Proofs for the Existence of God

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The Simplicity of Descartes’ Proofs and the Relation between Them

To a reader voyaging through the Meditations for the first time, Descartes’ proofs for the existence of God can seem daunting, especially the argument of Meditation III, with its appeal to causal principles that seem arcane, and to medieval doctrines about different modes of being and degrees of reality. First-time readers are not alone in feeling bewildered. Many commentators have had the same reaction. In an attempt at charity, some of them have tried to tame the complexity of Descartes’ discussion by reconstructing sophisticated arguments with numerous premises. This has had the effect of making Descartes’ arguments seem not more compelling, but less so.

We deploy another strategy in this chapter, one that springs from a conviction that Descartes intended his theistic proofs to be quite simple, if indeed he regarded them as proofs at all. What matters most for Descartes is that the meditator acquire the proper clear and distinct perceptions and that she “philosophize in the proper order.” He thus spends the bulk of his time trying to induce these perceptions in the meditator in an order that he thinks will best engender knowledge. This is important because one is tempted to force each of Descartes’ statements into the form of a premise, when what he is usually trying to do is to motivate his “premises,” which tend to be simple and few in number.

Descartes develops two main arguments for the existence of God – the causal argument of Meditation III and the ontological argument of Meditation V – raising questions about the order and relation between them. Given Descartes’ views about the foundational character of our knowledge of God, theistic arguments play a central role in the epistemological project of the Meditations. This shapes the character of the arguments he deploys. The meditator requires arguments that will establish not merely the existence of God, but the existence of a
certain kind of God, namely one who is supremely perfect and is the creator of all things. Only then can he be assured that he was created by an omni-benevolent being who would endow him with a faculty for attaining truth and who would not deceive him.

Both of Descartes’ arguments are adapted from traditional proofs of their kind. The causal argument bears a striking resemblance to the traditional “cosmological argument” found at least as far back as Aristotle but also in medieval thinkers such as St Thomas Aquinas. The standard version takes as its premise the existence of something perceived by the senses, such as the universe, and then seeks the source of this entity in the existence of a First Cause. But this traditional demonstration suffers from a serious shortcoming. It tells us precious little about the nature of this First Cause, which is an embarrassment for a Christian philosopher like Aquinas who would like to identify the First Cause with the God of scripture. Descartes sees it as an attraction of his argument that it yields a stronger conclusion, one that does deliver on God’s nature (AT viiiA, 13). It proceeds from the idea of God as an infinite being having all perfections. The nature of God is built into this idea.

The ontological argument picks up where the causal argument leaves off. It too has a long history, but receives its classic formulation in the eleventh-century philosopher Anselm of Canterbury, who attempts to prove God’s existence from the fact that we define “God” as a being no greater than one which can be conceived. If such a being did not exist, Anselm argues, he would not be the greatest conceivable being, which is contradictory. Against Anselm, Descartes thinks little of definitions of God. The fact that we define the term “God” in a certain way proves nothing about whether such a being exists in reality (AT vii, 115). For Descartes, one does not need to resort to a definition, for each of us has at his or her disposal a self-validating idea of God which is given to him or her in consciousness, and which represents God as existing.

The main relation between the causal and ontological arguments, then, is that they both proceed from the idea of God – an idea that is sufficiently rich to satisfy the epistemic needs of his project and the theological requirements of religion. But there is more. As a rationalist, Descartes subscribes to a theory of innate ideas. He takes the idea of God to be the clearest and most distinct of our innate ideas. The innateness of this idea is central to both the causal argument, which purports to show that God causes our idea of him by implanting it in us at creation, and to the ontological argument, which, as we shall see, hinges on a crucial distinction between innate ideas and those fictitious ideas that we form in our imagination.

The Causal Argument

The method of the Meditations requires that only what has been accepted in Meditation II can be used to develop knowledge of God in Meditation III. This
means that the meditator, a thing that thinks, is restricted to resources found in
his own thought. It is, therefore, ideas and in particular the idea of an infinite
thing, God, that will form the basis for the meditator’s knowledge of the actually
and necessarily existing God. The basic strategy is simple: the meditator’s actually
existing idea of God must derive its being from something else, and the only thing
that could serve as the source of this idea’s being is God. So God exists.

But what is the idea of God, and why should it, or any other idea, require a
source, or cause of its being? And for that matter, what is an idea? The term “idea,”
in the usage so familiar since Descartes, does not appear in the Meditations until
Meditation III. It is introduced there to draw attention to a particular feature of
the thinking thing’s thought: “Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of
things, and it is only in these cases that the term ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate”
(AT vii, 37). This means that the thoughts called ideas have objects, as it were. Ideas
are of people, chimeras, God, and so on. Descartes immediately points out that a
common error in thought is to suppose that what we naturally take as the objects
of ideas exist apart from thinking them, and that this error is compounded by sup-
posing that these objects exist outside thought in a way that resembles the idea.
Since the meditator of Meditation III is maintaining the stance that nothing exists
apart from his thought, it is crucial to isolate this error. This is accomplished by
referring to the “as it were the image of a thing” feature of an idea as its objective
being. This is distinguished from the formal being the idea has as a thought of a
thinking thing. Descartes uses the term “formal being” for the ordinary being of
anything that happens to exist, the meditator’s thought, for example. Now this
transformed medieval jargon can be used to characterize the error to which the
meditator is prone. It is that one prematurely judges that the objective being of an
idea strongly resembles some formal being apart from or “outside” that idea.

The structure of Descartes’ argument can be given more fully once we have
one more piece of terminology. The meditator’s idea of God is said to represent
an actually infinite amount of reality in virtue of its having God as its object or
objective being. In the third set of Replies, Descartes writes: “I have also made it
quite clear how reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing
than a mode . . . and, finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance,
it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance” (AT vii, 185). The
meditator is already aware of himself as a thing with many thoughts. So the medi-
tator is a finite “substance” and his particular thoughts are his “modes.” Each of
these modes is said to depend on the thinker for its existence; they would not
exist if the thinking thing did not exist. The thinking thing is not said to depend
on any particular mode for its existence because it thinks many things. Descartes
thus identifies three distinct levels of reality. Infinite substance (if it exists), finite
substance (the thinking thing, for example), and modes (particular thoughts of the thinking thing, for example) exemplify these degrees of reality formally.
But a thought of infinite substance is said to have the infinite level of reality
objectively. And, similarly, for two lower levels of objective reality corresponding
to the formal reality of finite substances and modes. To summarize these stipulative definitions:

*Highest Level*
INFINITE FORMAL REALITY: God (if God exists)
INFINITE OBJECTIVE REALITY: An idea of God

*Second Level*
FINITE FORMAL REALITY: A substance
FINITE OBJECTIVE REALITY: An idea of a substance

*Third Level*
MODAL FORMAL REALITY: A mode of a substance
MODAL OBJECTIVE REALITY: An idea of a mode.

It is important to realize that everything to this point is to be regarded as introducing terminology to refer to items that are easily found in thought. We are, in other words, just finding names for thoughts that are fully available in a Meditation II context, so we have not yet made a substantive advance beyond the Archimedean point of the *cogito*. The first logically substantive advance is made when Descartes asserts that the meditator does, in fact, think an idea whose object is God. Even though the idea Descartes wants here, in virtue of its objective being, represents infinite reality, it would not justify the immediate conclusion that infinite formal reality exists, i.e. it could not yet be concluded that God exists outside thought. Descartes seems to take it for granted that every meditator will easily think the idea of “a supreme God, eternal, infinite, [immutable], omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist apart from him” (AT vii, 40), but it seems he must verify that the meditator has the right idea of God.

In fact, he does provide the material for an argument to induce in an attentive meditator the requisite idea of God. This material is introduced to block the empiricist objection that what we call the idea of God is merely an augmented or enlarged idea of ourselves or some other finite thing (AT vii, 47). The required idea of God must represent *actually* infinite reality. Actual infinity is complete and perfect in the sense that it can in no way be augmented. The meditator’s knowledge is imperfect insofar as he has doubts, and desires more knowledge. This knowledge, for example, could be endlessly augmented. Since it can be augmented without end or limit, it might be termed “infinite,” but this is a potential or incomplete infinity. Descartes preferred the term “indefinite” for this imperfect kind of infinity. The crucial move now comes in understanding that if something might be endlessly augmented, this is the same as understanding that its augmentation will never be completed. But to understand that it will never be completed is to understand what it is that the process of augmentation can never reach. And that unreachable end is a completed, actual infinity. The point is that insofar as our idea of an incomplete infinity can be made distinct,
it is by negatively contrasting it with the prior, positive idea of a complete infinity.

Numbers provide a good analogy here. Natural numbers are endlessly augmentable insofar as any specified natural number, no matter how large, has a successor. Descartes would say that this is a kind of potential infinity – we can conceive no limit of natural numbers. But this is not an actual infinity precisely because any particular sequence of natural numbers, no matter how large, is “incomplete” and can always be augmented. What is more, it might be argued that if one understands that natural numbers have no limit, this induces the idea of the cardinality of the natural numbers. Something like this is indicated in the modern mathematical concept (which Descartes would have rejected in this context because of his philosophy of mathematics) of “omega,” which is, as it were, the set of natural numbers viewed as complete. In other words, the modern mathematical idea of the cardinality of the natural numbers functions in a way similar to the idea of complete infinity (God) in Descartes’ philosophy.

The case of numbers is merely analogical, but Descartes thinks we can draw this distinction non-analogically in the case of our own knowledge. And it is primarily knowledge as a kind of thought that is relevant here because the meditator is certain only that he is a thing that thinks. Applying the point about numbers to knowledge, we get the idea of actually infinite knowledge, or omniscience. We might do the same for power and omnipotence, or any other attribute of God. If we focus more generally on the finite being or reality revealed in the *cogito*, we similarly arrive at the idea of infinite being or reality. Descartes insists that the idea of infinity is prior to, and even clearer and more distinct (AT vii, 45–6), than any other. The sense of “priority” here is obviously not temporal priority. The *cogito* comes before the idea of God when philosophizing in the correct order. Instead, the meditator comes to realize the idea of anything finite is a limitation or bounding of the idea of the infinite. This set of considerations replaces the empiricist view that what we call the idea of the infinite is an augmentation or enlargement of finite ideas. We can now reconstruct the first substantive step of Descartes’ argument:

**STEP 1:** There exists in the meditator’s thought an idea with infinite objective being that represents actually infinite reality.

The second substantive step is a very plausible, general causal principle. Descartes writes: “Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much [reality] in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause” (AT vii, 40). Descartes motivates this by noting that if an effect had more reality than its total cause, the incremental reality would have to come from nothing. But “nothing” has no properties, which means that it has no causal powers. Therefore, “nothing” cannot be the cause of anything. The Latin slogan is *ex nihilo, nihilo fit*. This suggests, incidentally, that this Causal Principle is a version of the famous philosophical
doctrine, the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Nothing comes from nothing, so wherever there is something, one can inquire about its source.

Now the Causal Principle is applied to the idea of God. In particular, we are to inquire after the cause of the objective reality represented by the idea: “yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively [or representatively] in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing.” What then could account for this objective reality in the idea of God? Descartes makes this point rather bluntly at one place in Meditation III: “But in 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” (AT vii, 41). This expresses the notorious principle that is sometimes called OR-FR, short for objective-reality-to-formal-reality principle. The notoriety stems from the principle’s seeming to extend beyond any plausibly innocent causal principle. “Surely,” Descartes’ critics have argued, “an argument postulating a bizarre sort of being (i.e., actually infinite objective being) and then requiring God (i.e. actually infinite formal being) as its cause cannot be a convincing proof of God’s existence.” But does Descartes’ argument proceed this crudely?

Let us advance more carefully. Let us first consider how OR-FR would apply to an idea of a mode. An idea of a mode is not an idea of nothing; it has the third, modal level of objective reality. It follows from OR-FR that it must have a cause with at least the formal reality of a mode because that is the least formal reality anything can have. It can thus be proved that the objective reality of an idea of a mode is caused by something with at least the formal reality of a mode without using the fully general OR-FR; we require only that the idea have some cause, that it not be nothing or come from nothing.

Consider next an idea of a substance that has the second, finite substantial level of objective reality. This case seems harder, since we seem to need some implausibly robust OR-FR. Otherwise it is not immediately clear how to rule out as a cause for the second-level objective reality something with merely the third, modal level of formal reality. It is significant, however, that even on the (false for Descartes) supposition that a mode does cause an idea of a substance, we can still infer that a substance actually exists. We can apply the relatively innocent Causal Principle, “Nothing has no properties (i.e. modes)”, to the mode we are supposing to have caused the idea of a substance. That mode must depend on some substance for its being, for that is what it is to be a mode. So the appropriate existential conclusion again requires only the relatively innocent Causal Principle. This case does not require some more robust version of OR-FR. To be perfectly rigorous, it must be marked that this second case, the case of an idea with the second level of objective reality, does not require even the Causal Principle to establish second-level formal reality. It is, after all, the meditator’s idea of a finite substance that is under consideration and the meditator already has it from the cogito that he is a thinking thing, a finite substance.
Descartes does avoid bringing this out for a while by using the Latin *res* or “thing” (but we do get *ego autem substantia* at AT vii, 45 and thereafter). The meditator knows early on that, as a thinking thing, he himself has sufficient formal reality to serve as the source of finite objective reality in any of his ideas. So the absolutely crucial point is, of course, the treatment of the idea of God with its actually infinite objective reality. Could the meditator himself serve as the formal cause of the highest level of objective reality? Here Descartes makes another use of the distinction between that which is subject to augmentation and potentially infinite, on the one hand, and that which is complete and actually infinite, on the other. As we have seen, the meditator has arrived at an idea of God that is clear and distinct, and that contains absolutely nothing that is potential. He also understands that he can in no way construct the idea of an *actually* infinite thing from finite means. The meditator discovers his clear and distinct idea of actual infinity while investigating the process of augmenting and compounding ideas with finite objective reality. It follows that he cannot be the cause or sufficient reason of his idea of infinite objective reality. Only formally infinite reality can serve as the cause. So we have:

**STEP 2:** The infinite objective reality of the idea identified in **STEP 1** depends on infinite formal reality (God).

This concludes the argument. A striking thing about this reading is that no direct appeal is made to some implausibly robust OR-FR. The argument requires only that everything have some cause or other. We do not need the offending clause, namely, that the cause has as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality. The reasoning clearly has a transcendental character: it is given that the meditator has the idea of an actually infinite thing, and it is given that he could not have put this idea together from his store of ideas of finite, merely potentially infinite things, so the meditator could not be the cause of this idea. The existence of this idea must, therefore, be caused by an actually infinite thing outside his thought.

One might object here that a more robust causal principle is needed to rule out the possibility that some external substance other than God has caused the idea of the actually infinite. But even here we can do without. Anything aside from God that the meditator supposes to exist outside his thought has no more reality than he. Angels might be more “perfect” in various ways – even animals might have “perfections” that the meditator lacks – but angels and the rest still have the finite level of reality characteristic of created substances. The meditator himself can generate ideas of only potentially infinite things from finite means. He is, therefore, entitled to conclude that no other substance can do any better in this regard. Since the only thing that is at issue is finitude, an angel could not produce an idea of an actually infinite thing in its own mind. The reasons are exactly the same as in the case of the meditator himself. Furthermore, since an angel could not produce an idea of infinite objective reality for herself, she surely could not transmit it to the meditator – that is simply the innocent Causal Principle.
After giving the proof discussed above, Descartes acknowledges that a meditator might allow himself to become confused. One might still have the uncomfortable suspicion that Descartes is trading on the bizarre construct of “objective reality.” Descartes writes: “I cannot so easily remember why the idea of a more perfect being than myself must proceed from some being that really is more perfect. This makes me want to inquire further whether I myself, who have the idea, could exist, if no such being existed” (AT vii, 47–8). As Meditation III continues, the argument shifts from a focus on the objective reality of an idea to the existence of the thinking thing having that idea. In other words, we are going to proceed to consider the issue of God’s existence paying attention only to considerations of formal reality. The device of objective reality completely drops out. What follows is often referred to as Descartes’ “second” causal argument for God’s existence. Is it really a new argument? In correspondence about the Meditations written after their publication Descartes wrote: “It does not make much difference whether my second proof, the one based on our existence, is regarded as different from the first proof, or merely as an explanation of it” (to [Mesland] May 2, 1644, AT iv, 112). As we shall see, the basic structure of the “second” proof is exactly the same as the “first.” And since the second makes no use whatsoever of OR-FR, Descartes’ providing this additional proof or explanation is further evidence that the real philosophical foci of the proofs are the power of the idea of God and the Causal Principle.

The meditator now inquires about the total and efficient cause of his formal being as a thinking thing. Could he, himself, be the source of his own being? The same considerations apply this time too. Since the meditator is aware of his own limitations (for example, his doubting some things), he is not an infinite thing. As a finite thing, his formal reality requires an external source. To see this, suppose instead that he were the source of his own being. Then he either creates himself from nothing, or else he sustains his own being from eternity. But to create himself from nothing violates the Causal Principle unless his power to create is infinite. In other words, only an omnipotent being could create being from nothing. So if the meditator were the source of his own being, he would have to sustain his own being from eternity. Descartes claims that this too is impossible on the ground that conserving or sustaining being requires the same power as creation from nothing. Existence at one time is not by itself a sufficient cause for existence at any other time, so the sufficient cause must again be something actually infinite. Here, the meditator’s distinct realization that he is unable to serve as the source of his own being is tantamount to his earlier realization that actual infinity is required as the total and efficient cause, the sufficient cause, of his being.

Again, it cannot be objected that the meditator might derive his formal being from a different finite thing. For where would that other finite thing derive its existence? A very long regress of finite sources, even an indefinitely long regress, would itself require a source. It would not help to suppose that a second regress of causes was the source of the first indefinitely long regress because then the two taken together would now be a single, new, indefinitely long regress and no
progress would have been made. This way of blocking an infinite regress of finite, formal causes of being is isomorphic to the way in which Descartes’ blocks the empiricists’ claim that the idea of God can be formed by augmenting ideas with finite objective reality. A merely potentially infinite series of causes cannot do the work of an actual, complete, infinite cause. In short, since the cogito gives us that this thinking exists, the ultimate source of that existence must be a something which itself requires no source – a formally infinite being. So, we can again state that Descartes’ causal argument for the existence of God has two steps.

STEP 1: The meditator exists as a thinking thing that thinks of an actually infinite thing.

STEP 2: The sufficient cause for the meditator’s existence must be actually infinite.

Each of these steps involves an explicit, powerful philosophical assumption. But these assumptions are not bizarre, anachronistically medieval, or particularly obscure.

The Ontological Argument

The first thing to recognize about Descartes’ ontological argument is that it is not a proof. This sounds paradoxical, but the point is that what is called an “argument” is something very different from a formal proof. Certainly, Descartes uses the language of proof and logical inference in the context of Meditation V and, in some texts, even presents one or more syllogisms for God’s existence. His considered view, however, is that the so-called ontological “argument” is a self-evident axiom, grasped by intuition or – what is the same for Descartes – clear and distinct perception. Indeed, he maintains that we ultimately obtain knowledge of God’s existence by discovering that necessary existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being.

I ask my readers to spend a great deal of time and effort on contemplating the nature of the supremely perfect being. Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a formal argument, will make them realize that God exists; and this will eventually be just as self-evident to them as the fact that the number two is even or that three is odd . . . (AT vii, 163–4)

To say that the existence of God is ultimately known through intuition is not to say that it is immediately self-evident. If that were so, then there would have been no need for the causal argument. On the contrary, Descartes thinks that
God’s existence is something that only becomes self-evident after careful meditation. A formal argument can serve as useful heuristic in attaining the relevant intuition of God, but this is only a means to an end that is ultimately dispensable (see Nolan 2006). Consider a key passage on this point from Meditation V:

But whatever method of proof I use, I am always brought back to the fact that it is only what I clearly and distinctly perceive that completely convinces me. Some of the things I clearly and distinctly perceive are obvious to everyone, while others are discovered only by those who look more closely and investigate more carefully; but once they have been discovered, the latter are judged to be just as certain as the former. In the case of a right-angled triangle, for example, the fact that the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the square on the other two sides is not so readily apparent as the fact that the hypotenuse subtends the largest angle; but once one has seen it, one believes it just as strongly. But as regards God, if I were not overwhelmed by philosophical prejudices, and if the images of things perceived by the senses did not besiege my thought on every side, I would certainly acknowledge him sooner and more easily than anything else. For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists? (AT vii, 68–9)

Here again we find Descartes asserting that it is not proofs that convince him of God’s existence ultimately, but clear and distinct perception – specifically the perception that necessary existence is included in the idea or essence of a supremely perfect being. But he qualifies this point by noting that God’s existence is not immediately self-evident to most meditators. Initially, it is akin to a theorem in geometry, such as the Pythagorean theorem, which takes great effort and perhaps even a proof to discover. But once we have fully withdrawn from the senses and relinquished our philosophical prejudices, God’s existence becomes as self-evident as an axiom or definition in geometry, such as that the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle subtends its greatest angle.

Descartes’ reference to “philosophical prejudices” in this last passage is highly significant because it indicates why, on his analysis, God’s existence is not immediately self-evident. It also is relevant to his account of how God’s existence can become self-evident and reveals what the Fifth Meditation is primarily designed to do – namely, to dispel our prejudices, so that God’s existence can be directly intuited. As a way of exploring these issues, let us reflect for a moment on some of the central features of Descartes’ epistemology. Descartes is a nativist, meaning that he subscribes to a doctrine of innate ideas. He thinks that the ideas of God, soul, and body have been implanted in us by God and constitute the “seeds of knowledge” (AT x, 217). Attaining knowledge, according to this view, would seem to be a simple affair. One simply turns one’s attention to the ideas that are innately within the mind and reads off their contents. In reality, things are quite a bit more complicated. For one thing, one needs a divine guarantee that one’s innate, clear, and distinct ideas are true. Following Plato, Descartes also thinks that one’s innate
ideas are often “submerged” from consciousness and need to be “awakened” in the mind. But most importantly for our purposes, he holds that one’s innate ideas tend to be highly confused prior to meditating. This confusion results from various philosophical prejudices that one forms in childhood, typically as a result of relying on the senses and on traditional philosophy derived from Aristotle. To render one’s innate ideas clear and distinct, and ultimately attain knowledge, one must extirpate these prejudices (AT ixB, 5; vii, 157).

By the term “prejudices,” Descartes means false judgments that accompany our ordinary thoughts and perceptions. Typically, such judgments have become so habituated that we do not realize that we are making them (AT viiiA, 22). Instances of such prejudices abound, especially those stemming from the senses. By the term “sensations,” Descartes means false judgments that accompany our ordinary thoughts and perceptions. Typically, such judgments have become so habituated that we do not realize that we are making them (AT viiiA, 22). Instances of such prejudices abound, especially those stemming from the senses. Let us consider a few. Part of the Cartesian revolution in science consists in banishing so-called sensible qualities such as colors, odors, sounds, and so on from the physical world. But Descartes thinks that most of his meditators will have formed the habit of imputing such qualities to the objects around them. The ordinary person, for example, judges that greenness is in the grass and that sweetness is in the apple. Descartes maintains that such prejudices prevent us from intuiting that the whole essence of physical objects is extension. Prejudices stemming from the senses also pose an obstacle to our conception of immaterial beings. In fact, Descartes thinks that the greatest obstacle to forming clear and distinct ideas of the soul and God is our tendency to conceive everything in sensory and/or corporeal terms (AT vii, 131). In Meditation II, he speaks, for example, of his former tendency to judge that the soul is an airy material substance that permeates his body rather than a purely thinking thing (AT vii, 26). The ordinary Christian also tends to conceive God as a bearded, fatherly figure shining forth from the highest mountain top.

By Meditation V, the successful meditator has learned to withdraw from the senses and the prejudices they engender (AT vii, 53). But other prejudices remain and, as we shall discover, Meditation V targets those pertaining to God specifically. Descartes distinguishes two such prejudices, both of which must be removed if the meditator is to intuit God’s existence. The first prejudice involves a habit that Descartes believes his seventeenth-century reader would have acquired from what was then part of the standard educational curriculum – viz., scholastic philosophy. This is the habit of distinguishing a thing’s essence from its existence. The second prejudice derives from the habit of inventing mental fictions. The worry here is that God, conceived of as an existing being, might just be one of those fictitious entities that our mind is prone to fashion in the imagination. Although distinct, these two prejudices are closely related and reinforce one another, and consequently their dissolution is achieved in a similar manner. Before examining Descartes’ strategies for dispelling them, let us begin by investigating each of them at greater length.

Descartes sometimes characterizes the so-called ontological argument as a proof from the “essence” or “nature” of God, arguing that necessary existence cannot
be separated from the essence of a supremely perfect being without contradiction (AT vii, 66). In casting the argument in these terms, he is relying on a traditional medieval distinction between a thing’s essence and its existence. According to this tradition, one can determine what something is (i.e., its essence) independently of knowing whether it exists. This medieval distinction serves Descartes’ purposes very well, but it also poses something of a danger: one might be tempted to draw the distinction too sharply, such that existence is not included in God’s essence. Among medieval thinkers, there were different ways of understanding the distinction, at least as it applies to finite, created beings. All parties agreed that, in God, essence and existence are the same. God’s essence just is to exist. But in the case of finite beings, some medieval thinkers drew a very sharp distinction between essence and existence, treating them as two distinct things. According to this broadly “Thomistic” view, a finite thing’s essence enjoys an attenuated form of being eternally in the divine intellect, and existence is something that is added to it in creation. This is the theory of “real distinction” between essence and existence, a term that rightly evokes Descartes’ theory of the real distinction between mind and body. In both cases, the relata of the distinction are real entities that can have being apart from each other.

At the other end of the spectrum from the Thomistic position is the doctrine that there is merely a conceptual distinction between essence and existence in all things. Proponents of this view held that a thing’s essence and its existence are identical in reality and that the distinction between them is confined to our thought. Essence and existence are not distinct things, but one thing regarded in different ways. Reason draws a theoretical distinction where there is no distinction in reality (see Nolan 1998). This view was popular among many scholastic “nominalists,” who were eager to avoid multiplying entities beyond necessity. It is also the doctrine most amenable to the Cartesian system, which denies that there is anything (such as essences in the divine intellect) prior to God’s will. Descartes expresses his allegiance to it as follows:

I do not remember where I spoke of the distinction between essence and existence. However . . . because we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing . . . I call it a conceptual distinction. (AT iv, 349)

Although Descartes was committed to the view that essence and existence are merely conceptually distinct in all things, he worried that his readers would have likely been most influenced by the theory of real distinction between essence and existence. Indeed, he even refers to the latter as the “customary distinction” (AT v, 164). This is a problem because a meditator who has grown accustomed to drawing a real distinction between essence and existence in finite things might easily be tempted to extend this distinction to God. But to judge that, in God,
essence and existence are really distinct is to suppose that existence is not contained in the divine essence. “Since I have been accustomed to distinguish between existence and essence in everything else, I find it easy to persuade myself that existence can also be separated from the essence of God, and hence that God can be thought of as not existing” (AT vii, 66).

The second prejudice pertaining to God is far less technical than the first. It concerns an issue that was first treated with some care in Meditation III, and thus reveals one of the most significant linkages between the causal and ontological arguments. The issue is whether our idea of God is innate or fictitious. If it were fictitious then, in the context of Meditation III, there would have been no reason to posit an infinite being as its cause. The meditator, with his finite intellect, could be the cause, just as he is the cause of many fictitious ideas that have no existence outside thought. But the meditator discovers that, as a finite mind, he cannot be the cause of the idea of an actually infinite being. Thus, his idea of God is not invented but innate – the “mark of the craftsman stamped on his work” (AT vii, 51). In a surprising move, Descartes returns to the question of the origin of the idea of God in Meditation V, insisting after lengthy discussion that it is innate (AT vii, 68). Why does he revisit this question if it had already been settled earlier?

To answer this question, it helps to consider how fictitious ideas are formed. According to Descartes, such ideas are produced by arbitrarily combining other ideas, or elements of other ideas, in one’s imagination. For example, one forms the idea of the mythical creature Pegasus by combining the ideas of horse and wingedness (AT vii, 117). By its very nature or structure, a fictitious composite cannot be distinct in Descartes’ definitional sense of clarity and distinctness; a distinct idea is one that is “sharply separated from all other perceptions” (AT viiiA, 22). But if an idea is not clear and distinct, then it cannot be relied upon to reveal the true nature of reality. Consider now what was discovered about the idea of God in Meditation III. Descartes gives us two lists of attributes; included among these are infinitude, omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, and so on (AT vii, 40, 45). Noticeably absent from these lists, however, is “necessary existence.”

To discover the other attributes, it was sufficient for the meditator to train her mind to withdraw from the senses and to conceive God through the intellect alone. Necessary existence, however, is much more elusive. Much of the difficulty would seem to lie with the nature of the attribute to be perceived. It is one thing to perceive that the idea of God includes, say, omnipotence; quite another to determine whether necessary existence is properly included. For only in clearly and distinctly perceiving the latter are we compelled to conclude that God exists. Such a result could raise suspicions about whether we are dealing with a true idea or one of those false, invented ideas that lack existential import. So although it was established in Meditation III that the idea of God is innate, the question now is whether the idea of God qua necessary being is innate. The meditator may judge that he has corrupted or “fictionalized” the true idea of God discovered in
Meditation III by superadding necessary existence to it. This is where the compositional theory of invented ideas comes into play. In perceiving that my idea of God contains necessary existence have I merely unveiled one of its further contents or have I arbitrarily superadded another idea to it? (see Nolan 2006).

Now that we have a strong sense of the two prejudices themselves, let us turn to Descartes’ efforts in Meditation V and elsewhere to extirpate them. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that Descartes conceived the Meditations as a kind of guidebook to the truth. Each meditator has to discover the truth for herself, but Descartes thinks that he can aid her in this process by leading her through various cognitive exercises that are designed to dispel prejudice and induce clear and distinct perceptions. The famous method of universal doubt provides the most important and familiar example of such an exercise. The greatest benefit of hyperbolic doubt, we are told in the Synopsis of the Meditations, “lies in freeing us from all our prejudices, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses” (AT vii, 12). The method of doubt is intended to be universal, but does not dispel all of our prejudices, which are difficult to overcome owing to their habitual nature. Moreover, some of our prejudices are formed, or at least become manifest, in the course of meditating. This is clearly the case in this instance, where the judgments that my idea of God is invented, or that essence and existence are really distinct in all things, arise in a context in which one is considering whether God exists. Although the method of doubt is not completely successful in eradicating our prejudices, it provides a useful model for understanding the cognitive exercises that Descartes deploys in Meditation V.

The first prejudice stems from the habit of drawing a real distinction between essence and existence in all things. From the perspective of Descartes’ own theory of the relation between essence and existence, both the second prejudice and the scholastic habit that produced it are mistakes. It is just as wrong to ascribe a real distinction between essence and existence to created beings as it is to attribute such a distinction to God. In both cases, there is merely a conceptual distinction. Descartes, however, does draw a sharp distinction between different “grades” or kinds of existence: “Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being” (AT vii, 166). The insight that one cannot conceive anything except as existing is often mistakenly credited to Hume and Kant. Here we find Descartes expressing his own commitment to this principle, though with one important qualification: he distinguishes two different kinds of existence – possible and necessary. Necessary existence is unique to the idea or essence of God, and so it follows uniquely from our idea of God that such a being exists.

Given its source, the most powerful way of defeating the first prejudice would be to break the habit itself, which in fact is Descartes’ strategy. To suppose that there is a real distinction between essence and existence abroad in all things would
be to exclude existence from our clear and distinct ideas. But Descartes thinks that if we reflect on the matter carefully, we shall discover that we cannot conceive anything except as existing. Existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of every single thing. In fact, if the meditator is having trouble intuiting that necessary existence is contained in the idea of God, it helps to turn to the clear and distinct ideas of finite things, and to observe that contingent existence is contained therein. Repeated reflection on this fact will break one of the habit of ascribing to all things a real distinction between essence and existence.

Descartes’ strategy for defeating the second prejudice is a variation on this same device. Recall that the reader whose mind is confused by this prejudice falsely judges that he has “fictionalized” his innate idea of God by combining it with the idea of necessary existence. To form such a composite in the mind, however, one would have to derive the idea of necessary existence from some other source, perhaps by abstraction from the idea of some finite thing. But this is not possible. A careful survey of our clear and distinct ideas reveals that necessary existence is unique to our idea of God. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the clear and distinct ideas of all finite things, while necessary existence is peculiar to the idea of a supremely perfect being. We could not have derived the idea of necessary existence from any other source. One can now appreciate the force of the passage with which we began this section:

I ask my readers to spend a great deal of time and effort on contemplating the nature of the supremely perfect being. Above all they should reflect on the fact that the ideas of all other natures contain possible existence, whereas the idea of God contains not only possible but wholly necessary existence. This alone, without a formal argument, will make them realize that God exists . . . (AT vii, 163–4)

At first sight, this request seemed baffling, but put in the proper context, the motivation is now clear. Observing that necessary existence is unique to the idea of God is a useful exercise for overcoming the prejudice that we have invented such an idea. Once such prejudices are removed, God’s existence will be self-evident (see Nolan 2006).

So far, we have discussed the strategies for dispelling prejudice that Descartes deploys in texts designed to elucidate and expand upon Meditation V. But in Meditation V proper he deploys another set of cognitive exercises, some of which more directly link the ontological argument to the earlier causal argument. At the end of Meditation III, Descartes appeals to an important phenomenological feature of our idea of God to establish its innateness. He notes that the idea of God differs from invented ideas in that we cannot “take away anything from it or add anything to it” (AT vii, 51). In Meditation V, he develops this point, crafting it into a powerful device for eradicating our prejudices.

We learned above that invented ideas on Descartes’ account are ones that the mind forms by combining two or more other ideas (or the elements of other
ideas). Notice that ideas that have been composed arbitrarily in this way, more or less at will, can also be decomposed at will. If I form the idea of a winged horse by combining the ideas of “wingedness” and “horse,” then I can also conceive those elements apart from one another. Innate ideas, however, are not like that. Because they were created by God, and not by me, innate ideas impose their content on my thought. This is not to say that I am ever compelled to think about one of these ideas, but whenever I choose to summon an innate idea from what Descartes calls the “treasure-house” of my mind, I am compelled to regard it in certain prescribed ways (AT vii, 67). To put it differently, once I acquire facility with my innate ideas through meditation, I can think of them at will, but I cannot alter them at will. They are in this sense “incorruptible.” Here Descartes cites various geometrical examples. To wit, I might not have noticed initially that the sum of the angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles, but once I discover this property to be contained in my innate idea of such a figure, I cannot exclude it by a clear and distinct operation of the intellect (AT vii, 64, 67–8, 117–18). The aim of Descartes’ discussion, of course, is to show that the innate idea of a supremely perfect being also constrains the ways in which we are able to conceive it clearly and distinctly: “existence can no more be separated from the essence of God than the fact that its three angles equal two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle” (AT vii, 66).

The distinctive character of innate ideas provides Descartes with another means for defeating the two prejudices discussed above. For example, suppose one has formed the prejudice that there is a real distinction between essence and existence in God. This is tantamount to judging that existence can be excluded from the idea of a supremely perfect being by a clear and distinct intellectual operation. But to judge that something can be excluded from our ideas and actually to perform the exclusion are two very different mental operations. Like all prejudices, this one results from the failure to consult our clear and distinct ideas. Thus, Descartes invites his readers to attempt to exclude necessary existence from the clear and distinct idea of a supremely perfect being, fully expecting that their efforts will fail. Again, Descartes thinks that innate ideas have something like the character of “read-only” documents, to use an analogy with computers. Trying to exclude necessary existence from one’s idea of God is akin to attempting a “search-and-replace” operation on a read-only document, in which a phrase such as “necessary existence” appears. Since the document is read-only, one cannot alter its contents, and the attempt to delete something serves only to highlight the very item that one is attempting to expunge. A more Cartesian analogy can be found in the cogito, where the effort to doubt one’s existence is self-defeating and only confirms that one does exist as a doubter.

The ontological argument has been the target of several famous objections. Many of these were familiar to Descartes and his contemporaries from the classical debate between Anselm and a monk named Gaunilo. Descartes treats these objections in a unique way, one that squares with his view that God’s existence is
ultimately attained through intuition rather than by means of an argument. According to his diagnosis, all such objections are rooted in one of the two prejudices discussed above. Thus, his strategy for dealing with them is to attempt to dispel the objector’s prejudices.

Gaunilo famously objected that Anselm’s version of the ontological argument makes an illicit logical leap from the mental to the extra-mental. The claim is that even if we were to concede that necessary existence is inseparable from the idea of God, nothing follows from this about what does or does not exist in the actual world. Descartes considers an objection like this in Meditation V:

> [E]ven granted that I cannot think of God except as existing, just as I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it certainly does not follow from the fact that I think of a mountain with a valley that there is any mountain in the world; and similarly, it does not seem to follow from the fact that I think of God as existing that he does exist. For my thought does not impose any necessity on things; and just as I may imagine a winged horse even though no horse has wings, so I may be able to attach existence to God even though no God exists. (AT vii, 66)

Notice that in his formulation of the objection, Descartes takes the issue to be whether he has attached the idea of necessary existence to his idea of God in the way that one combines the ideas of horse and wings to imagine a winged horse. As he sees it, Gaunilo’s objection is motivated by a suspicion that our idea of God qua existing being is fictitious like that of the winged horse. If it were fictitious, then Descartes would agree, nothing follows from it.

Descartes replies to this objection as follows:

> But there is a sophism concealed here. From the fact that I cannot think of a mountain without a valley, it does not follow that a mountain and valley exist anywhere, but simply that a mountain and a valley, whether they exist or not, are mutually inseparable. But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists. It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes any necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, which determines my thinking in this respect. For I am not free to think of God without existence (that is, a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection) as I am free to imagine a horse with or without wings. (AT vii, 66–7)

There are two main points being made here, one for each of the ideas that are presented as disanalogous to the idea of God. First, the clear and distinct idea of God differs from the idea of a mountain without a valley (or, better, the idea of an upslope without a downslope) in that it contains necessary existence. So, Descartes holds, existence follows in the first case but not in the second. Second, and this is the more important case, the idea of God differs from the idea of a winged horse in that the first is innate and the second is fictitious. I know that
the idea of God is innate precisely because I am “not free” to think of him without existence, whereas I am free to imagine ideas that I have invented, such as a winged horse, in any way that I like. Again, innate ideas are incorruptible in the sense that their content is imposed on my thought. I cannot add anything to them that is not contained in them and I cannot subtract or exclude anything that is contained in them. Seeing that this is true of the idea of God is a powerful cognitive exercise for dispelling the prejudice that this idea is fictitious. Once this prejudice is removed, God’s existence will be self-evident, or so Descartes maintained.

The most famous objection to the ontological argument is often stated in the form of a slogan, known by every philosophy major worth her salt: “existence is not a property (or predicate).” This objection is often attributed to Kant and Bertrand Russell, but it was previously articulated by Pierre Gassendi, one of the official objectors to the Meditations (AT vii, 323). The point of the objection is that existence bears a very close relation to the thing that exists. It is not a property like other properties, for how can a thing even have properties if it does not exist? If someone brags to you about the various appointments of her new sports car, you would be perplexed if one of the options she listed was existence. Existence is not one of the car’s options (if it is, it’s the most expensive option!), but a prerequisite for having options in the first place. Kant puts the point in terms of concept-containment, observing that existence does not add anything to the concept of a thing. There is no intrinsic difference, for example, between imagining one hundred real dollars and imagining one hundred possible dollars. In both cases, we are imagining a set of existing dollars (which is not to say, of course, that they do exist).

It is often thought that Descartes succumbs to this objection by asserting that (necessary) existence is a property that can be listed among God’s other perfections. But, in fact, he agrees with his critics about the status of existence. Indeed, in passages cited earlier, we find Descartes asserting, along with Kant, that existence is included in the idea of every single thing. We cannot clearly and distinctly conceive anything except as existing (AT vii, 116, 166). He also affirms that existence is not an extra ontological category: there is merely a conceptual distinction between a substance and its existence (AT iv, 349; also see AT viiiA, 26, 30). Descartes maintained that we can draw a distinction in our thought between a thing and its existence, but this does not entail that existence is a mode (in his terminology) or that “the thing itself can be outside our thought without its existence” (AT iv, 349). Where he differs from his critics is in drawing a distinction between two kinds of existence – contingent and necessary. Contingent existence is contained in the clear and distinct idea of every finite thing, while necessary existence is uniquely contained in the clear and distinct idea of God, which is why, according to Descartes, actual existence follows uniquely from the concept of the latter (see Nolan 2001).