objective reality are intimately related: if a thing possesses a certain degree of formal reality, then the corresponding idea (i.e. the idea of that thing) has the same degree of objective reality.

The Third Meditation says little about formal reality; there, formal reality is only quickly glossed in terms of “perfection.” However, in the Third Replies Descartes suggests that the degree of formal reality of a thing is linked to its degree of independent existence:

I have . . . made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode; . . . and . . . if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance. (AT VII.185/CSM II.130)⁶

⁵I will treat objective being and objective reality (and likewise formal being and formal reality) as equivalent notions, as done in e.g. Hoffman, “Descartes on Misrepresentation,” 359; and Alanen, *Descartes’s Concept of Mind*, 122–25. Some scholars draw a distinction between the two notions, taking objective reality to be but one aspect of objective being (and likewise for formal reality and formal being); see for example, Chappell, “The Theory of Ideas,” 189–90; Field, “Descartes on the Material Falsity of Ideas,” 318–19; and perhaps Kaufman, “Objective Reality,” 392. Since the discussion here concerns only objective reality, it is not important in the present context to distinguish the two notions, though I acknowledge that in other contexts it might be important to do so.

⁶I have elided reference to “real qualities or incomplete substances,” since they are irrelevant to the current discussion. For further discussion of this topic see Menn, “The Greatest Stumbling Block: Descartes’ Denial of Real Qualities.”

The difference observed here between finite and infinite substance is grounded in Descartes's metaphysics, according to which substance is that which exists independently in one of two ways: finite substance exists independently of everything but God, whereas God, an infinite substance, exists independently of everything else.⁷ It is easy to see how this notion of degrees of formal reality as corresponding to degrees of independent existence can be extended to include modes. In Descartes's metaphysics, a mode, understood as a property of a substance, depends for its existence on its substance.⁸ If the degree of formal reality is indeed so tied to independence, it would follow that a finite substance has more formal reality than a mode—since a mode depends on a thing that is itself dependent, namely, a finite substance, whereas a finite substance only depends on a thing that is absolutely independent, namely, an infinite substance.

Schematically, then, we may say that entities are ordered in the following *reality hierarchy*:

	<u>formal reality</u>	<u>objective reality</u>
(more)	an infinite substance a finite substance	an idea of an infinite substance an idea of a finite substance
(less)	a mode	an idea of a mode

It is encoded in the reality hierarchy that an infinite being, and it alone, possesses a higher degree of formal reality than any other being, namely, infinite formal reality; correlatively, the idea of an infinite being, and it alone, possesses a higher degree of objective reality than any other idea, namely, infinite objective reality.⁹ With this point in hand, we are now in a position to formulate the proof.

The first premise, as we have seen, is that the meditator has an idea with infinite objective reality (as said above, we will return to the question of the meditator's entitlement to this premise). The second premise concerns a constraint on the possible causes of ideas that focuses on their objective reality:

[I]n order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea. For if we suppose that an idea contains something which was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the mode of being by

⁷*Principles of Philosophy* (henceforth "*Principles*") I.51 (AT VIII.A.24/CSM I.210). While a proper understanding of this distinction in my view requires attention to subtleties regarding dependence in Descartes, we need not engage such subtleties here in order to appreciate the basic idea, explained in the text.

⁸Cf. *Principles* I.48, 56, and 61 (AT VIII.A.22–30/CSM I.208–14).

⁹Granted, the passages cited above say only that an idea of an infinite being has "more" objective reality than ideas with finite objective reality; they do not explicitly say that the idea has *infinite* objective reality (and similarly for the formal reality of an infinite being). It is, nevertheless, customary to understand the proof as employing the premise that the meditator has an idea of an infinite being with infinite objective reality (see e.g. Broughton, "Skepticism and the Cartesian Circle," 609; and Nolan, "The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures," 175). This is justified by other texts where it is suggested that the idea of an infinite being has infinite or immeasurable objective reality or being; see e.g. the letter to Clerselier of 23 April 1649 (AT V.356/CSMK III. 377); and *Principles* I.18 (AT VIII.A.11/CSM I.199). It also seems to follow from Descartes's characterization of the objective reality of an idea as pursuant to the formal reality of its object, together with his characterization of God as supremely perfect or as having infinite perfections (in e.g. the letter to Clerselier just cited), which Descartes tends to equate with reality (see e.g. The Second Replies, AT VII.161/CSM II.113–14; see also section 5 below).

which a thing exists objectively in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing. (AT VII.41/CSM II.28)¹⁰

This passage, from paragraph 14 in the Third Meditation, suggests the following causal principle, which we can call the *Principle of Objective Reality* [POR], and which serves as the second premise in the proof: any given idea has a cause with a degree of formal reality that is equal to or greater than the degree of objective reality that is possessed by the idea itself. Paragraph 14 begins with the meditator stating that this premise is “manifest by the natural light” (AT VII.40/CSM II.28). He goes on to argue, only after making this statement, that the objective reality of an idea “cannot come from nothing” since it itself is not nothing—echoing the famous maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit* (“from nothing, nothing comes”), which is presumably, in Descartes’s view, certainly true. Although the meditator’s discussion of the POR and its nuances continues at least through paragraph 21, he seems to regard himself as entitled to the POR by paragraph 16, at which point he turns to an examination of his ideas.¹¹

In the case of the idea of an infinite being, which has infinite *objective* reality, only a being with infinite *formal* reality satisfies the necessary condition imposed on the cause of this idea by the POR (premise 2). As seen in the reality hierarchy, the only being with infinite formal reality is an infinite being. So an infinite being must be the cause of an idea with infinite objective reality, if such an idea exists. Yet the meditator holds that he has such an idea (premise 1), namely, his idea of God, an infinite being. Hence, the meditator concludes, an infinite being exists.¹²

To summarize, the Third Meditation’s proof for the existence of God can be understood as having two premises. The meditator takes himself to be entitled to the second premise on grounds that are by his lights adequate: it is “manifest by the natural light” (AT VII.40/CSM II.28). We also noted the temptation to read the self-report passage as one in which the meditator already takes himself to be entitled to the first premise, without need for any further, special reasoning or argumentation. However, I will argue in sections 2–4 that this temptation ought to be resisted. In sections 5–6, I will argue that the self-report passage in paragraph 13 is just the beginning of the meditator’s discussion of his idea of God in the Third Meditation: it introduces reflection on this idea, and offers an initial statement of the first premise of the proof. After a discussion of the POR and its application to various ideas in paragraphs 14–21, the first premise is repeated, and the entire proof summarized, in paragraph 22. Yet, as we will see, the proof is not concluded

¹⁰Cf. the Synopsis to the *Meditations* (AT VII.14–15/CSM II.10–11), the Sixth Meditation (AT VII.79/CSM II.55), and the letter to Mersenne of March 1642 (AT III.544–45/CSMK III.211).

¹¹While there is of course room to ask whether by the standards of the *Meditations* the meditator is indeed entitled to the POR at this point, this interpretative question is not ours, and we need not settle it here. For further, largely sympathetic discussion of the POR see e.g. Clatterbaugh, “Descartes’s Causal Likeness Principle”; Broughton, “Skepticism and the Cartesian Circle”; Broughton, *Descartes’s Method of Doubt*; and Schmaltz, *Descartes on Causation*. Largely unsympathetic appraisal is presented in e.g. Loeb, “Was Descartes Sincere in his Appeal to the Natural Light?”

¹²Strictly speaking, the validity of the proof requires the claim, noted above, that an infinite being, and it alone, possesses an infinite degree of formal reality. For simplicity of exposition, I leave this premise implicit.

at this point: just as the meditator's statement of the POR precedes its defense, the meditator's statement of the first premise precedes its defense. In particular, I will eventually argue that it is in paragraph 24 that we find the reasoning or argumentation that is meant to support the first premise.

2. THE FIRST PREMISE: TRANSPARENT? CLEAR AND DISTINCT?

In the self-report passage in paragraph 13, the meditator says that "the idea that gives me my understanding of . . . God . . . certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances." It seems fair to say that, by the meditator's lights, he is here entitled to the claim that he has an idea of an infinite being, insofar as he can be certain he has the ideas he does. Earlier, in paragraph 3 of the Third Meditation, the meditator emphasizes that even when in doubt about whether certain extra-mental objects exist, he is "not denying that these ideas occur within me" (AT VII.35/CSM II.24–25). Insofar as Descartes thinks that the claim that one has an idea of *x* requires justification, he seems to suggest that understanding the word '*x*' is sufficient: "we cannot express anything by our words, when we understand what we are saying, without its being certain thereby that we have in us the idea of the thing which is signified by our words" (letter to Mersenne of 23 June 1641, AT III.393/CSMK III.185).¹³ Accordingly, understanding the word 'God' suffices to show that one has an idea of God. In fact, a variation on the self-report passage which appears later, in paragraph 21, begins with the words "by the *word* 'God' I understand a substance that is infinite . . ." (AT VII.45/CSM II.31; my emphasis). Either because it is simply undeniable that the meditator has the idea of God, or because this is evident from the fact that he understands the words 'God' and 'infinite being' (or perhaps on the basis of the innateness of the idea of God or, as discussed below, the transparency of thought), the meditator seems to be entitled to the claim that he has an idea of God.

Matters become more complicated when we notice that the first premise of the proof that the meditator eventually offers is not simply that the meditator has an idea of God, but rather that he has an idea *with infinite objective reality*. What in the self-report passage (or in the reasoning leading up to it) could entitle him to this premise?

One possibility is to appeal to what Margaret Wilson has called the *transparency of thought*. The transparency of thought or consciousness is the doctrine, often ascribed to Descartes, that certain aspects of mental states and mental content are evident or certain—and in this sense "transparent"—to the reflective mind.¹⁴ The strategy of appealing to such transparency as the source of the meditator's entitlement to the first premise would consist in an attempt to identify some feature of the meditator's idea of an infinite being that is (i) transparent to the

¹³Cf. the Appendix to the Fifth Replies (AT VII.209/CSM II.273).

¹⁴Wilson, *Descartes*, 151. A doctrine of this type might be suggested by Descartes's remarks in the First Replies (AT VII.107/CSM II.77), the Second Replies (AT VII.160/CSM II.113), the Fourth Replies (AT VII.246/CSM II.171), and *Principles* I.9 (AT VIII.A.7/CSM I.195). For recent, critical discussions of the transparency thesis and whether it can rightly be ascribed to Descartes, see Broughton, "Self-Knowledge"; and Rozemond, "The Nature of the Mind."

mind, and (ii) entails that the idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality. To this end, it might be suggested that the precise degree of objective reality that a given idea possesses can be detected merely by inspection of the idea itself. If this were so, then *the infinite degree of objective reality* of the idea of an infinite being would itself be a feature that is transparent to the reflective mind, thereby satisfying both (i) and (ii). Thus Steven Nadler remarks that an idea's objective reality "is something that can be read off the idea, i.e. is accessible to a purely immanent and phenomenological examination"; he adds that otherwise, "the proof of God's existence, which is founded on an introspective examination of the objective reality of the idea of God, is undermined."¹⁵ In a similar vein, Wilson remarks that Descartes "seems to indicate that an idea's objective reality is transparent, deriving directly from its representative character."¹⁶ Both remarks may be read as suggesting that what entitles the meditator to the premise that he has an idea with infinite objective reality is that the objective reality of his idea of God is transparent and can be "read off" that idea.¹⁷

A serious problem with this approach is that it seems to be in tension with the possibility of what Descartes calls "materially false ideas." Ideas such as those of heat and cold, according to the Third Meditation, represent "as something real and positive" what is possibly a "non-thing [*non res*]" (AT VII.43–44/CSM II.30).¹⁸

¹⁵Nadler, *Arnauld*, 26. Similarly, Broughton suggests that Descartes secures the premise that the idea of God has infinite objective reality through "the incorrigibility of self-knowledge" ("Skepticism and the Cartesian Circle," 609). Curley also seems to gesture at this approach when he writes that "all Descartes really wants or needs to say is that he can conceive of a being with a certain combination of attributes," and that this is drawn from "what his consciousness contains" (*Descartes against the Sceptics*, 128). And Gueroult seems to suggest that Descartes takes the content of one's consciousness to be accessible through an "intellectual intuition" (*Descartes selon l'ordre des raisons*, I: 151). Compare this also to Williams's suggestion that the meditator "makes the crucial reflection" that he has the idea of God; the meditator then notes, according to Williams, that "the reality that attaches itself to the object of this idea, unlike the others, is the highest conceivable degree of reality" (*Descartes*, 142).

¹⁶Wilson, *Descartes*, 112. Cf. Kaufman, who cites Wilson's remark approvingly ("Objective Reality," 388); more recently, Cunning cites Nadler approvingly (*Argument and Persuasion*, 109).

¹⁷Wilson in fact goes on to say that reading Descartes as holding that objective reality is in general transparent to the mind "cannot be correct" because of the case of materially false ideas, where transparency of objective reality fails; this case is discussed below. Nevertheless, Wilson thinks that the tension between holding that an idea's objective reality is in general transparent and allowing for materially false ideas is internal to Descartes's thought; that he is committed to the former thesis and relies on it in the Third Meditation proof; and that the notion of materially false ideas is both "a problem and a distraction" for the proof of God's existence (Wilson, *Descartes*, 113). Other scholars are likewise critical of what they take to be Descartes's appeal to the transparency of an idea's objective reality, as something that "seems taken for granted in the Third Meditation" (Kenny, *Descartes*, 127). However, whereas certain scholars (like Wilson and Kenny) tend to see the appeal to transparency at this point in the Third Meditation as a problem for Descartes (or the meditator), I see the ascription of such an appeal to Descartes (or the meditator) as a problem for this particular interpretation.

¹⁸There is disagreement in the literature as to whether Descartes thinks that it is a necessary or a sufficient condition for a materially false idea that its object is a non-thing. On the first view, if the idea of cold is materially false it must follow that cold is a non-thing, i.e. the absence of heat; see e.g. Wilson, *Descartes*; and Field, "Descartes on the Material Falsity of Ideas." On the second view, this does not follow: the idea of cold can be materially false even if cold is a real thing (and heat, say, is the absence of cold); see e.g. Beyssade, "Descartes on Material Falsity"; Nelson, "The Falsity in Sensory Ideas: Descartes and Arnauld"; Kaufman, "Objective Reality"; Alanen, *Descartes's Concept of Mind*; Brown, "Objective Being"; and Shapiro, "Objective Being and 'Ofness' in Descartes." For the present purpose, this debate can be sidestepped; the only relevant point, one which remains uncontroversial, is that in the case of materially false ideas there may be a discrepancy between what objective reality these ideas

Yet, and this is the crucial point, the ideas of heat and cold themselves would not in this case be phenomenally different from how they would be if heat and cold *really were* something real and positive. As Descartes writes in the Third Meditation, these ideas “do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa” (AT VII.44/CSM II.30; my emphasis). And in the Fourth Replies he writes, “If I consider the ideas of cold and heat just as I received them from my senses, I am unable to tell that one idea represents more reality to me than the other” (AT VII.232/CSM II.163; my emphasis). Hence in the case of these ideas it is not transparent whether they have positive or null degree of objective reality; the meditator cannot “read off” from such ideas which degree of objective reality they in fact have.¹⁹ The lesson, in short, is that a simple appeal to the transparency of thought cannot suffice to make it the case that (or to explain how it is that) the meditator is always entitled to a claim about the precise degree of objective reality that his ideas, including his idea of an infinite being, possess.

An amended appeal to transparency would begin with the observation that the discussion of materially false ideas, in both the Third Meditation and the Fourth Replies, links their non-transparency with respect to their degree of objective reality to the fact that they are obscure and confused, that is, not clear and distinct.²⁰ The suggestion would then be that even if it is not possible to “read off,” or introspectively detect the degree of objective reality of materially false ideas, such detection may be possible in the case of the idea of an infinite being—which, unlike the materially false ideas of cold and heat, is clear and distinct.²¹ The invocation of clarity and distinctness is attractive. But it confronts the problem that there is no guarantee, at the self-report passage in paragraph 13,

in fact have (as determined by the formal reality their object in fact has) and what objective reality they seem to have (as determined by the formal reality their object seems to have). See the following note for further discussion.

¹⁹A further question is what degree of objective reality the mind *can* read off a materially false idea. On one view there is simply no degree of objective reality that can be read off such ideas. Nadler, for example, thinks that materially false ideas present no degree of objective reality to the mind in “an adequate fashion”; he also seems to hold that in fact they have none (*Arnauld*, 164). Others agree that such ideas present no degree of objective reality, but hold that they do possess a positive degree of objective reality; see e.g. Wells, “Material Falsity”; Normore, “Meaning”; and Kaufman, “Objective Reality.” Another view is that materially false ideas present to the mind a positive degree of objective reality, though in fact they possess no such positive degree; see e.g. Wilson, *Descartes*; Wilson, “Descartes on the Representationality of Sensation”; and Bolton, “Confused and Obscure Ideas of Sense.” Clearly, on these two views the mind cannot read off these ideas the degree of objective reality they in fact have, because of the discrepancy between the degree of objective reality they in fact have and the degree they seem to have. Yet a different view is that materially false ideas such as the ideas of heat and cold do present to the mind a positive degree of objective reality, namely that of ideas of modes, and that this is the degree they in fact have. But there is still a discrepancy: the ideas present heat and cold to the mind as modes of *body*, though in fact they are ideas of sensations—ideas of modes of *thought*; see e.g. Perler, *Repräsentationen bei Descartes*; Hoffman, “Descartes on Misrepresentation”; and Brown, “Objective Being.” Because of this discrepancy, it seems fair to say that also on this view the mind cannot read off such ideas the objective reality they in fact have, because the mind misidentifies the objects of these ideas—even if the misidentified object happens to have the same degree of reality as the true object. I am grateful to Dominik Perler for pressing me to clarify this point.

²⁰See the Third Meditation (AT VII.41/CSM II.28) and the Fourth Replies (AT VII.233/CSM II.163).

²¹This reading is suggested in Wilson, *Descartes*, 114.

that the meditator's idea of an infinite being is already clear and distinct.²² First, nowhere in the vicinity of this passage does the meditator himself claim that his idea of God is clear and distinct. Hence such an interpretation will have to simply assert, without textual evidence, that the meditator's idea is at that point already clear and distinct. Second, beyond this textual difficulty, such an interpretation seems to conflict with one of Descartes's stated aims in the *Meditations*, namely, to teach his readers "to *form* clear and distinct ideas."²³ Thus, as readers of the Third Meditation, we ought to expect to be taught to form a clear and distinct idea of God, not simply told, without comment, that we (or the meditator) already have such an idea at the self-report passage. It therefore seems problematic to invoke clarity and distinctness at this early moment in the meditator's reflections on his idea.²⁴ Indeed, it is preferable to identify an alternative ground for the meditator's entitlement to the first premise, if one is available (as I shall eventually argue): all else being equal, we should strive to interpret the Third Meditation proof in a way that does not depict Descartes (or the meditator) as simply helping himself to a crucial premise, in the guise of a clear and distinct perception.²⁵

There is a further concern facing a brute assertion of transparency or clarity and distinctness, namely, that the meditator may conceive of an infinite being in a confused or mistaken manner (perhaps, e.g. he conceives of God as an enormous man with a long, white beard²⁶), in which case his idea of an infinite being would *not* be clear and distinct at the self-report passage. This type of concern can be discerned in Descartes's exchanges with Gassendi, which (in Descartes's view) center on a serious confusion about the idea of God. Below, we will discuss this concern and the associated notion of misconception in detail. We will also examine a misconception that the meditator may harbor at the self-report passage—a misconception that is subtle enough to be harbored even by Gassendi. In effect,

²²This point does not rely on any particular interpretation of clarity and distinctness; it is rather simply that whatever the property of being clear and distinct consists in, as we shall see there is no good reason to hold that the meditator has, or is entitled to think that he has, an idea of an infinite being that possesses this property at this point of the *Meditations*. For a classic discussion of clear and distinct ideas see Gewirth, "Clearness and Distinctness in Descartes"; for a recent discussion see Patterson, "Clear and Distinct Perception."

²³Letter to Mersenne of 31 December 1640: "[W]e have to form distinct ideas . . . and this is what most people fail to do and what I have mainly tried to teach by my *Meditations*" (AT III.272/CSMK III.165). And compare the Second Replies: "In metaphysics by contrast [to geometry] there is nothing which causes so much effort as making our perception of the primary notions clear and distinct" (AT VII.157/CSM II.111).

²⁴Cf. Nolan and Nelson, "Proofs," 107. Importantly, when the meditator finally does say, in paragraph 25, that his idea of an infinite being is clear and distinct (AT VII.46/CSM II.32), a crucial passage will have occurred, in paragraph 24 (viz. AT VII.45–46/CSM II.31). In this passage, discussed in detail below, the meditator can be seen to engage in further reasoning that putatively entitles him to the first premise of the proof. In section 5 I will suggest that this reasoning is meant to purge the meditator of various potential misconceptions, which presumably brings his idea of God closer to being clear and distinct.

²⁵To my mind, such an interpretation would serve to vindicate Leibniz's complaint that Descartes's method is "take what is needed; do as you ought; and you will get what you wanted" (*Die Philosophische Schriften*, 4:329).

²⁶Descartes, perhaps disingenuously, accuses Gassendi of such a gross misconception: "[you] are supposing that we imagine God to be like some enormous man" (the Fifth Replies, AT VII.365/CSM II.252). We will discuss Gassendi's conception in more detail below.

it is not implausible or exaggerated to think that the meditator may harbor it too. Nor is it implausible or exaggerated to demand that an interpretation of the proof be sensitive to such misconceptions and provide reasons to think that the meditator is free from them. The interpretations discussed above, which restrict themselves to transparency and clarity and distinctness, fail to meet this demand.

3. THE ROLE OF CONCEPTIONS IN THE *MEDITATIONS*

As I see it, the self-report passage in paragraph 13 is just the beginning of the meditator's examination of his idea of God in the Third Meditation. At this point, the meditator might still be in a state of confusion: he might have *misconceptions* of God and of his idea of God, and as a result, have an idea of God that is not clear and distinct. This section explains the notion of a Cartesian conception (and misconception) and its role in the *Meditations*. The next section (section 4) discusses a particular misconception that the meditator might harbor with regard to God and with regard to his idea of God. Subsequent sections (sections 5–6) identify and explain the argument that centers on a change in the meditator's conception and, consequently, enables him to gain entitlement to the first premise of the proof.²⁷

My plan in this section is, first, to explain how I understand the notion of a conception and to anchor this understanding in Descartes's writings. Second, I will consider several ways in which this notion may be useful in interpreting Descartes. Third, I will show how this notion helps to explain why early in the Third Meditation the meditator must engage in special, further reasoning—beyond the mere appeal to transparency or the brute assertion of clarity and distinctness—to support the first premise of the proof for God's existence: in short, the meditator might harbor misconceptions that are inconsistent with this premise, and thus interfere with his entitlement to it.

We can begin to appreciate the notion of a conception, and the manner in which misconceptions may interfere with the meditator's entitlement to certain claims in the *Meditations*, by reflecting on an objection Gassendi makes to the indicated premise in the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*. There, Gassendi denies that our idea of God has infinite objective reality. He does not go so far as to deny that we have an idea of an infinite being. Rather, he simply denies that we have a "genuine" idea, that is, an idea with infinite objective reality, which represents God "as he is":

[C]an anyone claim that he has a genuine idea of God, an idea which represents God as he is? What an insignificant thing God would be if he were nothing more, and had no other attributes, than what is contained in our puny idea! (AT VII.287/CSM II.200)

Regarding this "puny idea," Gassendi proposes that

on the analogy of our human attributes, we can derive and construct an idea of some sort for our own use—an idea which does not transcend our human grasp and *which*

²⁷As noted above, I will eventually argue that it is not until paragraph 24 that we encounter the reasoning that is meant to support the first premise. As discussed in section 5 below, that the initial statements of the premise (in paragraphs 13 and 22) precede its defense is wholly consonant with the overall argumentative style of the *Meditations*.

contains no reality except what we perceive in other things or as a result of encountering other things. (AT VII.288/CSM II.201; my emphasis)

Of course, such an idea possesses only finite objective reality, for it is “derived” and “constructed” from other ideas which themselves have only finite objective reality.²⁸

Descartes’s reply to Gassendi is instructive. Descartes does not simply invoke the transparency of thought, nor does he insist on the clarity and distinctness of the idea of God, in defense of the premise that the meditator does in fact have the idea that the proof requires. Rather, he takes issue with Gassendi’s remarks about the idea in question. Descartes allows that we must distinguish between our human understanding of God and a fully adequate idea that is not available to a finite intellect—either of the infinite or of anything else (AT VII.365/CSM II.252).²⁹ In Descartes’s view (which will be discussed in detail in the next section), Gassendi mistakenly thinks that an idea of God can have infinite objective reality only if it is fully adequate—or, in Gassendi’s terms, “genuine.” (In the Third Meditation and elsewhere, Descartes emphasizes that whereas we cannot fully “grasp” or “comprehend” [*comprehendere*] the infinite, we can “understand” [*intelligere*] it;³⁰ here he seems to take the same position.) It is also a mistake to think, as Gassendi does, that our idea of God is derived or constructed from ideas of finite beings. In these ways, the dispute between the two philosophers—and from Descartes’s perspective, the heart of Gassendi’s confusion—concerns our idea of God, which is *not* merely derivative or constructed. In other words, from Descartes’s perspective, Gassendi harbors a misconception of the idea of God: his conception of this idea is incorrect.³¹

In describing this dispute, I have just referred to Gassendi’s “conception.” What is a conception? As I understand him, Descartes speaks of one’s *conception* of something when he speaks of the way in which one thinks, understands, or *conceives* of it (e.g. *concipere, concevoir*). Consider the following passages:

[I]t will be sufficient if I explain as briefly as possible what, for my purposes, is the most useful *way of conceiving* [*modus concipiendi*] everything within us which contributes

²⁸A full exposition of Gassendi’s views on these topics goes beyond the scope of this essay. For further discussion see Lennon, *The Battle of the Gods and Giants*, ch. 1, §6; and LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy*, ch. 4. It is worth emphasizing that Gassendi’s challenge here is not idle, given what is said in the Third Meditation. If a derivative or constructed idea could have more objective reality than the ideas from which it was derived or constructed, the difference in reality would have to come from nothing, which is impossible (recall the maxim *ex nihilo nihil fit*). So such an idea must have the same degree of objective reality as the ideas from which it was derived or constructed, namely, finite objective reality—not infinite objective reality, as the proof requires. We will return to this issue in section 4.

²⁹However, in the Fourth Replies Descartes suggests that adequate knowledge can be attained by divine revelation; see the Fourth Replies (AT VII.221/CSM II.156).

³⁰See the Third Meditation (AT VII.46/CSM II.32) and the First Replies (AT VII.112/CSM II.81). ‘*Comprehendere*’ is translated in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* as ‘to grasp.’

³¹We can of course also say that, from Descartes’s perspective, Gassendi’s idea of God is obscure and confused (i.e. not clear and distinct). Below I will suggest that there is a correlation for Descartes between having a misconception of *x* (or of one’s idea of *x*) and having an idea of *x* that is not clear and distinct. As was just pointed out, Descartes’s reply to Gassendi focuses on mistaken views that the latter holds regarding his idea of God, rather than on that idea’s lack of clarity and distinctness. I will thus follow Descartes in focusing primarily on Gassendi’s views regarding the idea of God—what I will refer to as his *conception* of the idea—rather than on its clarity and distinctness.

to our knowledge of things. (*Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, AT X.412/CSM I.40; my emphasis)

[B]y the term ‘idea’ I mean in general everything which is in our mind when we conceive [*concevons*] something, no matter *how we conceive it* [*de quelque manière que nous la concevions*]. (Letter to Mersenne of July 1641, AT III.392/CSMK III.185; my emphasis)

Here you prove that in fact you have no distinct idea of a substance. For a substance can never *be conceived* [*concipi*] in the guise of [*instar*] its accidents. (Fifth Replies, AT VII.364/CSM II.251; my emphasis)

And, in fact, those who think they have the idea of many gods have nothing of the sort. For it leads to a contradiction to *conceive* [*concevoir*] of many sovereignly perfect beings, as you have quite correctly noted.³² (letter to Clerselier of 17 February 1645, AT IV.188/CSMK III.248; my emphasis)

In these passages Descartes indicates that there are various manners in which things can be conceived: different subjects, or even the same subject at different times, may have different conceptions of the same thing, for example, of a substance. This is true even when one and the same idea of the thing is held. Hence Descartes can speak, as he does in the letter to Mesland quoted at the outset, of *the* idea of God. At the same time, Descartes says, one may conceive of God in different manners; the letter to Mersenne just quoted continues, “[B]y whatever way we conceive of [God] [*de quelque manière qu’on le conçoit*], we have the idea of him [*on en a l’idée*]” (letter to Mersenne of July 1641, AT III.392/CSMK III.185).

This comment raises interesting questions about the general relation between ideas and conceptions (ways of conceiving). For example, since one and the same idea may be accompanied by different conceptions, one’s conception of *x*—the way one conceives of *x*—need not always be itself one’s idea (or concept) of *x*. I leave it as an open question whether one’s conception of *x* is a judgment concerning *x*, since it is not clear that forming a conception requires the act of will in which Descartes takes judgments to consist (see example *b* below, which seems not to involve such judgment). Regardless of how the precise relations between conceptions, ideas, and judgments are ultimately to be understood, the above passages indicate that, according to Descartes, different thinkers may have the same *idea* of *x* while having different *conceptions* of *x*, as well as of their idea of *x*. For instance, recalling the debate between Descartes and Gassendi described above (and examined in detail in the next section), we can view the two philosophers as having the same idea of God³³ while having different conceptions of that idea.

³²In addition, the notion of preconceived opinion (*praconcepta opinione*) can perhaps be profitably understood as a type of conception, as in the following passage from the *Principles*: “The third cause of error is that we become tired if we have to attend to things which are not present to the senses; as a result, our judgments on these things are habitually based not on present perception but on *preconceived opinion* [*praconcepta opinione*]” (*Principles* I.73, AT VIII.A.37/CSM I.220; my emphasis). Perhaps the notion of a prejudice (*praepudicium*) can likewise be understood as a type of (faulty) conception; see for example, the *Meditations*’ dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne (AT VII.4/CSM II.5); the Second Replies AT VII.157/CSM II.111–112); preface to the French edition of the *Principles* (AT IXA.12–13/CSM I.185); *Principles* I.50 (AT VIII.A.24/CSM I.209); and *Principles* I.72 (AT VIII.A.36–37/CSM I.219–20).

³³Recall Descartes’s reference to *the* idea of God in the letter to Mersenne quoted above, as well as in the letter to Mesland quoted at the outset; see also e.g. *Discourse on Method* part IV (AT VI.37/CSM I.129); the First Replies (AT VII.105/CSM II.76); the Fifth Replies (AT VII.365/CSM II.252);

As an illustration of the various conceptions one may have of a given entity, we may consider the meditator's conception of himself—what he thinks he himself is—which changes as he makes progress in the *Meditations*:

- a. What am I? A man. (AT VII.25/CSM II.17)
- b. I [have] a face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body.³⁴ (AT VII.26/CSM II.17)
- c. I am, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks. (AT VII.27/CSM II.18)
- d. I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. (AT VII.81/CSM II.56)

These examples indicate that conceptions may be incorrect (as in *b*) or correct (as in *d*), incomplete (as in *c*, which concerns only what I am “in the strict sense”) or complete (as in *d*), and also that the same thinker may hold various conceptions of the same thing at various times (*a* through *d*). These conceptions can be held in an unconsidered or in a considered manner, implicitly or explicitly. When a subject's conception of *x* is incorrect or incomplete, we may say that the way that one conceives of *x* is mistaken or confused: one *misconceives* (has a *misconception*) of *x*.

Now that we have seen what a conception is and discussed some of its appearances in Descartes's writings, I would like to suggest several general ways in which this notion can be useful in interpreting Descartes. First, it allows us to track a kind of progress in the *Meditations*, which is achieved when the meditator's conceptions become correct and complete. As was seen above, in *a–d*, this is the case with the meditator's conception of himself, which is at the end, though not at the beginning, correct and complete. I will suggest below that the meditator's conception of his idea of the infinite is subject to a similar progress: whereas at the time of the self-report passage it may still be incorrect and incomplete, some errors in his misconception are removed at a later stage of the Third Meditation.

Second, there is a plausible correlation between the status (e.g. completeness or correctness) of the meditator's *conception* of *x* and the clarity and distinctness of his *idea* of *x*. For example, failure to have a distinct idea of *x* might be tied to, and even sometimes explained by, failure to have a correct and complete conception of *x*; this can be illustrated by a remark Descartes makes to Gassendi, in the Fifth Reply passage (cited earlier) to the effect that the way in which Gassendi *conceives* of substance, namely, “in the guise of its accidents,” “proves that you [Gassendi] have no *distinct idea* of substance” (AT VII.364/CSM II.251; my emphasis).³⁵

the letter to Clerselier of 17 February 1645 (AT IV.187/CSMK III.248); and the letter to Princess Elizabeth of 6 October 1646 (AT IV.315/CSMK III.273).

³⁴The meditator says that this “came into my thought spontaneously and quite naturally” (AT VII.26/CSM II.17).

³⁵Curley is perhaps pointing to such a correlation when he writes, “What is essentially involved [in the process of rendering our idea of body clear and distinct] is sorting out what is and what is not to be retained in our prephilosophical *conception* of body, and exploring the implications of those elements that are to be retained” (“Analysis,” 158; my emphasis). I say “perhaps” because Curley sometimes employs the pairs of terms ‘conception’ and ‘concept’ (“Analysis,” e.g. 166–67) and ‘concept’ and ‘idea’ (“Analysis,” e.g. 168–69) in a way that suggests that he assumes all three to be interchangeable, an assumption I am not making. And see similar usage in Cunning, *Argument and Persuasion*, e.g. 214. In any case, neither author employs the notion of a conception systematically in the way I do here.

Similarly, failure to have a clear idea of x might be tied to, and even sometimes explained by, failure to have a correct conception of x ; this possibility might be illustrated by b : it is only once the meditator achieves the correct conception in c that the meditator can be said to begin to have a clear idea of himself. Indeed, it is plausible that in some cases the meditator is not in a position to form a clear and distinct idea until certain misconceptions are corrected or eliminated.³⁶ In this way, the notion of a conception (and misconception) helps to illuminate the process of forming clear and distinct ideas. It also helps to clarify why in the exchange with Gassendi described above, Descartes focuses on Gassendi's views regarding the idea of God, rather than simply, but less helpfully, on clarity and distinctness (or the lack thereof): by identifying specific misconceptions, Descartes constructively points to (at least part of) what must be fixed in order for Gassendi to form a clear and distinct idea of God.

Third, the notion of a conception allows us to identify and make precise a rule or norm that very plausibly governs the endorsement of claims in the *Meditations*. It is well known that the *Meditations* contains such rules, which, although not always stated explicitly, are evidently an integral part of the meditator's reasoning. For example, in the Second Meditation the meditator takes himself to be entitled to the claim that he is a thing that thinks, though not yet to the claim that he is (or is not) identical to "these very things which I am supposing to be nothing," namely his body or some "thin vapor" permeating it.³⁷ The task of explicitly and coherently stating all of these rules is formidable—just think of the famous "truth rule" and the issues of circularity it raises.³⁸ Still, it seems that some rules are fairly clear. For instance, a rule that very plausibly governs the meditator's entitlement to claims in the *Meditations* is, roughly, that the meditator must be consistent. While such a rule is quite humble in comparison to others (e.g. the truth rule), a fact that explains why it need not be stated explicitly (and indeed the meditator does not so state it), it is a rule to which an interpretation of the Third Meditation proof must be sensitive.

This rule can be fruitfully explicated using Descartes's notion of a conception. Naturally, the meditator can legitimately endorse a claim, while maintaining his relevant conceptions, only if he can consistently accept it. Of course, mere

³⁶For example, it is plausible that so long as the meditator has an unshaken misconception of himself as a bodily thing, as at the start of the First Meditation, he is not yet in a position to clearly and distinctly perceive, as he does in the Second Meditation, that "this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (AT VII. 25/CSM II.17). Similarly, a misconception might impede correct exercise of the imagination; see e.g. *Principles* I.72: "[I]n early childhood we imagined the stars as being very small; and although astronomical arguments now clearly show us that they are very large indeed, our *preconceived opinion is still strong enough to make it very hard for us to imagine them differently from the way we did before*" (AT VIII.A.36–37/CSM I.219–20; my emphasis).

³⁷See the Second Meditation (AT VII.27/CSM II.18). On this occasion the meditator explains his endorsement of the former claim but not the latter as follows: "I can make judgments only about things which are known to me."

³⁸The "truth rule" is the rule that "whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true" (Third Meditation, AT VII.35/CSM II.24). The so-called Cartesian circle arises from what seems to be an attempt to establish the truth rule by means of proving that God is not a deceiver, a proof that allegedly itself employs the truth rule.

consistency is not by itself sufficient for entitlement. The meditator's conceptions may be consistent with very many claims, simply by being silent about them; or he might even lack the relevant conceptions. Hence the requirements on the meditator's entitlement go beyond mere consistency. In particular, it seems that the meditator is entitled to a claim only if it is not inconsistent nor is it potentially inconsistent with his conceptions; where a conception is potentially (or implicitly) inconsistent with a given claim if it is inconsistent with the claim on one of the various ways in which that conception might be completed or filled in.³⁹ When a conception is potentially inconsistent with a true claim, I will say that it is a *potential misconception*. Of course, a potential or actual misconception may be overcome by changing or filling in one's conception appropriately—as illustrated by the transitions from *a* to *c*, which involve changes in the meditator's conception of himself, and the transition from *c* to *d*, which involves its filling-in.⁴⁰ We will see, in the rest of this essay, that whereas the meditator has a potential misconception (in this sense, he might harbor a misconception) at the self-report passage, his conception later changes; and this change, I argue, removes a potential inconsistency with the first premise that previously interfered with his entitlement to that premise.

One of the virtues of drawing this connection between entitlement and consistency with conceptions in the *Meditations* is that it explains why appeals to transparency or to clarity and distinctness do not account for the meditator's entitlement to the first premise. The problem is that those appeals are not appropriately sensitive to the concern that early in the Third Meditation the meditator's conceptions are *potentially inconsistent* with the premise that his idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality, in which case the meditator's

³⁹This rule seems to be in the same spirit as the Fourth Meditation's maxim that one should refrain from making a judgment in cases where one does not perceive the truth clearly and distinctly, because then it is "by pure chance" that one arrives at the truth (AT VII.60/CSM II.41). If one happens to have a conception that is consistent with a true claim *p* and with not-*p* (i.e. if one has a potential misconception), then there is a sense in which it is "by pure chance" that one has a conception that is consistent with *p*. Given the standards for making epistemic progress in the *Meditations*, in this case one is not entitled to *p*. This fact is explained by the consistency rule that I am proposing.

⁴⁰This point bears emphasizing. It is not the case that the meditator can *become* entitled to a new claim only if it is consistent with his present conceptions. If this were the case, then it would be impossible for the meditator to transition from an existing (actual or potential) misconception of *x* that is inconsistent with some true claim *p* about *x* to a new and correct conception of *x* that is consistent with *p*. Rather, the consistency rule as stated says that, *at a given time*, the meditator is not entitled to any claim that is (actually or potentially) inconsistent with his present conceptions (at that time). As noted in the text, this rule amounts to, roughly, the demand that the meditator be consistent. The difference can be stated in terms of a distinction between static and dynamic rules of entitlement. A rule of entitlement is *static* just in case it identifies a condition a subject must satisfy in order to be entitled to a given claim at a given time; it is *dynamic* just in case it identifies a condition a subject must satisfy in order to become entitled, at a future time, to a given claim to which she is presently not entitled. The rule of entitlement at issue here is static: it says that the meditator is not entitled, at a given time, to a claim that is inconsistent (or potentially inconsistent) with his present conceptions. The importance of this particular rule is made clear in the next paragraph. Further investigation is needed to determine the specific dynamic rules of entitlement in the *Meditations*, rules which would say precisely what is required to overcome an actual or potential misconception; there clearly are such rules, but investigation into their exact content lies beyond the scope of the present paper. I am grateful to Nico Silins for pressing me to clarify the distinction between static and dynamic rules of entitlement.

idea of God cannot yet be clear and distinct; and, irrespective of the idea's alleged transparency, the meditator cannot be entitled to this premise.

Again, the point may be illustrated by the case of Gassendi: insofar as he conceives of the idea of God as constructed or derived, he holds a conception that is *inconsistent* with the idea of God having infinite objective reality; as a result, he is not entitled to this premise.⁴¹ Hence Descartes's reply: Gassendi's conception of the idea of God requires substantial correction. This type of concern about the meditator's conceptions is not assuaged in the self-report passage (in paragraph 13), or in the reasoning leading to it. Rather, there are reasons to think that at that early stage of the Third Meditation the meditator, like Gassendi, may indeed hold a conception of the idea of God that is inconsistent with the first premise. In the next section, we will articulate these reasons. In the following two sections, we will see how this concern is addressed later on in the Third Meditation, specifically, when the meditator's conception of the idea of God, an infinite being, begins to change as he turns his attention to the relation between this idea and his idea of a finite being, specifically, himself.

4. THE MEDITATOR'S CONCEPTIONS

Let us first consider what according to Descartes is the *correct* conception of the idea of an infinite being. In a letter to Clerselier, Descartes writes,

I say that the notion I have of the infinite is in me before that of the finite because, by the mere fact that I conceive being, or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, what I conceive is infinite being; but in order to conceive a finite being, I have to take away something from this general notion of being, which must accordingly be there first.⁴² (23 April 1649, AT V.356/CSMK III.377)

Here Descartes makes it clear that the notion or idea he has of the infinite is prior to the idea of the finite: it is "there first," and the idea of the finite is derived from it by "taking away" something. Regardless of how this "taking away" is understood, it is clearly incompatible with any view on which the idea of the infinite is derived from the idea of the finite. In particular, it is incompatible with Gassendi's view that our idea of the infinite is constructed or derived, obtained from ideas of finite things by somehow augmenting them.⁴³ Clearly, in Gassendi's view our idea of the infinite is not prior to the ideas of finite things in the sense of priority at issue in Descartes's letter to Clerselier.

A second feature of the idea of an infinite being, according to Descartes, is that it is distinct from the idea of that which is *indefinite*. Whereas infinity is a positive

⁴¹I am focusing here on a Gassendian conception but the point could also be illustrated by e.g. a Thomistic conception. For a comparison of Aquinas's and Descartes's conceptions of the idea of God, see Carriero, *Two Worlds*, ch. 4.

⁴²Cf. the letter to Hyperaspistes of August 1641 (AT III.427/CSMK III.192) and the conversation with Burman (AT V.153/CSMK III.338). In order to maintain uniformity, in discussing the letter to Clerselier cited in the text, I will use 'idea' where Descartes uses 'notion' (*notion*) as well as where he uses 'idea' (*idée*). Indeed, in the next paragraph of the letter Descartes switches to *idée* where he previously had *notion*.

⁴³Cf. the First Replies (AT VII.139/CSM II.100); the Fifth Replies (AT VII.365/CSM II.252); and the letter to Regius of 24 May 1640 (AT III.64/CSMK III.147), where Descartes explicitly rejects the constructive or derivative view.

feature that pertains to God alone, indefiniteness is a negative feature, indicating a mere lack of limits. The letter to Clerselier continues,

By 'infinite substance' I mean a substance which has actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections. . . . It should be observed that I never use the word 'infinite' to signify the mere lack of limits (which is something negative, for which I have used the term 'indefinite') but to signify a real thing, which is incomparably greater than all those which are in some way limited. (AT V.356/CSMK III.377)

Elsewhere, Descartes provides several examples of indefinite beings: the number of stars, extended matter and the space it occupies, and the divisibility of material bodies (*Principles* I.27, AT VIII.A.14–15/CSM I.201–2).⁴⁴ Descartes's remarks on the number of stars specifies the sense in which their lack of limits is merely "something negative":

[N]o matter how great we imagine the number of stars to be, we still think that God could have created even more; and so we will suppose the number of stars to be indefinite. (AT VIII.A.14–15/CSM I.201–2)

However great "we imagine the number of stars to be," there is some larger number such that "we still think" that it is possible for the number of stars to be this larger number. Likewise, Descartes says, "There is . . . no imaginable extension which is so great that we cannot understand the possibility of an even greater one" (AT VIII.A.14–15/CSM I.201–2). However, Descartes suggests, the case of God is different. While it is similarly true that for any perfection that we can think of or imagine, there is some further perfection such that we understand that it is possible for God to have this further perfection (i.e. we can recognize no limit to God's perfection), it is *also* true that we positively understand that God really does have this (and every other) perfection:⁴⁵

[I]n the case of God alone, *not only* do we fail to recognize any limits in any respect, but our understanding positively tells us that there are none. . . . [I]n the case of other things, our understanding does not in the same way positively tell us that they lack limits in some respect; we merely acknowledge in a negative way that any limits which they may have cannot be discovered by us. (*Principles* I.27, AT VIII.A.27/CSM I.201; my emphasis)

This again can be contrasted with Gassendi's position, on which we understand the infinity of God and (what Gassendi takes to be) the infinity of the physical universe in the same way. On Gassendi's position, someone who claims to understand or grasp the infinite must acknowledge, as Gassendi himself writes, that "just as the [infinite] extends beyond any grasp of it he can have, so the negation of a limit which he attributes to its extension is not understood by him, since his intelligence

⁴⁴Cf. the letter to Chanut of 6 June 1647 (AT V.52/CSMK III.320); the letter to Arnauld of 29 July 1648 (AT V.224/CSMK III.359); and the letter to More of 15 April 1649 (AT V.347/CSMK III.375).

⁴⁵It is a matter of some controversy how exactly Descartes's notion of a "positive" versus a "negative" or "mere" lack of limits is to be interpreted. See e.g. Wilson, "Can I Be the Cause of My Idea of the World? (Descartes on the Infinite and the Indefinite)," for a wholly epistemic reading of the difference; and Ariew, "The Infinite in Descartes' Conversation with Burman." Fortunately, we need not take a stand on this controversy in order to recognize the basic distinction that Descartes draws between the indefinite and the infinite.

is always confined within some limit" (AT VII.286/CSM II.200). This on Descartes's view seems to correspond to the negative way in which we conceive of something as merely lacking limits, hence indefinite, rather than the positive understanding of something (namely, God) as "incomparably greater than all those which are in some way limited," hence infinite.

To summarize, according to Descartes, the idea of the infinite is prior to, rather than derived from, the idea of the finite. Moreover, we positively understand (even if we cannot fully comprehend) the infinite, whereas we negatively understand the indefinite—we merely acknowledge that we cannot conceive of its limits. By contrast, Gassendi maintains that we negatively understand the infinite, in the sense that we acknowledge that we cannot conceive of its limits; we also have a positive idea of the infinite, though this idea is derived from the idea of the finite. These differences are substantive. If Descartes is right, then the idea of the infinite can possess infinite objective reality: a *Cartesian conception* of the idea of the infinite is consistent with this claim. (In fact, a fully fleshed-out Cartesian conception of the idea of the infinite *includes* the claim that the idea has infinite objective reality.) However, this is not the case with a *Gassendian conception*: if Gassendi is right, then the idea we have of the infinite cannot possess infinite objective reality. For, according to both Descartes and Gassendi, there is an intimate connection between whether an idea is derived or not derived from another, on the one hand, and its degree of objective reality relative to the other, on the other hand. In the present case, if the idea of the infinite is derived from the idea of the finite, the former cannot have more objective reality than the latter: since the idea of the finite possesses a finite degree of objective reality, it would follow that the idea of the infinite does so as well.

If the foregoing is correct, then Descartes and Gassendi have different conceptions of God and of the idea of God, and since these conceptions are incompatible, only one can be correct. From Descartes's perspective, of course, it is Gassendi who holds the misconceptions. Let us not dwell here on whether Descartes's assessment is correct; for the present purpose we may assume that it is, adopting an "interpretative stance" and approaching the *Meditations* from the perspective of its author. This allows us to focus attention on the following question: what are the meditator's conceptions of God and of the idea of God at the early stages of the Third Meditation? For instance, might the meditator, like Gassendi, harbor misconceptions of God and of the idea of God at these early stages, and in particular, at the self-report passage (in paragraph 13)?

We already noted that the meditator is not immune to misconceptions: he begins the *Meditations* with misconceptions of himself (recall *a–d* above). Similarly, at least in the First Meditation he entertains a misconception of God as possibly a deceiver or as possibly not existing (AT VII.21–22/CSM II.14–15). Moreover, his comment in the self-report passage that "the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him" might be read, in Gassendian fashion, as a comment about an idea that is "augmented" from ideas of, for example, finite duration, finite knowledge, finite power, and so on—an idea that need not have infinite objective reality. So, while there is no evidence indicating that the

meditator's conception of God and of the idea of God at the time of the self-report passage is Cartesian rather than Gassendian, there is evidence indicating that he is at least susceptible to various misconceptions of God and of the idea of God at these early stages of the *Meditations*. Hence, it is plausible to conclude that, at these early stages of the *Meditations*, up to and including the self-report passage, the meditator harbors potential misconceptions (or, perhaps, actual misconceptions) of God and of the idea of God. As we have seen, some of these misconceptions, for example the Gassendian misconception highlighted above, are inconsistent with the claim that the meditator's idea of God has infinite objective reality.

The implications should be clear. We saw above that by the standards for making epistemic progress in the *Meditations*, if a given claim is potentially inconsistent with any of the meditator's standing conceptions, this is enough to prevent him from being entitled to that claim, and from using it as a premise in a proof. So, insofar as at the early stages of the Third Meditation the meditator has conceptions that are potentially inconsistent with the first premise in the proof of God's existence, he is not yet entitled to this premise. This remains so despite his position in the self-report passage that he has an idea with infinite objective reality—a position that, due to his potential misconceptions, he is not yet entitled to take (even if his idea does *in fact* contain infinite objective reality).

At the same time, this approach to understanding the meditator's progress in the Third Meditation allows us to maintain, as I have argued that we should (recall section 2), that the meditator is entitled to the claim, in the self-report passage, that he has an idea of an infinite being. In addition, it allows us to accommodate Descartes's view that the idea of God is transparent to the reflective mind, without maintaining, as I have argued that we should not (recall section 2), that its transparency is enough to entitle the meditator to the premise that this idea has infinite objective reality. The idea is transparent to the reflective mind, as well as innate, and nevertheless the meditator might harbor misconceptions of it. As Descartes remarks elsewhere, the thesis that some ideas are innate does not entail that it is impossible to be deeply confused and to harbor misconceptions about them in ways that, in his words, "lead to a contradiction."⁴⁶

Now, there is a point in the Third Meditation at which the meditator explicitly rejects the possibility that his idea of the infinite is derived from the idea of himself, a finite being. In paragraph 25, he considers the possibility that his knowledge is potentially limitless, and asks, "[I]f the potentiality for [supreme and infinite] perfections is already within me, why should not this be enough to *generate* the ideas of such perfections?" (AT VII.47/CSM II.32; my emphasis). His answer is that potential infinity (indefiniteness) is not the kind of infinity possessed by God: "God . . . I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection"; and hence the idea of God cannot be "generated" in this way. Interestingly, this explicit

⁴⁶For, even if the idea of God is so imprinted on the human mind that there is no one who does not have in himself the faculty for knowing it, this does not prevent many persons from having been able to live their whole lives without ever representing to themselves distinctly this idea. And, in fact, those who think they have the idea of many gods have nothing of the sort. For *it leads to a contradiction to conceive of many sovereignly perfect beings, as you have quite correctly noted* (letter to Clerselier of 17 February 1645, AT IV.187–88/CSMK III.248; my emphasis).

rejection, which implies, correctly, the crucial premise that the meditator has an idea with infinite objective reality, and not merely finite objective reality (as in the case of a derived idea), occurs *after* the meditator has engaged in an examination of various other ideas he possesses (paragraphs 17–23), and in particular of the relations between his idea of God and his idea of himself (paragraph 24). On the reading of the text that I will suggest in the next section, this is as it should be: something has changed, and so the meditator is now (at paragraph 25)—but not at the earlier stage of his inquiry (e.g. at paragraph 13)—entitled to this premise.

5. CHANGING THE MEDITATOR'S CONCEPTIONS

What is required is a change in the meditator's conception of his idea of an infinite being, which will eliminate various potential misconceptions and will allow him to proceed with the proof. In this section I explain how, in my view, this change begins to come about. The next section continues the discussion of this change and outlines the corresponding argument, presented in paragraph 24, which supports the first premise of the proof.

As noted above, the entire discussion of the proof proceeds from paragraph 5 to paragraph 27. The two key premises in the proof, as well as the conclusion, are explicitly stated in paragraph 22. This makes it tempting to view paragraphs 23–27 as afterthoughts that offer mere replies to objections—that is, replies that simply restate the position challenged, without substantially clarifying the position or providing further considerations to support it (as in Descartes's Third Replies to Hobbes, which contains many replies of this sort). I believe that this temptation should be resisted, especially given the organic character of the *Meditations* in general, and the Third Meditation in particular. Consider, for example, the discussion of the POR (explained in section 1 above). Paragraph 14 presents and justifies the POR (“it is manifest by the natural light”), but this is not the end of the story: the POR is further explained and refined, for example, in paragraph 15, where the meditator clarifies that “although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here” (AT VII.42/CSM II.29); and in paragraph 21 (AT VII.45/CSM II.31), where he explains that he can be the cause of his ideas of modes of corporeal substance that are contained in him eminently though not formally. This is simply one illustration. In general, the argumentative style of the *Meditations* is not always subject to a strict linear order of theses, arguments, and conclusions, as in a geometrical treatise. Accordingly, we need not view paragraphs 23–27 as presenting mere afterthoughts, and as lacking substantive reasoning, simply because they appear after an explicit statement of the intended conclusion in paragraph 22.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Nor is there agreement in the literature that this is how we should view these paragraphs. Considering paragraph 27, Carriero suggests that it contains substantive reasoning, writing that it presents the claim that “God is the sort of being in which no potentiality is found” and that it belongs to “a fair amount of philosophical theology” developed in the *Meditations* (*Two World*, 195). I will argue that paragraph 24 also contains substantive reasoning. Other interpretations that take paragraph 24 to include substantive reasoning are presented in Beyssade, “The Idea”; Rovane, “God without Cause”; and Nolan and Nelson, “Proofs”; these commentators, however take paragraph 24 to make a different point than I do (I return to this difference below; see note 60). Kenny, on the other hand, seems to take this passage to contain at most an afterthought (*Descartes*, 135–58).

In my view, although paragraph 24 is perhaps styled as a reply to an objection, it is not a *mere* reply. On the contrary, it includes substantive reasoning about the idea of God that eventually entitles the meditator to the first premise of the proof. I quote the paragraph here in full (for ease of discussion, sentences are marked with letters):

[A] And I must not think that, just as my perceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. [B1] On the contrary, I clearly understand [*manifeste intelligo*] that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, [B2] and accordingly [*proinde*] that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. [C] For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me an idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?⁴⁸ (AT VII.45–46/CSM II.31)

On my interpretation, the meditator's reasoning in this passage is subtle and short. The meditator has an idea of the infinite, God, and an idea of "the finite, that is myself." He reflects on the relation between these ideas, and considers in particular whether the former is derived from ("arrived at . . . merely by negating") the latter. But when he examines his idea of himself, replete with "defects" or imperfections, he comes to understand that this idea is "in some way" posterior to his idea "of a more perfect being," namely, his idea of the infinite, God; for he could not have the former idea if he did not have the latter idea as well ("For how could I . . . unless . . ."). This understanding brings about a change in his conception of his idea of God: he concludes that this idea *cannot* be derived from the idea of the finite, nor is it the idea of the mere indefinite. In this way, the meditator's conception is filled in correctly, and it is no longer potentially inconsistent with the premise that his idea of God has infinite objective reality. The potential misconception that interfered with his entitlement to this premise is now removed.

This is simply meant as a summary, but I believe that it captures the core of the meditator's reasoning in paragraph 24. I will now explain this interpretation in greater detail. First, I will make an observation about the place of the meditator's reasoning here in the dialectical progress of the *Meditations*. Second, I will examine the relations between the notions of infinity, perfection, and finitude. Third, I will discuss the sense of priority (and, correlatively, posteriority) invoked in [B2] and highlight its significance to the overall argument. In my view, the crucial step in this argument takes place in [C], which is the sentence upon which I will eventually focus.

First, in [C], the meditator tells us that he understands that he doubts, desires, and lacks something—as he makes explicit just before in [B2], he understands

⁴⁸The translation in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* is slightly altered here: in [B2] I have translated '*proinde*' (which can be translated with 'hence,' 'therefore,' 'as a result,' 'accordingly,' and 'so') with 'accordingly' rather than 'hence' to avoid the (in my view misleading) implication that [B2] is meant to be a simple deductive consequence of [B1]. In [C] I have translated '*percipio*' (literally, 'I perceive') with 'perception' rather than 'conception,' as the former seems to be a closer translation. Also, in order to maintain uniformity with the use of 'idea' (*idea*) in [B2] and [C], in the subsequent discussion I will for the most part use 'idea' where Descartes uses 'perception.'

that he is a finite being. Of course, the meditator is entitled to the claim that he doubts, since this was sufficiently established already in the First and the Second Meditations (recall the *cogito*).⁴⁹ In this way, the meditator's reasoning in this paragraph, whose concern is the first premise of the Third Meditation's proof, is directly connected to the results of his earlier meditations. (We will return to this point below.)

Second, while [B] invokes the "perception of the *infinite*" and contrasts it with the "perception of the finite, that is myself," [C] contrasts the understanding of something as "not wholly *perfect*" with "an idea of a more *perfect* being." This raises interesting questions about the relations between infinity, perfection, and finitude. Throughout the Third Meditation, the meditator speaks of God's perfection and God's infinity in the same breath. For example, in paragraph 25 the meditator refers to "this idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being" (AT VII.46/CSM II.31); and in paragraph 27 he says that God is "actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection" (AT VII.46–47/CSM II.31–32).⁵⁰ These remarks help us to interpret paragraph 24. In [C], the meditator describes himself as *doubting*, as *lacking something*, and as *not wholly perfect* (*non omnino perfectum*); in view of the previous sentence, [B], which concerns the meditator's perception of his status as a *finite being*, it is natural to understand these descriptions as emphasizing his finitude. Similarly, in [C], the meditator speaks of an idea of a more *perfect* being; in view of the previous sentences [A] and [B], which concern the idea of an *infinite* being or substance (*idea substantiae infinitae*), it is natural to understand this as referring to the meditator's idea of the infinite.

It is also worth noticing that [C] invokes an idea of a *more* perfect being (*idea entis perfectionis*), where one might have expected reference to the idea of a *supremely* perfect being (*idea entis summe perfecti*), as in paragraph 25 (quoted above in section 4). I think that it is clear from the context of [C] that it is meant to be read as invoking the latter idea, the idea of a supremely perfect being, God, an infinite being. This seems to be reinforced by the Fifth Replies. There, rejecting Gassendi's proposal that the idea of a perfect being is "compounded" or "augmented" from ideas of finite perfections, Descartes says, "[H]ow could we have a faculty for amplifying all *created perfections* (i.e. conceiving of something greater or more ample than they are) were it not for the fact that there is in us an idea of *something greater*, namely God?" (AT VII.365/CSM II.252; my emphasis). Presumably Descartes is drawing a distinction between having created, finite perfections, and having what he describes in the letter to Clerselier (cited above in section 4) as "actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections" (AT V.356/CSMK III.377). A being with such perfections, he there goes on to say, is "*incomparably greater* than all those [things] which are in some way limited" (AT

⁴⁹It is even repeated at the opening of the Third Meditation: "I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts . . ." (AT VII.34/CSM II.24).

⁵⁰Cf. *Discourse on Method*, part IV (AT VI.34–35/CSM I.128); *Principles* I.19 (AT VIII.12/CSM I.199); the First Replies (AT VII.113–14/CSM II.81–82); and the letter to Clerselier of 23 April 1649 (AT V.355/CSMK III.377). Scholars are divided about the coherence of Descartes's position; cf. e.g. Marion, "The Essential Incoherence of Descartes' Definition of Divinity"; and Winkler, "Descartes and the Names of God."

V.356/CSMK III.377; my emphasis)—in this sense, it is “more perfect” than those beings with merely finite perfections. If this is correct, then the meditator’s remark in [C] that thinking of himself as imperfect is possible only if he has an idea of a being that is “more perfect” should be understood as saying that what is required is an idea of something greater in the sense of the Fifth Replies and the letter to Clerselier: namely, what is required is an idea of an incomparably greater being—a being with infinite perfections, or, more simply, an infinite being.⁵¹

Third, the preceding interpretative observations suggest the following paraphrase of [C]:

[C*] I could not understand that I was finite unless there were in me an idea of an infinite being, which enabled me to recognize my own finitude by comparison.

As noted above, the meditator is here telling us that he understands that he is finite: he has an idea of a finite being. But this is not all: in addition, he is telling us that this is possible *in virtue of* him having an idea of an infinite being. In this sense, the idea that gives the meditator his understanding of a finite being *depends* on his idea of an infinite being. Such dependence is conceptual, in the sense that the former idea (or concept) depends for its existence on the latter idea (or concept). The presence of such dependence would make good sense of the meditator’s comment in [B₂] that his idea of the infinite is “in some way prior to” his idea of the finite: to wit, the idea of the finite depends on—in this way, is posterior to—the idea of the infinite.

Let us introduce a second paraphrase of [C] which makes the reference to such priority or dependence explicit:

[C**] I could not understand that I was finite unless there were in me an idea of an infinite being, upon which my idea of a finite being depends.

In the next section we will return to the role [C**] plays in supporting the first premise of the proof. For now, it is important to notice that what allows the meditator to accept [C**] is that upon comparing the two ideas, the meditator *clearly understands* that the dependence relation holds. This is evident from the dialectical progress of the passage. In [B] the meditator states something he “clearly understands.” Yet, as indicated by the fact that [C] begins with the explicatory ‘for’ (*enim*),⁵² the truth of [B] is recognized on the basis of [C]. So, [C] must be “clearly understood” as well. After all, it would make little sense for the meditator to assert one claim that he “clearly understands” on the basis of another claim, unless he understands the latter [C] at least as clearly as the former [B].

⁵¹This might also help to explain the formulation of the proof in the *Discourse on Method*, which invokes “the idea of a being *more perfect* than myself” (AT VI.34/CSM I.128; my emphasis), rather than the idea of a supremely perfect, infinite being. The proof otherwise proceeds as in the Third Meditation, using the POR, and concludes that there must be something “with a nature truly more perfect” than oneself—and moreover, something that possesses “in itself *all* the perfections of which I could have any idea” (AT VI.34/CSM I.128; my emphasis). The latter remark makes clear that the expression ‘a being more perfect’ should be interpreted as referring, not to a being with greater, yet finite perfection (since such a being would not have “all perfections of which I could have an idea”), but rather to a being with “actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections,” as in the letter to Clerselier.

⁵²‘*Enim*’ can be translated as ‘for,’ ‘in fact,’ ‘indeed,’ or ‘truly.’

This way of endorsing [C**] might seem problematic if it is assumed, first, that the meditator can endorse a claim only if it is evident or is established by an argument whose premises are evident, and, second, that the claim or the premises that establish it must be *universally, atemporally* evident—evident to anyone, at any time. [C**] is not established by means of an argument, so on this (two-piece) assumption it would follow that it must be universally and atemporally evident. Yet [C**] obviously will not be evident to everyone; for example, it will not be evident to those who, like Hobbes, flatly deny that we have an idea of the infinite.⁵³ So [C**] is not universally evident. Nor will it be evident at any time: for example, it is not evident to the meditator at the self-report passage.⁵⁴ So [C**] is not atemporally evident as well. One might then conclude that by his own lights Descartes should present further argument from universally and atemporally evident premises to the conclusion that [C**] is true, and that it is problematic that he does not do so.

However, the assumption that the meditator can endorse a claim only if it is universally and atemporally evident is mistaken,⁵⁵ and I believe that the foregoing discussion can help explain why such a requirement is not part of Descartes's method. To illustrate, consider that Gassendi rejects [C**] because he holds that the idea of the infinite is posterior to the idea of the finite; in other words, [C**] conflicts with his standing conceptions. I believe that from Descartes's perspective, this is not problematic. Unlike the meditator, Gassendi is not in a position to clearly understand that [C**] is true—this claim is not evident to him—though perhaps it would be, or could become, evident to him in different conditions. Perhaps the problem is that Gassendi holds empiricist presuppositions that have not been successfully suspended, as is required of those willing to meditate properly.⁵⁶ Regardless of the correct explanation for Gassendi's failure to clearly understand [C**], the important point is that, from Descartes's perspective, the problem does not lie in [C**] but in Gassendi.⁵⁷ [C**] is not universally and atemporally evident,

⁵³See the Third Objections (AT VII.185/CSM II.130).

⁵⁴In addition, even after a truth has become evident to the meditator, it might not stay evident to him for very long. On one interpretation of the so-called Cartesian circle (developed in e.g. Della Rocca, "Descartes, the Cartesian Circle, and Epistemology Without God"; and Carriero, "The Cartesian Circle and the Foundations of Knowledge"), it is exactly because the meditator is not at all times in a state of understanding certain truths evidently or clearly and distinctly that he requires a rule to assure him of their truth when he is no longer in that state.

⁵⁵While Descartes makes it clear in the letter to Mersenne of 21 January 1641 that his intention is that "there is nothing in [the] *Meditations* which I [Descartes] do not believe to be either very evident by the natural light or else demonstrated very precisely" (AT III.284–85/CSMK III.169), at no point does Descartes indicate that his use of 'evident' is not restricted in several ways. For example, in the same letter, Descartes reports that he "is confident that [he] can *make it* understood by those who are able and willing to meditate on it" (AT III.284–85/CSMK III.169; my emphasis); by 'meditating,' Descartes does not mean something trivial. Recall also Descartes's comment, cited in note 23, that "we have to form distinct ideas . . . and this is what most people fail to do and what I have mainly tried to teach by my *Meditations*" (AT III.272/CSMK III.165; my emphasis).

⁵⁶See previous note. In addition, compare the *Meditations*' dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne (AT VII.4/CSM II.5); the Second Replies (AT VII.157/CSM II.111–12); Preface to the French edition of the *Principles* (AT IXA.12–13/CSM I.185); and *Principles* I.50 (AT VIII.A.24/CSM I.209).

⁵⁷As was suggested above, failure to have a correct and complete conception of *x* might perhaps be tied to a failure to have a clear and distinct idea of *x*. If so, then from Descartes's perspective, part of the reason that Gassendi does not clearly understand that [C**] is true might be that Gassendi firmly holds a misconception of the idea of an infinite being. This, together with his failure to meditate properly, might blind him to the truth of [C**], so to speak.

nor need it be, but it is evident to those who are in a position to understand it clearly. Gassendi is just not among their number.

Of course, this is not supposed to put an end to the debate between Descartes and Gassendi about the idea of the infinite, but to highlight what is at issue in that debate, and to do so by identifying their underlying disagreement, which centers on [C**]—an evident truth that, from Descartes’s perspective, Gassendi with his misconceptions fails to see.⁵⁸

6. THE PROOF RECONSIDERED

We can now identify the meditator’s reasoning in paragraph 24, which is meant to entitle the meditator to the first premise of the proof. The central claims in this paragraph can now be reordered to clarify the dialectical progress:

[C**] I could not understand that I was finite unless there were in me an idea of an infinite being, upon which my idea of a finite being depends. [A] And I should not think that, just as my perceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my idea of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. [B₂] And accordingly my idea of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my idea of the finite, that is myself. [B₁] I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one.

The starting point of the passage now becomes the meditator’s possession of an idea of himself as a finite being. Read this way, the proof builds upon the argument of the *cogito*, for it begins with the meditator’s self-understanding as an existing, doubting thing, which he now considers in relation to his idea of the infinite. This is arguably a more natural starting point than the mere assertion of the existence of an idea with infinite objective reality, and it allows the meditator to tie his reasoning here to earlier stages of the *Meditations*. Indeed, at the end of the Third Meditation, the meditator’s summary of the reasoning he has performed is telling:

[W]hen I turn my mind’s eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on another . . . but I also understand *at the same time* that he on whom I depend [God] has within him all those greater things, not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely. . . .⁵⁹ (AT VII.51/CSM II.35; my emphasis)

The present interpretation, and the perspective it yields on the dialectical progress of the meditator’s reasoning in the core passage, explains why this summary is apt. For, as we have seen, the crucial step was indeed considering the two ideas *together*, that of the finite and that of the infinite, “at the same time.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸A complete philosophical treatment of this dispute would examine potential arguments for and against the dependence claim in [C**]. This lies beyond the scope of the present essay, which aims to uncover the reasoning behind the first premise of Descartes’s proof of God’s existence in the Third Meditation. The aim is not to provide a dialectically conclusive defense of this premise from independent, neutral premises (nor from premises that are universally and atemporally evident).

⁵⁹Another example is at the beginning of the Fourth Meditation: “[W]hen 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, an idea of God” (AT VII.53/CSM II.37). See also the *Search for Truth*: “[F]rom this universal doubt, as from a fixed and immovable point, I propose to derive the knowledge of God . . .” (AT X.515/CSM II.209).

⁶⁰I here differ from Beyssade and Nolan and Nelson, who read paragraph 24 as making a different point. Nolan and Nelson agree that the starting point of the passage is the idea of oneself as

Recall the potential misconception of the idea of the infinite discussed in section 4: a misconception of the idea as, first, derived or augmented from the idea of the finite, and, second, as involving the negative way in which we conceive of something as merely lacking limits, hence indefinite, rather than the positive understanding of something (namely, God) as “incomparably greater than all those which are in some way limited,” hence infinite. Once the meditator has compared the idea of himself as a finite being to his idea of the infinite, as in [C**], he is in a position to correct this dual misconception: first, he recognizes that his idea of the infinite is not derived or augmented from his idea of a finite being or beings (see [A]). It was previously open to him, à la Gassendi (recall section 3), that this was so. But the possibility of such a misconception has now been eliminated: he now realizes that he “should not think” of his idea of the infinite in this incorrect way. Accordingly, the meditator’s conception has now changed. He now clearly understands that the idea of the infinite is “prior to” his idea of himself qua finite (see [B2]). In effect, he is now endorsing a position similar to the one expressed in the letter to Clerselier, cited above in section 4, namely, “that the notion I have of the infinite is in me *before* that of the finite” (my emphasis).

Second, the meditator is now also in a position to distinguish between his idea of the infinite and his idea of the indefinite, the latter of which only indicates “the mere lack of limits (which is something negative . . .) [and not] a real thing” (letter to Clerselier of 23 April 1649, AT V.356/CSMK III.377). When we conceive of something as indefinite we are simply acknowledging a failure to identify limits. This is incompatible with the corresponding idea being prior to the idea of the finite—on the contrary, understanding something in terms of “the mere lack of limits (which is something negative . . .) [and not] a real thing” cannot be that upon which our idea of our own finitude, which is positive and a real thing, depends. Since the meditator now realizes, in [C**], that the idea he has is prior to the idea of the finite, the meditator can safely conclude that his idea is not merely the idea of the indefinite.

finite, but they hold that the crucial move is the *augmentation* of the meditator’s finite perfections in order to reach a proper understanding of the infinite: “[T]he crucial move now comes in understanding that if something might be endlessly augmented, this is the same as understanding . . . what it is that the process of augmentation can never reach. And that unreachable end is a complete, actual infinity” (“Proofs,” 107–8). Beysade makes a similar remark, focusing on what he describes as “the expanding or amplifying of perfections found in me” (“The Idea,” 180). It is not clear, however, that this type of reading can explain how the meditator can achieve an understanding of the infinite that sufficiently distinguishes it from the indefinite, for the latter is also “an unreachable end” through a process of augmentation (recall section 4). If this is correct, then such a process cannot guarantee that the meditator achieves a proper understanding—in particular, a correct conception—of the infinite. I also differ from Rovane, who reads paragraph 24 as focusing on the fact that the meditator is an imperfect knower. Rovane holds that the meditator achieves a proper understanding of the infinite through reflection on the *temporal* character of this particular imperfection: the Cartesian subject “knows herself to be temporally bounded,” and this recognition presupposes “the idea of a being that could actually survey all of time from a point outside of it, thereby gaining a direct grasp [i.e. knowledge] of what we can only approach but never reach” (“God without Cause,” 101–2). This is an interesting suggestion, but it is not clearly supported by the text of paragraph 24, which does not mention the temporal character of the meditator’s imperfection. Nor does the text seem to privilege imperfect knowledge: the meditator understands that he “doubted or desired—that is, lacked something,” and hence that he is “not wholly perfect” in a more general sense.

In these ways, the meditator eliminates potential errors in his conception. The conception that he now has is no longer *consistent* (nor *potentially inconsistent*) with such errors, and hence no longer poses an obstacle to his *entitlement* to thinking that he has an idea with infinite objective reality. Indeed, [B1] states that an infinite being has more reality than a finite being; since the meditator cannot yet conclude that an infinite being exists, this must be understood as a claim about the reality an infinite being has *to the extent that it is perceived or understood*—in short, a claim about the infinite *objective* reality in an idea of an infinite being. The reasoning undertaken in paragraph 24 thus enables the meditator to gain entitlement to the premise that he has such an idea, which is neither derived from the idea of a finite being nor is simply an idea of the indefinite.⁶¹

To summarize, I propose that paragraph 24 presents the following argument or reasoning in support of the first premise of the Third Meditation proof:

Step (i): I understand that I am finite: I have an idea of a finite being, that is myself. (Second Meditation)

Step (ii): I could not understand that I was finite unless there were in me an idea of an infinite being, upon which my idea of a finite being, which has finite objective reality, depends. [C**]

Step (iii): There is in me (I have) an idea of an infinite being, upon which my idea of a finite being depends. [(i) and (ii)]

Step (iv): Given that my idea of a finite being depends on my idea of an infinite being, my idea of an infinite being is neither derived from my idea of a finite being nor is an idea of the indefinite: that is, it is an idea with infinite objective reality. (recall above)

Step (v): So, I have an idea with infinite objective reality.

As discussed above, this reasoning (in particular, at steps [ii] and [iv]) consists in a significant change in the meditator's conceptions.

It is useful to contrast this interpretation of the Third Meditation proof with Janet Broughton's interpretation in *Descartes's Method of Doubt*. There, Broughton argues that the meditator is not entitled to the claim in [C], namely, the claim that he could not understand that he were not wholly perfect unless he had an idea of a being more perfect than himself. She, too, interprets [C] as invoking dependence, but of a very different sort than I have suggested: for her, the relevant dependence is simply a type of necessitation (or entailment), which is not distinctly conceptual and does not hold between the meditator's ideas. She proposes instead that the meditator is here arguing that any reason to doubt the proposition that he has the requisite idea of God necessitates the proposition's truth; hence, it is not possible to rationally doubt the proposition, in which case it is certain.⁶² However, Broughton argues, this is not so: it *is* possible for the meditator to rationally doubt that he has the requisite idea. Accordingly, the meditator must seek entitlement to the first premise elsewhere.

⁶¹While Descartes does not explicitly say so in the *Meditations*, he clearly thinks that one's idea of an infinite being will have finite objective reality only if it is either derived from an idea of a finite being or is an idea of the indefinite; otherwise, it must have infinite objective reality. This is reflected in step (iv) in the reconstruction of the argument below.

⁶²Broughton, *Descartes's Method of Doubt*, 147–48. I am here summarizing two steps in Broughton's reconstruction. Notably, this is an instance of what Broughton regards as a systematic strategy in the *Meditations*, namely, using doubt in order to achieve certainty. According to Broughton, the meditator employs this strategy in the Third Meditation in an effort to show "both that he can be certain he has a concept of God and that it has the character he needs it to have" (*Descartes's Method of Doubt*, 147–48).

Broughton goes on to consider the possibility that the meditator achieves such entitlement through reflection on the relationship between the finite and the infinite, but she contends that this would amount to an appeal to “an abstract and contentious metaphysical doctrine about the nature of being and infinitude,” and that it is “disappointing” as a way of filling out the proof.⁶³ She does not explain why exactly such metaphysical doctrines must be regarded as “abstract and contentious,” but in any case we can sidestep this evaluation.⁶⁴ I have proposed an alternative interpretation of the meditator’s reasoning in paragraph 24 that focuses simply on the meditator’s comparison of his *ideas*. This interpretation is compatible with what Harry Frankfurt has called the meditator’s “philosophical naïveté.”⁶⁵ While the meditator’s reasoning does invoke the claim that the idea of the finite depends on the idea of the infinite (namely, [C**]), this claim cannot plausibly be said to invoke a “doctrine about the nature of being and infinitude”; it simply cites a relation between two of the meditator’s ideas—a relation that emerges once the meditator considers these two ideas comparatively. And I have proposed that this is what is required for the meditator to become entitled to accept the first premise. The meditator himself does not need, in addition, a theory of the nature of being or infinity (nor dependence) in which these facts about his ideas are couched and explained.

By the end of paragraph 24 the meditator holds that his idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality. On the present interpretation, if the reasoning presented in this paragraph is sound, then he is now entitled to this claim, whereas this was not the case before, since it is here that he goes through the process of changing his conception of the idea of God—a conception which was potentially inconsistent with the premise that this idea has infinite objective reality. In effect, this paragraph removes obstacles to, and provides the meditator with a reason for, accepting this first premise. From this point the proof can proceed as before, only now on safer (albeit not universally, atemporally evident) ground.

7. CONCLUSION

The interpretation I have offered here attempts to uncover a line of reasoning that putatively entitles the meditator to the first premise of the proof for God’s existence in the Third Meditation. I have drawn attention to the notion of a conception and the role it plays in a rule of entitlement—a simple rule of consistency—that plausibly governs the meditator’s endorsement of claims in the *Meditations*. Whereas in the early stages of the Third Meditation the meditator has a misconception that interferes with his entitlement to the premise that he has an idea with infinite

⁶³Broughton, *Descartes’s Method of Doubt*, 152.

⁶⁴Although my interpretation does not emphasize such doctrines, it seems to me that the claims I have highlighted in paragraph 24, or any other claims made in the course of the proof concerning being or infinitude, are no more abstract, nor more contentious, nor more metaphysical than many claims in the *Meditations*—including claims that Broughton herself seems to treat as legitimate (e.g. claims concerning the possibility of thought regarding spatial objects, as in the famous wax passage of the Second Meditation, to which Broughton does not seem to object; see *Descartes’s Method of Doubt*, 171–72).

⁶⁵Frankfurt, *Demons, Dreamers, and Madmen*, 6.

objective reality, I have argued that at a later stage the meditator's conception undergoes a change, so that it is no longer potentially inconsistent with the first premise of the proof.

This interpretation makes sense of why a simple appeal to the transparency of thought or clarity and distinctness of the meditator's idea of God is unsatisfying and does not suffice for the premise that he has an idea with infinite objective reality. At the same time, it also explains how the proof is connected to the earlier stages in the *Meditations*, in particular, to the *cogito*. This is the starting point: the proof's first premise does not rest on an untenable appeal to the transparency of thought nor on a brute assertion of clarity and distinctness; rather, it is secured through an argument that comes about through a change in the meditator's conceptions, and builds upon his realization that he is a doubting, finite thing. Consequently, the meditator's justification for the existence of the requisite idea can be seen to fit naturally within the overall progression of the *Meditations*.

More generally, this interpretation of the Third Meditation proof might help to illuminate a kind of epistemic progress in the *Meditations*, centered on a process of correcting and completing the meditator's conceptions. For example, whereas at the start of his inquiry the meditator might have a Gassendian misconception of his idea of an infinite being that poses an obstacle to his entitlement to the proof's first premise, in the Third Meditation the meditator corrects his conception. Here we find what may be described as the double role of the meditator's conceptions, roles that are respectively factive and normative. Regarding the first role, at any given stage of inquiry the meditator's extant conceptions *record* the progress made up to that point, insofar as his extant conceptions exclude those elements of the initial conception that were shown to be incorrect while incorporating subsequent insights (recall stages *a* through *d* in the meditator's conception of himself, discussed in section 3, as well as the various steps in the argument of paragraph 24, discussed in section 6). Regarding the second role, at any given stage of inquiry the meditator's extant conceptions *constrain* what he may then accept, as in the consistency rule (discussed in section 3) that the meditator is entitled to a claim only if it is not inconsistent, nor potentially inconsistent, with his conceptions.⁶⁶

The present discussion does not aspire to an exhaustive treatment of the dual role of conceptions in the *Meditations*. Instead, my aim has been simply to indicate the importance of these roles, especially in the Third Meditation, where attention to the meditator's conceptions at various stages of his inquiry may help to identify the reasoning underlying his claim to possess an idea with infinite objective reality and perhaps place this claim in a more charitable light.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Whereas some scholars have gestured toward what I am calling the 'factive role' of conceptions in the meditator's epistemic progress (recall note 35), I am unaware of any mention in the literature of what I am calling their 'normative role.'

⁶⁷Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Yale, UNC-Chapel Hill, ANU, the South Central Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Texas A&M, and the Mid-Atlantic Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy at Princeton; I am grateful to participants in these meetings for their helpful suggestions. In addition, I would like to thank the editor and anonymous referees for the JHP, Brom Anderson, Omri Boehm, Ulrika Carlsson, Stephen Darwall, Keith DeRose, Arnon Levy, Alan Nelson, Elliot Paul, Dominik Perler, Zoltan Szabo, Gilad Tanay, and Ken Winkler. Special thanks are due to Michael Della Rocca, and above all, to John Bengson.

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