Descartes’ Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being

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, 4:113; 3:232).¹

There is a tendency to understand Descartes as in effect 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. 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” (1978, 146). Alternatively, Descartes (and the meditator) is sometimes said to rely on the reach of introspection and the transparency of thought: to wit, the requisite idea of God is there, simply waiting to be noticed. Either way, readers of the *Meditations* often find this crucial premise unconvincing and, like Williams, distance themselves from it.

This paper aims to show that Descartes presents a subtle justification in the Third Meditation, beyond mere appeal to the alleged transparency of thought, 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’ (and the

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translations are taken from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volumes 1-3. The original texts in Latin or French may be found in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, volumes 1–12. (Full bibliographical information is provided below.) References to Descartes’ work in the main text and notes cite the volume and page number in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, followed (after a semi-colon) by the volume and page number in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 
meditator’s) lights the meditator is not entitled to this premise at the outset of the proof. Although he does in fact have an idea of God, he may misconceive the idea in a way that undermines his entitlement to certain claims about it—in particular, the crucial claim that his idea has infinite objective reality. Second, I explain how in the Meditations the possibility of such misconceptions is subsequently eliminated. This is done when the meditator turns his attention to other ideas that he possesses at this stage of his inquiry, specifically, his idea of his own finite self (as revealed by the cogito). He realizes that having an idea of a finite being depends on having the requisite idea of an infinite being; and since he has the former, he must have the latter as well.

This interpretation, if correct, allows us to view the Third Meditation argument for God’s existence in a more charitable light. The primary aim of the paper is to examine the meditator’s justification for the existence of the requisite idea, and to show how this justification can be seen to fit naturally within—and, indeed, to be an indispensable part of—the overall progression of the Meditations. A secondary aim is to highlight an important way in which epistemic progress is 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, at subsequent stages of inquiry he corrects these misconceptions in a way that makes available new insights about these and other philosophical topics.

1. The proof

Although the proof for God’s existence in the Third Meditation is generally well-known,² it is

² There are in fact two proofs for God’s existence in the Third Meditation; I will discuss only the first of them here. (It is widely thought that the second proof is not completely independent of, and is rather an elaboration of, 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” (4:112; 3:231-2).) Accordingly, expressions such as ‘the proof’ or ‘the proof in the Third Meditation’ are to be understood as referring to the first proof, presented, approximately, at 7:40-47; 2:27-32 and especially at 7:45-6; 2:31.
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.³

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, an infinite being (or, as Descartes
sometimes says, an infinite substance). The meditator seems to report this much in the following passage
from 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 (7:40; 2:28).

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” (7:41; 2:29).⁴ (Ideas are of course also things—viz., modes of a thinking substance—and so they,
too, possess formal reality, in addition to objective or representational reality.) Both types of reality allow

³ Detailed reconstructions of the proof are offered in, e.g., Kenny (1968) and Curley (1978). Nolan and Nelson
(2006) offer a two-premise reconstruction that is similar to the one I will suggest.

⁴ I will treat objective being and objective reality (and likewise formal being and formal reality) as equivalent
notions, as done in, e.g., Hoffman (1996, 359) and Alanen (2003, 122ff). 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 (1986, 189-190), Field (1993, 318-319), and perhaps Kaufman (2000,
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.
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 (7:165-6; 2:117).

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 (7:185; 2:130).\(^5\)

The difference observed here between finite and infinite substance is grounded in Descartes’ 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.\(^6\) 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’ metaphysics, a mode,

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\(^5\) I have elided reference to “real qualities or incomplete substances”, since they are irrelevant to the current discussion. See Menn (1995) for further discussion of this topic.

\(^6\) *Principles of Philosophy* (henceforth “Principles”) I.51 (8A:24; 1:210). 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.
understood as a property of a substance, depends for its existence on its substance. 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:

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<th>formal reality</th>
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<td>an infinite substance</td>
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<td>a finite substance</td>
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<tr>
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<td>a mode</td>
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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, viz., infinite formal reality; correlativey, the idea of an infinite being, and it alone, possesses a higher degree of objective reality than any other idea, viz., infinite objective reality. 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 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 (7:41; 2:128).

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8 Cf. the Synopsis to the *Meditations* (7:14-5; 2:10-1), the Sixth Meditation (7:79; 2:55), and the letter to Mersenne
This passage 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. This premise is endorsed by the meditator as certainly true, and even as “manifest by the natural light” (7:40; 2:28). To the extent that any further argumentation is undertaken, it is only said 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’ view, certainly true. While there is of course room to ask whether this premise is correct, that is not our project here, so let us simply grant for the sake of argument that the meditator is entitled to it.9

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.10

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” (7:40; 2:28). 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 the next section that this temptation ought to be resisted.

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9 For further, largely sympathetic discussion of the causal principle see, e.g., Clatterbaugh (1980), Broughton (2002), and Schmaltz (2008).

10 Strictly 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.
2. The first premise: Transparent? Clear and distinct?

In the self-report passage 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 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” (7:35; 2:24-5). 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, 3:393; 3:185). 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 a little later begins with the words “by the word ‘God’ I understand a substance that is infinite...” (7:45; 2:31, 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 claim?

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

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11 Cf. the Appendix to the Fifth Replies (7:209; 2:273).
of mental states and mental content are transparent to the reflective mind (1978, 151).

The strategy of appealing to transparency of thought 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 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” (1989, 26).

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” (1978, 112).

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.

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13 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 this is drawn from “what his consciousness contains” (1978, 128). Cf. Gueroult (1968, vol. 1, 151), who seems to suggest that Descartes takes the content of one’s consciousness to be accessible through an “intellectual intuition”. Compare this to Williams’ suggestion that the meditator “makes the crucial reflection” that he has the idea of God; the meditator then notes, according to this suggestion, that “the reality that attaches itself to the object of this idea, unlike the others, is the highest conceivable degree of reality” (1978, 142).

14 See also Kaufman (2000, 388), who cites Wilson’s remark approvingly.

15 Wilson in fact goes on to say that reading Descartes as holding that objective reality is in general transparent to
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” \([\text{non res}]\) (7:43-4; 2:30).\(^{16}\) 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 “\textit{do not enable me to tell} whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa” (7:44; 2:30, my emphasis). And in the Fourth Replies he writes: “If I

\(^{16}\) There 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, endorsed by, e.g., Wilson (1978) and Field (1993), if the idea of cold is materially false it must follow that cold is a non-thing, i.e., the absence of heat. On the second approach, endorsed in, e.g., Beyssade (1992a), Nelson (1996), Kaufman (2000), Alanen (2003), Brown (2007), and Shapiro (forthcoming), 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). 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 in fact have (as determined by the formal reality their object in fact has) and what objective really they seem to have (as determined by the formal reality their object seems to have). See the following note for further discussion.
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” (7:232; 2:163, 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. 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

17 There is a further question as to what degree of objective reality the mind *can* read off a materially false idea. Views differ here. One view is that 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 (1989, 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 Wells (1984), Normore (1986), and Kaufman (2000). A different 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 Wilson (1978) and (1990), and Bolton (1986). 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 these ideas in fact have and the degree of objective reality 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 of objective reality 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 Field (1993), Perler (1996), Hoffman (1996), and Brown (2007). 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 [name omitted for blind review] for pressing me to clarify this point.
clear and distinct. 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. The invocation of clarity and distinctness is attractive. But it confronts the problem that there is no guarantee, in the self-report passage, that the meditator’s idea of an infinite being is already clear and distinct. 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’ stated aims in the Meditations, namely, to teach his readers “to form clear and distinct ideas”. 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. Indeed, it is preferable to identify an alternative ground for the meditator’s

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18 See the Third Meditation (7:41; 2:28) and the Fourth Replies (7:233; 2:163).

19 This reading is suggested in Wilson (1978, 114).

20 This 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. See Gewirth (1943) for a classic discussion of clear and distinct ideas, and Patterson (2008) for a more recent discussion.

21 Letter to Mersenne of 31 December 1640: “…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” (3:272; 3:165). 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” (7:157; 2:111).

22 Cf. Nolan and Nelson (2006, 107). Importantly, when the meditator finally does say that his idea of an infinite
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.\textsuperscript{23}

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, for example, he conceives of God as an enormous man with a long, white beard\textsuperscript{24}), in which case his idea of an infinite being would \textit{not} be clear and distinct at the self-report passage. This type of concern can be discerned in Descartes’ exchanges with Gassendi, which (in Descartes’ view) center on a serious confusion about the nature of the idea of God. Below, we will discuss this concern and the associated notion of misconception in detail. We will also examine some misconceptions that the meditator may harbor at the self-report passage—misconceptions that are subtle enough to be harbored by Gassendi. In effect, it is not implausible or exaggerated to think that the meditator may harbor them 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. Let us, therefore, look elsewhere for a more charitable perspective on the meditator’s reasoning.

\textsuperscript{23} To my mind, such an interpretation would serve to vindicate Leibniz’s complaint that Descartes’ method is “take what is needed; do as you ought; and you will get what you wanted” (1875-1890, 4:329).

\textsuperscript{24} Descartes, 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, 7:365; 2:252). We will discuss Gassendi’s conception of God in detail below.
3. The role of conceptions in the Meditations

The meditator’s endorsement of various claims in the *Meditations* is governed by rules and norms, which, although not always stated explicitly, are evidently an integral part of his 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. The task of explicitly and coherently stating all of these norms is formidable—just think of the famous “truth rule” and the issues of circularity it raises. Still, it seems that some rules are fairly clear. Eventually, I am going to suggest a rule that very plausibly governs the meditator’s entitlement to claims in the *Meditations*: roughly, the meditator must be consistent. This rule is quite humble in comparison to others (e.g. the truth rule), which explains why it need not be stated explicitly (and indeed the meditator does not so state it). However, as we shall see, it is a rule to which an interpretation of the Third Meditation proof must be sensitive.

The rule will focus, specifically, on consistency within the meditator’s conceptions. 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 considering an illustration that draws upon an objection made by Gassendi to the first premise of the proof in the Third Meditation. After considering this objection, as well as Descartes’ reply, we will be able to make precise the concern that the meditator may harbor misconceptions that force him to engage in special, further reasoning—beyond the mere appeal to transparency or the brute assertion of clarity and distinctness—to achieve entitlement to this

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25 See the Second Meditation (7:27; 2:18). 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.”

26 The “truth rule” is the rule that “whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (the Third Meditation, 7:35; 2:24). The famous 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.
In the Fifth Set of Objections to the *Meditations*, Gassendi denies that our idea of God has infinite objective reality. He does not go as 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 or representational 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! (7:287; 2:200)

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 contains no reality except what we perceive in other things or as a result of encountering other things (7:288; 2:201, 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.\(^{27}\)

Descartes’ 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 nature of 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

\(^{27}\) 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.
the infinite or of anything else (7:365; 2:252). In Descartes’ view, 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 comprehend [comprehendere] the infinite, we can understand [intelligere] it; 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’ perspective, the heart of Gassendi’s confusion—concerns the nature of our idea of God, which is not merely derivative nor constructed (as discussed in the next section). In other words, from Descartes’ perspective, Gassendi harbors misconceptions of the nature of the idea of God: his conception of this idea is incorrect.

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). Different individuals, or even the same individual at different times, may have varying conceptions of the same thing, even though one and the same idea is held. Hence Descartes can talk, 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: by “whatever way we conceive of him [de quelque manière qu’on le conçoive], we have the idea of him [on en a l’idée]” (letter to Mersenne of July 1641, 3:392; 3:185). Since one and the same idea may be

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28 However, in the Fourth Replies Descartes suggests that adequate knowledge can be attained by divine revelation. See the Fourth Replies (7:221; 2:156).

29 See the Third Meditation (7:46; 2:32) and the First Replies (7:112; 2:81). Comprehendere is translated in the Philosophical Writings as ‘to grasp’.

30 For a discussion of the exchange between Descartes and Gassendi and the significance of their philosophical differences, see, e.g., Lennon (1993, especially ch. 1, §6).

31 Cf., e.g., the First Replies (7:105; 2:76) and Discourse on Method part IV (6:37; 1:129).

32 Cf. Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence, where Descartes speaks of a mode or way of conceiving [modus concipiendi] (10:412; 1:40).
accompanied by different conceptions, one’s conception of x—the way one thinks, understands or conceives of x—need not always be itself one’s idea (or concept) of x.33

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:


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 (7:26; 2:17)

c. I am, in the strict sense, only a thing that thinks. (7:27; 2:18)

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. (7:81; 2:56)

These examples suggest 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

33 I leave it as an open question what kind of entities these ways of conceiving, or conceptions, are in Descartes’ view. Plausibly, one’s conception of x is not, or at least is not always, one’s idea of x—for, as seen in the letter to Mersenne quoted in the text, one and the same idea of x can be accompanied by different conceptions of x (“whatever way we conceive of [God], we have the idea of [God]”). Likewise, it seems, one’s conception of x is not, or not always, a judgment concerning x—for 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). For contemporary treatments of conceptions and misconceptions which may bear on our understanding of Descartes’ notion of “way of conceiving”, see Peacocke (1998), Higginbotham (1998), and Bengson and Moffett (forthcoming).

34 The meditator says that this “came into my thought spontaneously and quite naturally” (7:26; 2:17).
confused: one misconceives (has a misconception) of x.

Taking seriously the notion of a way of conceiving—the notion of a conception—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, 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 of his misconceptions 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, to the effect that the manner in which Gassendi conceives of substance “proves that you [Gassendi] have no distinct idea of substance”. 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.

35 “Here you prove that you have no distinct idea of substance. For a substance can never be conceived [concipi potest] in the guise of its accidents” (Fifth Replies, 7:364; 2:251). Gassendi may be comparable to the subject in Burge’s contract example (1979), who misunderstands the concept contract insofar as he conceives of contracts as requiring paper.

36 Curley 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” (1986, 158). I say “perhaps” because Curley sometimes employs the pairs of terms ‘conception’ and ‘concept’ (on, e.g., 166, 167), and ‘concept’ and ‘idea’ (on, e.g., 168, 169) in a way that suggests that he assumes all three to be
Third, this approach allows us to identify a rule that very plausibly governs the endorsement of claims in the *Meditations*. Naturally, the meditator can endorse a claim only if he can consistently accept it while maintaining his relevant conceptions. But, of course, mere consistency is not by itself enough 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. As these examples make clear, the requirements on the meditator’s entitlement go beyond consistency. In particular, the meditator is entitled to a claim only if it is not inconsistent nor 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.\(^{37}\) 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.\(^{38}\) Thus when we return to the Third Meditation we will see that, whereas the meditator has interchangeable, an assumption I do not share (recall note 33). Cf. Cunning (2010, e.g., 214).

\(^{37}\) This rule might be compared to 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 (7:60; 2:41). Likewise, if one happens to have a conception that is consistent with a true claim \(p\) simply because one’s conception is completely silent both on \(p\) and on \(\neg p\), 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 \(p\).

\(^{38}\) This 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 conception of \(x\) that is consistent with \(p\). Rather, the entitlement 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
a potential misconception (in this sense, he may harbor a misconception) at the self-report passage, his conception changes at a crucial point in the proof; and this change, I argue, removes a potential inconsistency with the first premise that previously interfered with his entitlement to that premise.

For now it suffices to note that, if I am right to draw this connection between entitlement and conceptions in the Meditations, then we can see why appeals to transparency or to clarity and distinctness miss the mark in their attempt to account for the meditator’s entitlement to the first premise: they are not appropriately sensitive to the concern that the meditator’s conceptions are potentially inconsistent with the premise that his idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality, in which case he cannot be entitled to this premise merely on account of its transparency or clarity and distinctness. In other words, such appeals are not sensitive to the concern that the meditator may harbor misconceptions. The point may be illustrated by the case of Gassendi: insofar as he conceives of the idea of God as constructed or derived, 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 [name omitted for blind review] for pressing me to clarify the distinction between static and dynamic rules of entitlement.

Moreover, as suggested just above, 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. Hence it is plausible that in some cases the meditator is not in a position to have a clear and distinct idea until certain misconceptions (or potential misconceptions) are corrected. To draw again on the example of the meditator’s conception of himself: it is plausible that so long as the meditator has a misconception of himself as a bodily thing, as in the First Meditation, he is not 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” (7:25; 2:17).
he holds a conception that is inconsistent with the idea of God having infinite objective reality, and thus he is not entitled to this premise. Hence Descartes’ 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, or in the reasoning leading to it. Rather, there are reasons to think that at that early stage of the meditator’s inquiry the meditator, like Gassendi, may 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 section, we will see how this concern is eventually laid to rest at a later stage in the Third Meditation.

4. The meditator’s conceptions

It will be helpful to first consider what is the correct conception of the idea of an infinite being. In a letter to Clerserlier, 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 (23 April 1649, 5:356; 3:377).

Here Descartes makes clear that the idea of the infinite is prior to the idea of the finite: it is “there first”,

40 The case of Aquinas provides another illustration: insofar as Aquinas conceives of our idea of God as originating from the senses, he holds a conception that is inconsistent with the idea of God having infinite objective reality (recall note 27). For a comparison of Aquinas’ and Descartes’ conceptions of the idea of God see Carriero (2009, ch. 4).

41 Cf. the letter to Hyperaspistes of August 1641 (3:427; 3:192) and the conversation with Burman (5:153; 3:338). In order to maintain uniformity, I will use ‘idea’ where Descartes uses ‘notion’ (notion) as well as were he uses ‘idea’ (idée). Indeed, in the next paragraph of the letter to Clerserlier Descartes switches to idée where he previously had notion.
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.\textsuperscript{42} Clearly, in Gassendi’s view our idea is not prior to the ideas of finite things in the sense of priority mentioned in Descartes’ letter to Clerselier.

Another relevant feature of the idea of an infinite being, according to Descartes, is this: the idea of the infinite is distinct from the idea of that which is indefinite. Whereas infinity is a positive metaphysical feature that pertains to God alone, indefiniteness is a negative epistemic feature, indicating our failure to comprehend limits.\textsuperscript{43} 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 (5:356; 3:377).

Elsewhere, Descartes provides several examples of indefinite beings: the natural numbers, extended matter and the space it occupies, and the divisibility of material bodies (\textit{Principles} I.26-7, 8A:14-15; 1:201-2).\textsuperscript{44} The natural numbers illustrate the sense in which the lack of limits is merely negative: although it is true that we can conceive of no largest finite number, it is not true that there is an infinite number. The epistemic dimension of the distinction is emphasized in the \textit{Principles}:

\textsuperscript{42} Cf. the First Replies (7:139; 2:100), the Fifth Replies (7:365; 2:252), and the letter to Regius of 24 May 1640 (3:64; 3:147).

\textsuperscript{43} I defend this interpretation of Descartes’ distinction between the infinite and the indefinite in detail in [citation omitted for blind review].

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. the letter to Chanut of 6 June 1647 (5:52; 3:320), the letter to Arnauld of 29 July 1648 (5:224; 3:359), and the letter to More of 15 April 1649 (5:347; 3:375).
For in 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, 8A:27; 1:201)

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 is always confined within some limit” (7:286; 2:200). This on Descartes’ view seems to correspond to the “negative” way in which we conceive of something as indefinite, rather than the “positive” understanding of something (namely, God) as 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. If Descartes is right, then the idea of the infinite can possess infinite objective reality: such a Cartesian conception is consistent with this claim. 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 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, we can see the force of the following question: *might the meditator harbor a misconception of God at the early stages of the Third Meditation?* Recall that the meditator
begins his investigations with an incorrect conception of God as possibly not omnipotent or as possibly a
deceiver (possibilities he does not renounce until later in the Third Meditation), and possibly non-existent
(a possibility he does not renounce until the Fifth Meditation). Turning from the meditator’s conception of
God to his conception of his idea of God, we can also ask: *might the meditator harbor a misconception of
the idea of God at the early stages of the Third Meditation?* In other words, might the meditator at that
point harbor a Gassendian conception of his idea of the infinite? Indeed, his comment in the self-report
passage that “the idea that gives [him his] understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient,
onnipotent, 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, e.g., finite duration, finite knowledge,
finite power, and so on. This illustrates just a few of the ways in which, at the outset of the Third
Meditation, the meditator may harbor a misconception—whether a misconception of God or of the idea of
God—that is inconsistent with the true claim that his idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality.

The implications should be clear. We saw above that by the standards for making epistemic
progress in the *Meditations*, a potential inconsistency between a claim and the meditator’s standing
conceptions is enough to prevent him from being entitled to that claim, and from using it as a premise in
an argument or proof. At the early stages of the Third Meditation, then, the meditator is not yet entitled to
the premise that he has an idea with infinite objective reality. This remains so despite his assertion in the
self-report passage that he has such an idea—an assertion that from the present perspective he is not yet
entitled to make (even if his idea does *in fact* contain infinite objective reality).

At the same time, this perspective allows us to maintain, as I have argued that we should (recall
§2), that the meditator is entitled to the claim, in the self-report passage, that he has an idea of an infinite
being. It also allows us to explain how, from Descartes’ point of view, Gassendi can disagree with him
about the nature of our idea of an infinite being (as well as about the nature of the infinite). In addition, it
allows us to accommodate Descartes’ view that the idea of God is innate and transparent to the reflective
mind, without making its innateness nor its transparency enough to entitle the meditator to the premise
that this idea has infinite objective reality. The idea is innate and transparent to the reflective mind, 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 harbor misconceptions about them in ways that, in his words, “lead to a contradiction”.

Now, there is a point in the Third Meditation at which the meditator rejects the possibility that his idea of the infinite is derived from the idea of himself, a finite being. He considers the possibility that his knowledge is potentially limitless, and asks: “if the potentiality for [supreme and infinite] perfections is already within me, why should not this be enough to generate the ideas of such perfections?” (7:47; 2:32, 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. However, this explicit rejection occurs only after the proof has been completed—and, as we shall see, after the meditator has achieved a correct conception of the idea. In effect, the meditator now (after the proof) correctly asserts that he has an idea with infinite objective reality, and not (as in the case of a derived idea) merely finite objective reality. On the reading of the text that I will suggest below, this is as it should be: the meditator is now—but not at the earlier

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45 See the letter to Clerselier of 17 February 1645: “For, 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; and when the Ancients named many gods they did not understand thereby many all-powerful beings, but only many powerful beings, above whom they imagined a single Jupiter as sovereign, to whom alone, consequently, they applied the idea of the true God, which was presented confusedly to them” (4:187-8; 3:248, my emphasis).

46 A similar assertion occurs shortly beforehand in the Third Meditation, when the meditator says, “I must not think that…my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite” (7:45; 2:31). As I argue in the next section, in the dialectic of the Third Meditation this, too, follows upon the meditator’s achieving a correct conception of the idea of God.
stage of his inquiry—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 correct various potential misconceptions and allow him to proceed with the proof. In this section I explain how, in my view, this change is brought about.

I believe that the self-report passage is at most a preliminary stage in or the beginning of the meditator’s discussion of God in the Third Meditation; in other words, it is not part of the proof itself, but introduces reflection on the meditator’s idea of God, and eventually readies the meditator to offer the first premise of the proof. In my view, the core of the Third Meditation’s proof of God’s existence is presented in one passage, which I quote here in full (for ease of discussion, sentences are marked with letters); let us call it the core passage:47

[A] …but this [the fact that I am a substance] would not account for my having the idea of an infinite substance, when I am finite, unless this idea proceeded from some substance which really was infinite. [B] And I must not think that, just as my perceptions [percipio] 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. [C1] On the contrary, now [nam] I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, [C2] and so [proinde] that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. [D] 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

47 Other interpreters who take this passage to contain the crux of the proof include Beyssade (1992b) and Nolan and Nelson (2006), even though they take it to make a different point than I do (I return to this difference below). Kenny (1968, 135-8) expresses what seems to be a much more prevalent approach when he takes this passage to contain at most an afterthought to the proof, either adding a point of clarification or considering and answering a possible objection.
perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison? (7:45-6; 2:31)

The first sentence, [A], summarizes the second premise of the proof, which has already been introduced and explained (recall §1): the cause of the meditator’s idea of an infinite being must be an infinite being. The remaining sentences, [B] to [D], are not idle. On the contrary, they hold the key to understanding the first premise. The meditator’s reasoning is subtle and short: the change to which I have been alluding occurs somewhat elliptically in [D], while [B] and [C] help to explain the change that is taking place.

Before discussing this change, let us observe that in [D] the meditator tells us that he understands that he doubts, desires, and lacks something—as he makes explicit just before in [C], he understands 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). It is even repeated at the opening of the Third Meditation: “I am a thing that thinks: that is, a thing that doubts…” (7:34; 2:24).

Here it is worth pausing to note, in addition, that [D] 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 the paragraph following the core passage, the meditator refers to “this idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being” (7:46; 2:31). Shortly thereafter he says: “God…I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection” (7:46-7; 2:31-2). These remarks help us to interpret the core passage. In [D], the

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48 The translation in The Philosophical Writings is slightly altered here: in [C2] I have translated proinde (which can be translated with ‘hence’, ‘therefore’, ‘as a result’, ‘accordingly’, and ‘so’) with ‘so’ rather than ‘hence’ to avoid the (in my view misleading) implication that [C2] is meant to be a simple deductive consequence of [C1]. In [B] 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 in the subsequent discussion I will sometimes use ‘idea’ where Descartes uses ‘perception’ (percipio).

meditator describes himself as *doubting*, as *lacking something*, and as *not wholly perfect* [non omnino perfectum]; in view of the previous sentence, [C], 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 [D], the meditator speaks of an idea of a more *perfect* being; in view of the previous sentences [A], [B], and [C], 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 [D] invokes an idea of a *more* perfect being [idea entis perfectionis], where one would have expected reference to the idea of a *supremely* perfect being [idea entis summe perfecti], as in the discussion immediately following the core passage (quoted in the previous paragraph). I think that it is clear from the context of [D] 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: “how 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?” (7:365; 2:252, my emphasis) Presumably Descartes is drawing a distinction between *created* perfections, and perfections *simpliciter* (i.e. perfections in an unqualified sense). The latter are not merely quantitatively greater than created human perfections, but also qualitatively greater. If this is correct, then the meditator’s remark in [D] 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 *qualitatively* (not merely *quantitatively*) more perfect, that is, an idea of a being that is perfect *simpliciter*: a supremely perfect—i.e., infinite—being.\(^{50}\)

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\(^{50}\) This distinction between being quantitatively and qualitatively more perfect also helps to explain the formulation of the proof in the *Discourse on Method*, which invokes “the idea of a being *more perfect* than myself” (6:34; 1:128,
These interpretative observations suggest the following paraphrase of [D]:

[D*] 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. But this is not all: in addition, he is telling us that this understanding is possible in virtue of having an idea of an infinite being. In this sense, the idea which gives the meditator his understanding of a finite being depends on his idea of an infinite being. Such dependence is presumably ontological, in the sense that the former idea depends for its existence on the latter idea. This would make good sense of the meditator’s comment in [C2] that his idea of the infinite is “in some way prior to” his idea of the finite: to wit, the idea of the finite ontologically depends on the idea of the infinite. 51

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

[D**] 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.

The meditator can affirm that understanding that he is finite depends on having an idea of an infinite being because, upon comparing the two ideas, he clearly sees that the dependence relation holds. This is evident from the dialectical progress of the passage. In [C] the meditator states something he “clearly

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 has to be something “with a nature truly more perfect” than oneself. Descartes then says that a being that is more perfect also has these perfections maximally, and hence that it is God (ibid). Clearly, Descartes cannot be taking “more perfect” here in the quantitative sense, in which something that is merely wiser or stronger than myself (quantitatively speaking) can be said to be more perfect. The inference plainly requires a qualitative difference in perfection, and thus perfection simpliciter.

51 Elsewhere, in [citation omitted for blind review], I argue that this dependence shares important characteristics with the dependence of mode on its substance, which is a paradigm case of ontological dependence, and proceed to suggest a general characterization of Cartesian ontological dependence that covers both cases.
understands”. Yet, as indicated by the fact that [D] begins with the explicatory “for” [enim], the truth of [C] is recognized on the basis of [D]. So, [D] 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 [D] at least as clearly as the former [C]. The next section explores the meditator’s reasoning in greater detail.

6. The proof reconsidered

We can now identify the meditator’s reasoning which entitles him to the first premise of the proof. This reasoning is presented in what I have suggested is the core passage of the Third Meditation’s proof. Setting [A] to the side, the central claims can now be reordered to clarify the dialectical progress:

[D**] 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. [B] And I should not think that, just as my perceptions [percipio] 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. [C2] And so [proinde] my idea of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my idea of the finite, that is myself. [C1] Now [nam] 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 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:

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52 Enim can be translated as ‘for’, ‘in fact’, ‘indeed’, or ‘truly’.
[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…” (7:51; 2:35, my emphasis).53

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”.54

Once the meditator has compared the idea of himself as a finite being to his idea of the infinite, as in [D], he is in a position to recognize that his idea of the infinite is not derived from his idea of a finite being or beings [B]. It was previously open to him, à la Gassendi (recall §3), that this was so. But the

53 Another example is at the beginning of the Fourth Meditation: “when I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God” (7:53; 2:37). See also the Search for Truth: “from this universal doubt, as from a fixed and immovable point, I propose to derive the knowledge of God…” (10:515; 2:209).

54 I here differ from Beyssade (1992b) and Nolan and Nelson (2006), who read the core passage as making a different point. Nolan and Nelson agree that the starting point of the passage is the idea of oneself as 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: “the 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” (2006, 107-8). Beyssade makes a similar remark, focusing on what he describes as “the expanding or amplifying of perfections found in me” (1992b, 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 §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.
possibility of such a misconception has now been eliminated: he now realizes that he “should not think” or conceive of his idea of the infinite in this incorrect way. Accordingly, the meditator’s conception has now changed. He now clearly sees that the idea of the infinite is “prior to” his idea of himself qua finite (recall §5). In effect, he is now endorsing a position similar to the one expressed in the letter to Clerselier (recall §4). Hence we can see that by endorsing the dependence claim, the meditator begins to complete and correct his conception of the idea of the infinite.

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”. 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 [D**], 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.

In these ways, the meditator eliminates potential Gassendian errors in his conceptions. The conceptions that he now has are no longer consistent with such errors, and hence no longer pose an obstacle to his entitlement to thinking that he has an idea with infinite objective reality. The reasoning described in the core passage thereby enables the meditator to be entitled to the premise that he has an idea, which is not simply the idea of the indefinite, that has more reality than any idea of a finite being or beings, namely, infinite objective reality. Indeed, [C1] 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 objective reality in an idea of an infinite being. Since this idea has positively more objective reality than any idea of a finite being or beings, according to the reality hierarchy it has infinite objective reality.
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 [D]. She, too, interprets [D] as invoking dependence, but of a very different sort than I have suggested: for her, the relevant dependence is a type of necessitation (or entailment), which is not distinctly ontological (nor does it 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 depends on the proposition’s truth; hence, it is not possible to rationally doubt the proposition, in which case it is certain. 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.

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 require appealing 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 (2000, 152). 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.

I have proposed an alternative interpretation of the first

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55 Broughton (2000, 147-8). 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.”

56 Although my interpretation does not focus on such doctrines, it seems to me that they 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. One example is provided by the famous wax passage of the Second Meditation. There, Broughton says, “as [the meditator] reflects upon a piece of wax, he finds that his ordinary way of thinking about it depends upon his having a conception of it that he had never recognized before”; namely, a conception of it as “something that is extended and can undergo innumerably many changes in size and shape” (2000, 171-2; cf. the
premise that focuses, not on any “doctrine about the nature of being and infinitude”, but rather simply on the meditator’s comparison of his ideas. This interpretation is compatible with what Harry Frankfurt has called the meditator’s “philosophical naivete” (1970, 6). Indeed, [D**] does not consist in a fully developed “doctrine” about infinity, but 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.

At the end of the core passage, the meditator affirms that his idea of an infinite being has infinite objective reality. He is now entitled to this claim, whereas this was not the case before the reasoning presented in this passage. On the interpretation I have offered, in this passage he goes through the process of changing his conception of the idea, a conception which was potentially inconsistent with the premise that this idea has infinite objective reality. In effect, this passage 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 ground.

7. Conclusion

Second Meditation, 7:31; 2:21). This metaphysical claim—concerning the nature of our grasp of spatial objects—seems to be “abstract and contentious”, yet Broughton does not seem to object. In fact, she says that in the case of the wax the meditator “achieves greater clarity and distinctness in his thoughts about the physical world” (2000, 172). Broughton’s discussion indicates that perhaps on her view, a difference may be found, not in the claims themselves, but in the role of the arguments in which such claims feature: the proof of God’s existence is part of the anti-skeptical stance of the Meditations, while not so for the wax passage, where it is permissible to obtain conclusions that are not immune to doubt. This position may be influenced by Curley’s interpretation of the wax passage, which argues that the passage involves a suspension of doubt regarding the existence of external objects (1978: 213).
I have attempted to uncover a subtle line of reasoning that entitles the meditator to the claim that he has the kind of idea of an infinite being required by the proof for God’s existence in the Third Meditation—an idea the possession of which is crucial for the proof’s success. This reading of the meditator’s reasoning reveals that the proof is intimately 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 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*.

This approach to the Third Meditation proof serves to illustrate, more generally, how we might understand epistemic progress in the *Meditations*, namely, through a process consisting in the correction and completion of the meditator’s conceptions. Whereas at the start of his inquiry the meditator may have a Gassendian misconception of his idea of an infinite being, in the Third Meditation he corrects his conception, thereby removing an obstacle to entitlement to the proof’s first premise. This illustrates 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 so far, 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 §3). Regarding the second role, at any given stage of inquiry the meditator’s extant conceptions *constrain* what he may then accept, as in the entitlement rule (discussed in §3) that the meditator is entitled to a claim only if it is not inconsistent, nor potentially inconsistent, with his conceptions.57

57 Whereas several scholars, such as Curley (1986) and Cunning (2010), have gestured towards what I am calling the ‘factive role’ of conceptions in the meditator’s epistemic progress (see also note 36), I am unaware of any discussion of what I am calling their ‘normative role’.
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 place his claim to possess an idea with infinite objective reality in a more charitable light.\footnote{Acknowledgements omitted for blind review.}

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