Descartes' *Meditations*: Can the Idea of God Be Derived From a Meditation on the Will and Substance?

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Master’s Thesis
Submitted to: Brock University, Philosophy Department
In partial fulfilment of requirements for the MA
August 27th 2004
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Introduction

Is the idea of God capable of being derived from the idea of a perfect will and the idea of substance?¹ This is the question that drives the argument of this thesis. By examining the arguments used by René Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), I will show in this paper that an argument can be made for an alternative formal cause for the idea of God which does not require the existence of God. In the first causal proof of God's existence, which appears in the *Third Meditation*, Descartes argues that the existence of the idea of God in the mind is not mere evidence, but is, or leads to, unassailable proof that God exists. Because the idea of God contains ideas such as infinity and perfection, Descartes argues that the mind, which is a finite, imperfect substance, could not produce it. Simply put, the mind lacks the necessary formal reality to be the cause of the idea of God. The alternative formal cause for which I will argue here is the

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¹ To the best of my knowledge, the problem that I have investigated in this thesis has not been directly analysed in the scholarly literature on Descartes. My project has been conceived and executed as a primary document analysis that works with and within the conceptual framework set up by Descartes himself. Since I have conceived my analysis in this way, I have not included any secondary material in the paper itself. The inclusion of secondary sources, given the originality of my investigation, would lead to digressions from my argument that would be distracting for the reader, without contributing substantially to the argument. I have included in an appendix an annotated bibliography that highlights the work of several scholars who have contributed substantially to topics on Descartes that are discussed in this thesis. I hope that the reader finds this annotated bibliography helpful.

Recently, I found an article by Donald Cress (see annotated bibliography for full reference) which alludes to but does not deal directly with my problem. In considering Descartes' "doctrine of volitional infinity", Cress, in a short paragraph, mentions in passing the issue which I analyse at length and seek to resolve in my thesis. I came across this article only recently, having already developed my argument independent of it. However, I am very pleased to be able to situate my inquiry in reference to some specific piece of published work. I cite below the entire passage in which Cress mentions the problem of this thesis. "Moreover, Descartes had rested his chief proof of the existence of God on the claim that, being finite and limited, Descartes could not possibly be the cause of the idea of God. At the very least, the doctrine of volitional infinity seems to cloud this premise, for there is something infinite in Descartes which an objector could allege to be the real cause of the idea of God. I believe that Descartes could answer this objection; unfortunately, Descartes was never questioned about it" (Cress, p. 157). Cress suggests, then, but does not go on to explore or analyse the idea. My thesis goes some way to respond to the unfortunate lack to which Cress alludes, since I take both the objection and Descartes' possible responses to it seriously.
mind itself, directly contrary to Descartes’ conclusion. I will demonstrate that the mind, as Descartes himself characterises it, does have the capacity on its own to generate an idea of God.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes makes three attempts to prove that something exists outside of his own mind. First Descartes tries to establish the existence of material things by examining adventitious ideas. This attempt is unsuccessful though, so Descartes quickly aborts it. Next, he offers two *causal* arguments for the existence of God. This inquiry will mainly focus on the *first causal* that Descartes outlines in the *Third Meditation*, and then consider it in conjunction with the characterisation of the will of the *Fourth Meditation*, in order to analyse the problematic implications that arise when the former is reconsidered in light of the latter.

The conclusion of the causal argument states that God exists. Descartes comes to this conclusion upon discovering, through meditation, that he has an idea of an infinite substance which possesses perfect attributes. Since Descartes knows he is not an infinite and perfect substance, but is finite and imperfect, he argues that God must exist (outside of his mind) as the formal cause of his idea (of God). Descartes says that this conclusion is logically necessitated by the causal principle: in order for the idea to have a certain degree of objective reality, the cause of the idea must possess at least the same degree of formal reality as the idea contains objectively. Since the idea of God has more objective reality than Descartes’ finite being has formal reality, Descartes cannot claim that he is formal cause of his idea of God without being in violation of the causal principle. Therefore, Descartes concludes, God must exist as the formal cause of the idea of God in the mind. This argument seems to be relatively unproblematic if it is examined in isolation.

However, later on in the *Fourth Meditation*, Descartes argues that the will, unlike the faculty of reason, is not limited in any (experientially noticeable) way and is therefore “perfect”
in terms of its function. The will can freely affirm or deny any propositions or perceptions that come before the mind. In other words, the will knows no limitations when it is in the process of making judgments; its unlimited capacity to judge implies its perfection. Descartes even goes so far as to argue that his and God’s will are identical as regards their perfection because neither one is limited, strictly speaking (see Descartes, Vol. II, p. 40; AT 57).

If carefully considered, this characterisation of the will might present a serious problem for the first causal argument. Descartes had concluded in the causal argument that God is the only being who possesses enough formal reality to be the cause of the idea of God in the mind (and that therefore God must exist). But considering Descartes’ characterisation of the will, the careful reader is poised to ask whether a meditation on the perfection of the will might not be used to generate an idea of God in the mind. If it is possible to generate an idea of God this way, then we can conceive of a second, alternative formal cause for the idea of God, which would weaken Descartes’ causal argument considerably.

The alternative not only challenges the proof of God’s existence and the overall integrity of the causal argument, it threatens the overall project of the Meditations, which aims at resolution of the problem of solipsism and of uncertainty in the sciences. According to the Meditations, it seems, the resolution of these two issues depends to a great extent on God’s existence.

To make my case, I will proceed in the following manner. First, I will give a detailed analysis of relevant points that are found in the First, Second, Third and Fourth Meditations. Among other things, this analysis will discuss the significance of the existence of God for Descartes’ overall project in the Meditations. Second, I will provide a careful analysis of the first causal argument, giving special attention to its structure and to the implications the
argument has for the overall project of the Meditations. Third, I will consider the characterisation of the will. Here I will pay special attention to the structure of the argument and to its importance for the overall project of the Meditations. Fourth, I will consider the consequences of combining the causal argument and the characterisation of the will and assess the implications of this combination for the causal proof of the existence of God. Specifically, I will discuss whether the idea of God is capable of being derived from the idea of the will as perfect and the idea of immaterial substance. I will answer the question: can these two ideas when combined lead to the generation of an idea of God that is identical to the idea of God which Descartes finds in his mind? Next, I will examine the implications that the alternative argument has for the overall project of the Meditations. Finally, I will consider whether Descartes unwittingly neglected these possibilities or whether he may have overlooked them intentionally. To round out the argument, I will offer suggestions as to how Descartes might either have defended his conclusions or resolved the problems that arise from this objection to the first causal argument.

I. Analysis of the problem of certainty as it relates to the overall project of the Meditations: interpretation of the relevant points, arguments and conclusions of the First and Second Meditations; a discussion of the significance of the proofs for the existence of God

I: i. The Problem of certainty as it relates to metaphysics, epistemology and the sciences

The general object of inquiry of Descartes’ Meditations On First Philosophy is stated succinctly in the opening paragraph of the First Meditation. Descartes’ main concern arises from the context of his own experience: he entertains the possible falsity of notions which he previously thought to be true (perhaps out of habit) and which he had employed as the foundations for other systems of empirical knowledge, especially scientific systems. I quote Descartes’ statement in
full so that his purpose is sufficiently understood at the outset of this paper's analysis. Descartes writes,

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last.

(Descartes, Vol. II, p. 12; AT 17)

This statement gives us good reason to pause since it provides us with the motivation for the *Meditations* and outlines the type of activity that will be used to establish stability in the sciences. Naturally, the meaning of this passage is more fully understood following a reading of the *First Meditation*, in which Descartes displays the weakness of the 'whole edifice' through a methodical application of doubt. The exploitation of methodical doubt\(^2\) stresses the necessity to discover a certain, rational foundation that can support all future investigations and conclusions of empirical science.

Descartes explains to his reader and fellow meditator that he became interested in the problem of certainty in the sciences when he realised that he had previously been prone to accept as true and certain many untested beliefs and false notions. This opening passage should be considered along with the warning that appears in *The Preface to the Reader*, which advises the reader to participate actively in the process of meditation as he/she reads this text, in order to avoid any misinterpretation of the arguments presented therein.\(^3\) When these two passages are read together, one implication that emerges is that the reader, like Descartes, must be prone to

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\(^2\) Methodical doubt involves the use of forms of doubt for the sake of metaphysical and epistemological testing and discovery. Metaphysical doubt, on the other hand, is a philosophical position that is skeptical.

\(^3\) "On the contrary I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are willing to meditate seriously with me, to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between. Those who do not bother to grasp the proper order of my arguments and the connection between them, but merely try to carp at individual sentences, as is the fashion, will not get much benefit from reading this book. They may well find an opportunity to quibble in many places, but it will not be easy for them to produce objections which are telling or worth replying to" (Descartes, Vol. II, p.8; AT 9-10).
similar prejudices and errors of judgment and that the course of the Meditations, if properly followed, is the solution to this problem. Thus, the problem of certainty recognised by Descartes when he reflects on his own personal experiences is also a generalised problem that any reflective individual should come to acknowledge and should seek to resolve. The generalisability of the problem precipitates the warning to the reader in the Preface not merely to peruse the Meditations, but to meditate along with them. Interestingly, this request shifts the role of those who wish to engage the text from that of reader to that of meditator. This meditative participation is necessary to ensure the synchronicity of minds. Descartes' and his readers' meditation is to be sustained throughout the entire exercise so that the reader comes to the same conclusions as Descartes regarding the first principles of philosophy.

Hence, the problem of certainty is a general one. Because fundamental beliefs are untested, and thus, 'highly doubtful,' Descartes suspects that while they might prove to be true by chance, they could just as well turn out to be false. Part of the problem of certainty entails epistemological issues since it is possible that some untested beliefs are conflated with or are used as support for knowledge. But notice in this passage that Descartes is not only concerned with epistemology (knowability of non-empirical or empirical objects); he is also concerned with metaphysical issues since it is unclear what the nature of the metaphysical foundations entails. Thus, epistemological and metaphysical certainties are both at stake here. Put another way, Descartes' problem with certainty implicates both metaphysics and epistemology because it not only concerns the degree to which things can be known by the mind, but also the metaphysical nature of the mind, body and other entities that belong to the totality of the universe. Hence, the expression 'the whole edifice,' which appears in this first passage, applies to the foundations of
knowledge as well as the foundations of metaphysical. In a sense then, the Meditations can be read as 'metaphysical physics.'

Uncertainty is at the heart of the Meditations. It is the catalyst for the text’s specifically dialectical activity: In the first passage, Descartes describes this activity as the demolition of these old and 'highly doubtful' (or perhaps false) foundational notions, and the construction (through discovery) of new, certain foundations, which will culminate in the synthesis of a new metaphysical and epistemological system. These new foundations, in turn, will serve as the solid groundwork for a pure, rational, non-empirical foundation for empirical science. The dialectical activity of the Meditations is analogous to the Socratic method for knowledge acquisition. Descartes uses meditation just as Socrates uses probing questions--for the purpose of discovery. Descartes meditates in order to discover philosophic truth, which will take the form of a system that is metaphysical and epistemological in nature. Because this new system will be grounded on a stable foundation of knowledge, its discovery is the key to stability in the sciences. Descartes’ main goal in this text is to exchange the precarious state of science, which rests on merely probable foundations and is consequently highly susceptible to skepticism, for a science that rests on a foundation that is 'stable' and 'lasting' and which therefore cannot be questioned or doubted.

At the very least, by the end of the Meditations, it should be clear to the reader that the 'foundations' that Descartes seeks to construct are both metaphysical and epistemological.

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4 The idea that the Meditations have a metaphysical as well as epistemological approach was discussed by Professor Murray Miles in a class on Descartes in 1998. The idea also appears in a supplementary text authored by Professor Miles, entitled Inroads: A Historical Introduction to Ancient and Modern Western Philosophy (Miles, p. 219).

5 In The Search for Truth, a Platonic style dialogue, the character, Eudoxus, argues that skepticism will prevail if the sciences are not grounded on certainty. "...fears have prevented men of letters from acquiring a body of knowledge which is firm and certain enough to name 'science'" (Descartes, Vol. II, p. 408; AT 512-13). Cottingham et al. compare this passage to one found in the Second Set of Replies, where Descartes distinguishes awareness from scientific knowledge. Cottingham et al. argue that awarenesses are isolated acts of consciousness (cognitio), whereas, scientia is a systematic, properly grounded body of knowledge (Vol. II, p. 101 ff).
Descartes' revision of epistemological foundations constitutes a reversal in the traditional 'order of knowing', conceived originally (by Aristotle) as moving from knowledge of the sensible external world to knowledge of the divine creator and then, finally, to knowledge of the self. It becomes clear in the Second Meditation that the order of knowing, for Descartes, begins with self-awareness and knowledge of the mind, as a finite, immaterial substance. From this comes the awareness of the idea of God in the mind, which, in turn, leads to the proof and knowledge of God, an infinite, immaterial substance and the cause of all things, including the mind. From knowledge of God, one can then infer the existence and certainty of the external world, which consists of both immaterial and material finite substances. Thus the order of knowing begins with the mind, which Descartes claims is better known than the body, moves to knowledge of God, and finally to the external world. Knowledge of body, then, is dependent on knowledge of the mind and on God, who ensures that the mind is capable of having "clear and distinct" perceptions of the physical world. The capacity of the mind independent of God is limited. The mind can only know for certain that its existence is indubitable. Thus, any accurate and true knowledge of the external world (which is necessary to avoid solipsism as we will later see) is possible only if God exists and is not a deceiver. Descartes intuits the indubitability of the mind’s existence each time he engages in thought, but it is God who ultimately guarantees the reliability of memory and reason, both of which are necessary to build systematic knowledge. While attending to clear and distinct perceptions, the mind will not err. But when the mind recalls what it once perceived as clear and distinct, it is susceptible to error. Remembered perceptions are

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6 The following ideas concerning the reversal of the traditional 'order of knowing' and the 'order of being' in Descartes were discussed by Professor Murray Miles, who expanded on them in lectures that I attended on Descartes in 1997 and 1998. They are also outlined in his text Inroads: A Historical Introduction to Ancient and Western Philosophy, p.220-21.
subject to radical doubt since, for example, an evil genius could influence the mind and cause it to remember a perception that is actually obscure and confused as clear and distinct.

The counterpart to the order of knowing is the ‘order of being’, which involves the metaphysical structure of the ‘edifice’. Among other things, the order of being concerns relations of existential dependence, which hold between all things that are contained in the universe. In addition to revising the traditional order of knowing, Descartes reconsiders the old order of being as well. Without question, the underlying concern of the *Meditations* is a metaphysical one, although this comes with epistemological consequences. After all, the *Meditations* examine the existence and essence of mind, body and God, so their first priority is to discover and describe the true natures of these. According to Descartes, the universe contains two kinds of substances, which, he argues, are separate and distinct, namely material substance (i.e. bodies) and immaterial substance (i.e. minds). While he holds fast to the traditional idea that all created things in the universe depend on God for their creation and sustained existences, Descartes breaks with tradition in his proof that neither mind nor body is dependent on the other. For Descartes, mind and body are different substances (immaterial and material, respectively) and each is independent (distinct or separate) of the other. Thus, mind does not depend on body for its existence and likewise body does not depend on mind. Mind and body both depend on God for their respective existences, but at the same time each is a separate and distinct substance. This position must have seemed somewhat strange for Descartes’ contemporaries, as it seems strange to us today, since it implies that mind can be conceived of as existing without body and vice versa. But the real distinction of mind and body is not just a conception or epistemological one. Rather, we conceive of mind and body as distinct substances because there is a real (ontological)
distinction between them. In other words, Cartesian dualism is a revised metaphysical framework that has some epistemological consequences.

Descartes recognises the need—if scientific investigations and theoretical conclusions are to be grounded in truth—for the discovery of a system as the stable basis for science. Descartes’ search for (this kind of) metaphysical certainty begins with the adoption of two main assumptions. The first is that metaphysical foundations can only be derived through rationality or the employment of pure reason. The second is that the faculty of reason is adequately equipped and sufficiently powerful to come to true and certain conclusions. From these assumptions, Descartes investigates the mind in the First and Second Meditations, and he searches for evidence of God’s existence and veracity in the Third, Fourth and Fifth Meditations.

I: ii Summary of the relevant points of the First and Second Meditations

Descartes describes his previously held beliefs (some of which are falsehoods) and the old ‘edifice’ as ‘highly doubtful,’ suggesting that these do not meet a strict standard of certainty, and that they therefore need to be demolished. In the First Meditation, Descartes instructs his fellow meditator on how precisely to bring about this kind of destruction, which he says must involve the careful application of four forms of radical, methodical doubt. Because these four forms of doubt represent the most extreme ways of calling his own beliefs into question, it is appropriate for Descartes to describe them as radical.

The four applications of radical doubt that Descartes proposes in the First Meditation are as follows: 1) that all perceptions may be illusions; 2) that all perceptions may be dreams; 3) that all perceptions may be false (i.e. falsely represented in the mind or falsely conceived as
having an external cause) due to the work of a deceiving God who is an infinitely powerful being; and 4) that all perceptions may be false (in the senses mentioned above) due to the work of a malicious demon, who is more powerful than a human being but who is not infinitely powerful. These applications of doubt effectively generate uncertainty across all domains of possible knowledge, ranging from sensory perceptions to the most abstract thoughts about mathematics and philosophy, but he notes that his application of doubt is not metaphysical in nature. Instead, he qualifies it as strictly methodical—that is, he employs various forms of doubt as devices for the purpose of distinguishing what is true and certain from what is false and uncertain. Accordingly, he uses them merely to call into question the “certainty” that is often blindly or habitually attributed to various kinds of knowledge.

In the First Meditation, the application of doubt is successful, and consequently Descartes begins the Meditations without any certain knowledge. Like Socrates, Descartes’ first major insight, his starting point or spur, is the knowledge that he knows nothing for certain: he knows with certainty nothing of the metaphysical structure that underlies the phenomenal world that he experiences; nor can he affirm with certainty any of the propositions and beliefs that he seems, or seemed, to know best (including mathematical and geometrical knowledge).

Descartes reiterates this stance of uncertainty in the Second Meditation. As he considers each of his former beliefs once again, Descartes happens upon one peculiar belief, namely that he, i.e. his mind, exists as a thinking thing (or as a res cogitans). He finds this belief to be anomalous. It is unlike any of his other beliefs since it seems to resist each of the applications of methodical doubt. But just how does Descartes arrive at this conclusion?

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7 Descartes, in “Part One” of Principles of Philosophy, defines “perception” in principle 32, as “operation of the intellect”. He asserts that “sensory perception, imagination and pure understanding are simply various modes of perception” which take place in the intellect. (Descartes, vol. I, p. 204; AT 19).
Recall that the application of radical doubt permits Descartes to suspend his trust in all that he encounters. At the beginning of the Second Meditation he writes,

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

(Descartes, vol. II, p.16; AT 24)

The conclusion is provisional here. Descartes goes on to examine whether there is something that exists which is not susceptible to the application of doubt. He first considers his belief that there is a God, which he quickly dismisses by granting that he himself could have constructed this idea.

Descartes will find in the Second Meditation that awareness of his own mind is self-evident (since he is immediately and directly aware of its existence). This awareness will become the first principle for Descartes’ new philosophical system. Descartes will progress from this awareness to proofs of God’s existence, which appear later in the Third Meditation. What is noteworthy here is the self-evident nature of Descartes’ awareness of his own mind; this is unlike the awareness that he has of God’s existence, which is not self-evident but inferred as a result of examination of the contents of his mind. Thus, God does not make for a suitable starting point for the construction of a sound metaphysics; remarkably, such a starting point is instead reserved for the mind alone. Descartes interprets mind and God as being in a unique and asymmetrical (given God’s superior position over the mind) relationship. It is through the mind that the existence of God can be inferred, yet it is because of God’s will that the mind comes into existence and is preserved.

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8 This is not to say, however, that God’s existence depends upon the existence of the mind, since this is precisely what Descartes sets out to disprove with his proofs for God’s existence.
Descartes reasons that he could potentially be the author of any of his ideas. While this realisation makes him acutely conscious that the status of all his ideas is uncertain, the question of authorship also leads him straight to the awareness that he is at least 'something', i.e. an intellect who perceives true, false, real or fictitious ideas. He states that he is not yet certain that this thinking 'something' has either senses or a body because there is no reason that the 'I' or the bearer of ideas cannot exist without a body. Returning to the application of doubt, he reminds himself that he has not yet proven that his mind or body is not subject to doubt. Descartes finds that he has reasons to doubt the existence of his body. But when he tries to doubt the existence of his mind, he notices something quite unusual. In order for Descartes to doubt the existence of anything, including his own mind, he must exist as an intellect first, since doubting is itself an act of the intellect. Shifting his full focus now to the nature of this 'I', or intellect, Descartes discovers that although he can place all other things into doubt, he is unable to say that he himself does not exist, since this admission would produce a contradiction. Doubting, as an act of the intellect, is dependent upon the existence of an intellect that is capable of doubting. The only conclusion that Descartes can draw here is that it is impossible, as he is engaged in the act of thinking, to conceive of himself as non-existent since any attempt to doubt his own existence is immediately aborted by the mind's awareness that it is engaged in the act of doubting itself. Thus, the mental act of doubting, or any other mental act for that matter, such as willing, affirming, denying, etc., is always accompanied by an immediate awareness of the mind's existence as the thing that underlies all mental activity.

To test the certainty of the existence of his mind, Descartes applies the most extreme of the four forms of doubt to it. He contemplates the possibility that the awareness he has of his own mind is the result of a deception orchestrated by a cunning deceiver who has supreme
power, a malicious God. In other words, his mind does not actually exist but only seems to Descartes to exist. However, the problem with this possibility is similar to the problem of doubting the mind, mentioned above. Again, Descartes must exist first as a mind (a thinking thing) if he is to be deceived by a malicious God. So, of this much, (that the mind exists) Descartes can now be certain. The nature of the ‘I’ is necessarily such that it can never doubt its own existence, so long as it is actively caught up in the act of thinking. In this way, Descartes overcomes his first challenge, which is to identify something that he can know with absolute certainty.

Descartes then turns to a careful consideration of this ‘I’, whose existence cannot be doubted, in order to gain further insight into its nature. He runs through a list of possible characteristics of the ‘I’. In this list, he includes material qualities that pertain to body, like nourishment, locomotion, sensation and properties of extension (shape, size, duration, number etc.). He also includes in the list non-material qualities like having a soul and the capacity for thought. Descartes tests these material and non-material qualities to see which ones are subject to doubt (i.e. which qualities he cannot say for certain belong to the nature of the ‘I’). With the exception of the last quality, the capacity for thought, each of the other qualities is susceptible to the application of doubt. Descartes does not know for certain whether these other qualities are true qualities of the ‘I’, or whether he mistakenly attributed them to the ‘I’ because he is under some illusion. But Descartes cannot deny that his mind exists, since denying, like doubting, is itself a form of thinking that necessarily requires the presence of a thinker, a mind that engages in the act of thought. Thinking, as an activity, depends on the existence of a mind that is capable of thought. So, thinking alone is a quality that cannot be separable from the ‘I’. Descartes closes this argument having gained the knowledge that as long as he is thinking, or rather that he is
aware that he is engaged in thinking, he can assert with certainty that he, as a thinking substance ('a mind, or intelligence, or reason'), must exist. In the Meditations, Descartes expresses this new knowledge as follows, "...this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind" (Descartes, Vol. II, p. 17; AT 25).

Descartes can distinguish the 'I' that thinks from anything connected to the body and the imagination, which he regards as a material faculty rather than a faculty of the mind. Knowledge of the 'I', for instance, does not depend on knowledge of body (whose existence at this time cannot even be proved). He sums up his investigation of the nature of the 'I' by claiming that it is strictly limited to activities that are exclusively modes of thinking, which, he argues, include doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, imagining and having sensory perceptions. Although sensation belongs to the domain of the body, the perception or the idea that one is having this or that sensation is an act of judgment, and it thereby belongs to the domain of mind. In addition, if it is the case that, upon introspection, the mind is immediately and indubitably aware of itself as engaged in these modes of thinking (willing, affirming, denying, etc.), and if it is impossible to distinguish these modes from the (thinking) mind itself, then it must also be the case that the nature of the mind, thus far, contains nothing in it that can be subject to doubt. The 'I', that is aware of itself in the act of thinking, then, is the same 'I' that undergoes these different modes of thought (doubting, understanding, willing, etc.).

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9 cf. Sixth Meditation, Vol. II, p.50-51; AT 72-74. Here Descartes treats of the distinction between imagination and pure understanding, which is a faculty of mind. Descartes demonstrates that the imagination, which he locates in the brain, allows us vaguely to form pictorial representations of things; while the faculty of pure reason, he claims, has its seat in the mind, and it permits us a clear and more abstract representation of things. The example Descartes uses to illustrate this point is that of a chiliagon, or a thousand-sided figure. The faculty of imagination does not have the power to distinguish with clarity and distinctness a chiliagon from a myriagon, or a ten thousand sided figure, because the pictorial representations produced by the imagination of either polygon are obscure and confused. Upon examining the imaginative representations of a chiliagon and a myriagon, we immediately notice that we cannot tell one representation from the other. Our faculty of understanding, on the other hand, easily is able clearly and distinctly to perceive the differences between a chiliagon and a myriagon. It distinguishes one multi-sided polygon
Descartes accepts the indubitable knowledge that he is a thinking thing as the
‘Archimedean point’; its establishment is the first critical step toward a stable foundation for the
sciences. However, merely establishing the indubitability of the ‘I’ alone cannot bring about the
certainty that things exist outside the mind; and yet extra-mental things are usually the objects of
scientific investigation. Therefore, Descartes’ position at the end of the Second Meditation is
solipsistic. With certainty, he knows that he exists, but nothing else. A detailed discussion of this
position and its implications will be provided below.

To be sure, solipsism is not a satisfactory state in which to leave the mind. If Descartes is
unable to progress further in his meditations towards a sound argument for the existence of
things (his body, bodies in general, God) beyond his own mind, then his project for certainty has
no hope of success. Hence the Third Meditation, which contains proofs for the existence of God,
can be interpreted as Descartes’ continued effort to build a solid metaphysical and
epistemological framework based on the certainty of the mind and to provide a justification for
judgments regarding the external world. At this point, Descartes is relatively certain that he is not
actually being deceived about the things that he thinks he knows best (like mathematical truths
and judgments about the external world). In fact, he even claims near the beginning of the Third
Meditation that any doubts that arise by applying the most excessive form of doubt, the
deceiving God scenario, are “very slight, and so to speak, metaphysical” (Descartes, Vol. II,
p.25; AT 36). However, he cannot at present remove this doubt absolutely. Even with the
discovery of the indubitable ‘I’, Descartes, by the Second Meditation, is still not able to remove
the slight doubt that has been cast over the external world, and, for that matter, over God’s
existence, by the application of radical doubt. So, in order to remove doubt completely,

from the other by attending only to the polygon’s abstract feature, namely the number of sides it possesses and how
these sides are organized and related to each other.
Descartes must push his analysis a step further, and construct an argument to justify the existence of something that is extra-mental. Thus, the *Third Meditation*, which primarily deals with the kinds of ideas that the mind possesses, and which contains proofs for God's existence, is critical for the success of the project of certainty in general and for scientific knowledge specifically. God's existence is the next element that Descartes must secure in order to move closer to the completion of his new metaphysical framework and to establish epistemological certainty.

II: Explication and analysis of the *Third* and *Fourth Meditations*. Special attention given to the structure, content and logical movement of the arguments presented and to the implications these arguments have for the overall project of the *Meditations*.

II: I Third Meditation

In the opening paragraphs of the *Third Meditation*, Descartes recalls what he has established as certain thus far, that he himself exists, and that for as long as he reflects on his own existence, his existence cannot be doubted. Descartes considers this discovery his *first metaphysical principle*. Equipped with this first principle, Descartes moves on to question the ontological status of extra-mental objects, i.e. objects that he formerly and habitually believed to have independent existence outside the mind.

Let us consider the two important issues that drive the inquiry of the *Third Meditation*. The first issue deals with the certainty of the external world. The existence of the external world is a legitimate concern for Descartes given that the application of radical doubt imposes a degree of uncertainty on the existence of *all* things, except the *cogito*\(^{10}\). While the application of doubt

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\(^{10}\) *Cogito*, from the Latin, is translated as 'I think'. As discussed in section II, the first certainty that Descartes establishes in *the Second Meditations* concerns his own experiential awareness of his thought. Specifically, the awareness that he is thinking leads him to the conclusion that he must exist, or to *sum*, which is translated from Latin as 'I am', since the act of thought necessarily requires the existence of a thinker. These two awarenesses combine to
generates uncertainty with respect to all things, including the existence of extra-mental objects, Descartes is not too concerned here that their existence is in any real jeopardy, since the uncertainty that results from the application of doubt is only "very slight". The only real and serious threat to judgments about extra-mental objects is the possible existence of a deceiving God (a being with supreme power). But since Descartes knows of no evidence that such a God, or any other kind of God, exists, he concludes that there is just a "slight reason" to doubt his judgments concerning things such as extra-mental objects. The implication here is that the application of doubt forces the conclusion that, save for some sort of certain proof, the existence of extra-mental objects at this point is only probable. Moreover, having a "slight reason" to doubt also means that any judgments asserting the existence of a relationship between external objects and ideas cannot yet be absolutely certain. The following is a list of various judgments that the mind may make about the relationship between objects and ideas but that are susceptible to Cartesian doubt: there is a connection, a correspondence and a resemblance between external objects and ideas; the mind can accurately represent external objects which exist outside of it and which the senses apprehend; ideas of external objects come from independent sources, i.e. that they originate from objects themselves which exist outside the mind; and finally, external objects have a degree of formal reality which is as great as or is greater than the degree of objective reality in their corresponding ideas.

Notice how the uncertainty that results from application of doubt calls into question the possibility of accurate scientific observations and true conclusions, in that all four propositions formulate Descartes' first principle, Cogito ergo Sum, which Descartes employs as the foundation for his metaphysics and epistemology. The exact phrasing of 'cogito ergo sum' is not used in the Meditations, but is implied by the argument. However, Descartes does use this exact phrase in other works, such as Discourse on Method (see The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol. 1. Trans. Cottingham et al., p. 127; AT 32) and in "Part One" of the Principles of Philosophy (see The Philosophical Writings of Descartes Vol. 1. Trans. Cottingham et al., pp. 195-96; AT 8), and in both cases these arguments focus on the same issue, namely that thinking implies existence, as the arguments of the Second and Third Meditations.
mentioned above *must be true* if there is to be any reliable empirical knowledge in the sciences. Moreover, these propositions require a justification if they are to move from probable to certain. In addition to undermining empirical investigations, doubt has the power to undermine knowledge of the metaphysical foundations of the empirical world as well. It can potentially place into question metaphysical frameworks because at any point we cannot be certain that we are not being tricked by a deceiving God, or a malicious demon. Either one could cause the mind to be incapable of rationally distinguishing true metaphysical propositions from false ones. Therefore, scientific and philosophical conclusions remain *merely probable*, until Descartes can establish certainty regarding external objects; he must provide a justification both for their independent existence and for the senses’ and the mind’s capacity accurately to receive and to represent, respectively, extra-mental objects. Mere probability as an outcome simply would not suffice, since that would leave knowledge, philosophical and scientific, susceptible to skepticism. Certainty of the existence of the external world drives Descartes to set up (mediating) proofs for the existence of a God, who is not a deceiver, in the *Third Meditation*. God, if he exists and is no deceiver, would then ensure the independent existence of a formal reality just as he would ensure the mind’s ability to apprehend it.

Descartes faces a second noteworthy problem as he begins the *Third Meditation*. This is the problem of solipsism. Considering whether there seem to be external objects that possess their own ontological status, Descartes implicitly asks whether or not he is the only being that exists. This is to say, he needs to know whether he exists alone, without other men, without the universe and without a Creator, or whether he exists independently along with these other things, which also possess their own independent existence. Although at this point Descartes can only consider the existence of the external world as likely, the idea that the external world exists
independently does indeed accord with his own prior experience of it. But once again, Descartes cannot accept an uncertain conclusion regarding the external world. An uncertain conclusion in this case would still leave open the possibility that the external world exists only as a product of (Descartes') mind. The uncertain status of the external world, in addition to rendering the conclusions of philosophy and science susceptible to skepticism, also produces a negative outcome for the mind, specifically, solipsism of the metaphysical and/or epistemological kind\(^{11}\).

Neither brand of solipsism bodes well for the project of certainty in the sciences, since neither would permit the extension of metaphysical or epistemological certainty beyond the mind, and both of these are necessary for the establishment of the new ‘edifice’. In addition to rendering useless any metaphysical and scientific knowledge of the external world, solipsism has the further effect of nullifying the possibility for any kind of self-knowledge or self-understanding that extends beyond the formal, abstract perception of mind as ‘res cogitans’. Thus, Descartes must eliminate the outcomes of uncertainty and solipsism altogether if he is to accomplish the general goal of the Meditations.

Descartes' forms of radical doubt are so effective that he can no longer wholly trust the dictates of his own sensory experience, particularly since he cannot deny that in his own experience he is occasionally prone to making incorrect judgments of all kinds. Thus, he is forced to conclude that sensory experience can neither offer itself as a reliable guide for the process of scientific and/or philosophical inquiry, nor can it be an auxiliary to the generation of their conclusions. At this juncture, Descartes must trust only in conclusions that are drawn from the examination of the contents of his own mind, since this is the only object of certainty that has been discovered thus far.

\(^{11}\) Metaphysical solipsism is the position that nothing except one's own subjectivity actually exists in the universe, while epistemological solipsism holds that only the existence of one's own self can ever be known to exist.
At the start of the *Third Meditation*, Descartes reflects on the knowledge that he has of his own existence as a thinking thing and discovers a second bit of critical knowledge. His *particular* perception (and his experience) of the certainty of the cogito implies that he must also know what it means to be certain in general. To be certain is to have a ‘clear’ and ‘distinct’ perception of the object of certainty. So, in order for one to have certainty of ‘*x*’, one must also have a clear and a distinct perception of ‘*x*’. The corollary of this observation, of course, is that if ‘*x*’ is uncertain, then the perception of ‘*x*’ is ‘obscure’ and ‘confused’. Moreover, Descartes acknowledges that it can never have been the case that what is perceived with genuine clarity and distinctness is false, since it can never be the case that something is both true and at the same time obscured or confused in its nature. So the experience of clarity and distinctness, which accompanies the perception of his own existence, provides Descartes with a general understanding of what it means to be certain of something; what is clear and distinct is true, and what is true must necessarily also be clear and distinct. Thus, for Descartes, clarity and distinctness serve as the complete criteria for truth and certainty.

Descartes combines both points to form a ‘general rule’, which states that any perception that is both clear and distinct must also be true; or as Descartes phrases it, “[s]o now I seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (Descartes, Vol. II, p.24; AT, 35). The general rule is a bridge between a proposition and the certainty or truth of it; it allows for the inference from the former to the latter. Since this is a rule that permits this special inference, Descartes must be convinced that the truth rule applies in

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12 'Clear' and 'distinct' are two important terms for Descartes, and he employs them in accordance with the strict definition that he gives each in principle 45 from "Part One" of *Principles of Philosophy*. Here he defines 'clear' as a perception that is "present and accessible to the mind-just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility" (Descartes, Vol. I p. 207; AT 21-22). Descartes defines as 'distinct' a perception that is both clear and that is, additionally, "so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear" (Descartes, Vol. I p. 207; AT 22).
every case and that the faculty of reason is structured in such a way that it can execute the rule correctly every time it is applied to propositions. Descartes offers a strong objection to the general rule in order to test its viability. He considers his own experience with perceptions and acknowledges that in the past he has had certain perceptions, which he would have described at the time as clear and distinct, but which he later came to discover (after more careful investigation) were in fact obscure and confused. If Descartes can be deceived just once about what he believes he perceives clearly and distinctly, then clarity and distinctness cannot independently constitute criteria for truth and certainty.

To better illustrate this troubling objection, Descartes examines one particular perception that he claims in the past to have perceived clearly and distinctly, namely the ‘habitual belief’ that some ideas and perceptions originate from objects that exist outside the mind and that these ideas express a resemblance to their corresponding objects. The quandary here is straightforward. While it is reasonable to conclude on principle that actual clear and distinct perceptions must also be true, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the intellect is incapable of distinguishing between clear and distinct perceptions, on the one hand, from obscure and confused ones, on the other. This quandary becomes especially apparent when we consider conclusions that are not intuitively self-evident but can only be inferred or reasoned out by means of a complex proof. In other words, clarity and distinctness, as criteria for certainty seem to require their own criteria. The seriousness of this objection is emphasised if the application of radical doubt used in the First Meditation is recalled. Doubt effectively demonstrates, among other things, that the seemingly clear and distinct perception of external objects existing independently is in fact uncertain, or obscure and confused. So how can Descartes be sure that he can rightfully believe that clarity and distinctness in perception always imply truth?
The only way out of the quandary is to exercise caution when distinguishing clear and distinct perceptions from confused and obscure ones. The exercise of caution is twofold. First, it requires Descartes to accept provisionally that his general perceptions regarding the clarity and distinctness of objects, for example, at best are probably correct because he cannot dismiss outright the implications of doubt on the ontological status of external objects. Second, Descartes must reserve the qualifiers of clarity and distinctness only for perceptions that are self-evidently clear and distinct. At this point in the *Meditations*, then, Descartes can only be sure that the perception of his own existence as a thinking thing is clear and distinct, since this perception is self-evident each time he engages in the thought process. Descartes seems to imply here that the clear and distinct criteria do not themselves need criteria since for now the judgment of clarity and distinctness is limited only to what is self-evidently clear and distinct (e.g., to the cogito). Judgments regarding other perceptions, however, such as that bodies exist independent of the mind, will need something more to guarantee that they are actually true, or clear and distinct perceptions, not obscure and confused. Once again, Descartes is in danger of solipsism. By the Third Meditation, the mind is limited in a severe way since it has been demonstrated that each attempt to secure knowledge beyond the existence of the mind ends at an impasse.

The problems concerning clarity and distinctness do not just apply to complex objects, like material bodies, but to simple objects also, like mathematical propositions, which may also likewise seem clear and distinct. Here, Descartes must again concede that he might be mistaken about the clarity and distinctness, and thus the truth-value, of these types of propositions, especially if it turns out that God is a deceiver. After all, an omnipotent but deceiving God could easily cause Descartes to miscalculate the sum of two plus two, or any other seemingly clear and distinct mathematical proposition. If it is possible for Descartes to judge a perception as clear and
distinct and then to discover later that this same perception was false (which is always possible when factoring in a deceiving God), then he cannot trust that clarity and distinctness are absolute and infallible criteria for the perception of truth. Such a possibility would seem effectively to undermine the very criterion of truth, the truth rule. Descartes writes,

[i]n order to remove even this slight reason for doubt, as soon as the opportunity arises I must examine whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether he can be a deceiver. For if I do not know this, it seems that I can never be quite certain of anything else.

(Descartes, Vol. II, p. 25, AT 36)

From this "slight reason for doubt", Descartes will argue that until it can be demonstrated that there is a God who is not a malicious deceiver and who has the power to ensure that the mind is not deceived in cases where it seems to perceive things clearly and distinctly (e.g., affirming seemingly non-contradictory principles and propositions of mathematics), any perception that is judged to be true by virtue of clarity and distinctness might in fact be false. The next step of the Meditations is clearly expressed in this passage: the existence of God must be established with certainty or nothing else beyond the mind can be known with certainty to exist. Without a proof for God's existence, the Meditations would come to an abrupt, solipsistic end.

The phrase "anything else" from the above passage requires some further clarification. It would be misleading to assume that Descartes is implying here that the existence of the cogito is subject to the threat of a deceiving God in the same manner as everything else seems to be. After all, as Descartes himself points out in the Second Meditation, a deceiving God may deceive the mind in many ways, but deception is only possible if the mind exists first as a thinking thing, since it is not logically possible for a non-existent mind to be deceived. "Anything else" here does not seem to include the cogito, but refers to anything else besides it.
The problem with the use of “anything else” in this passage is also nicely articulated in the *Second Set of Objections*, compiled by his critic Mersenne (Descartes, Vol. II. p. 89; AT 124-125). In the third objection, Descartes is charged with reasoning in a circle. The third objection notes that, on the one hand, Descartes concedes in the *Third Meditation* that he cannot be certain of, i.e. he cannot know with clarity and distinctness, the existence of anything including the existence of God. However, on the other hand, Descartes requires the knowledge of God’s existence *first* if “anything else” is to be known with clarity and distinctness or with certainty. As the objector points out, this contradictory requirement jeopardizes the certainty of the cogito, since Descartes cannot know that he (Descartes) exists as a thinking thing prior to knowing for certain that God exists. But again, given Descartes’ reversal of the order of knowing, the existence of God can only be known after the certainty of the mind has been established. Is this or isn’t this circular?

Descartes responds to this challenge by distinguishing between conclusions that are deduced and self-evident or “primary notions”, such the cogito, which are intuited. In the case of deduced conclusions, either the mind attends to the proof or argument to verify the truth of the conclusion, or the mind recalls the conclusion from memory without referring to the steps of the argument or proof. Conclusions that are recalled rather than re-produced by an argument or proof are more susceptible to doubt because memory is limited and tends to be prone to error. Memory cannot, therefore, absolutely guarantee the truth of any conclusion. In addition to the problem of remembered conclusions, Descartes points out that proofs, even those that we attend to and seem to know best, are still prone to the slight possibility of error since they can be targeted by the application of the most radical forms of doubt. Thus, God’s existence is necessary in order to ensure that the mind, when it reasons correctly, does not err in its judgments.
Now the mind can guarantee that well reasoned conclusions are *likely* true, and, presumably, there is a greater degree of certainty in proofs that are immediately before the mind than in conclusions that are later recollected. But, in the end, if any proof or conclusion is to be considered *absolutely* true or indubitable, then it must be known with certainty that God exists and is not a deceiver in order to act as its guarantor. While Descartes does not directly question the mind's capacity to reason in this *Reply*, he does indirectly suggest that reason *alone* is not enough to absolutely guarantee the correctness of a proof or the truth its conclusion, even one that is currently before the mind. The certainty of proofs and their conclusions cannot be guaranteed by the mind absolutely since any *act* (not perception) of the mind, including acts of judgment or reason, is vulnerable through doubt. Thus, the implication here is straightforward: the capacity to reason is fallible, though perhaps it is not as fallible as memory.

Unlike proofs and deduced conclusions, the (intuitive) *perception* of the cogito, which Descartes classifies as a "primary notion," is self-evident. This perception is not the product of deduction or syllogism, but is instead "recognised" by "a simple intuition of the mind" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 100; AT 140). The awareness of the mind that it is engaged in the act of thinking immediately implies its own existence. In the *Second Set of Replies*, Descartes argues that if "cogito ergo sum" were a syllogism, then it would have to contain a suppressed major premise (it would be an enthymeme): in this case, "everything which thinks is, or exists" (Descartes, Vol. II p.100; AT 140-1). But the mind, prior to forming this syllogism, would have to have had previous knowledge of this major premise or universal statement in order to deduce its own existence from it. Descartes denies this scenario, insisting that the mind does not deduce its existence from this universal statement. Instead, the knowledge that it is "impossible that [one] should think without existing" (Descartes, Vol. II p.100; AT 140-1) is derived from one's
unmediated awareness of one’s own experience as a thing which thinks. It is the mind’s particular awareness, its unmediated intuition of itself, which implies its own existence.

Therefore, according to Descartes, “cogito ergo sum” cannot be deduced; it must be a direct, unmediated awareness, a ‘primary notion’. As such, it is absolutely true and certain because like all primary notions, it is a direct and unmediated perception, while the truth of deduced or mediated conclusions can never be absolutely secured unless it be demonstrated that God exists and is not a deceiver.

Before moving on, it is worthwhile to examine more closely the reliability of reason problem from a different angle, to see how this problem affects the habitual judgment that certain relations (causality, correspondence and resemblance) exist between ideas and objects. If the deceiving God possibility turns out to be true, then there is no basis for Descartes to believe that the capacity to reason itself is not inherently flawed or unreliable. In the First Meditation, Descartes argues that the mind is prone to error and deception. But at this point in the Meditations Descartes is without the benefit of the later argument from the Fourth Meditation that explains how and why the mind is prone to err. Descartes can only assume here that the tendency to err is a sign that the mind’s creator cannot be an all-powerful, supreme being, since a supreme being, God, would have the power to create a perfect mind. So, if a deceiving, and therefore imperfect, God is the ‘author’ of the mind, then it must also be true that the mind is inherently flawed. Without proof that God exists and is no deceiver, the reliability of reason remains uncertain, and any judgment that reason produces concerning the objects of its awareness is also susceptible to doubt.

As a direct result, the judgment that external objects (e.g., the trees and the sky) exist and are the sources of ideas of them may in fact be incorrect. The reason for this is as follows. A
deceiving God cannot be perfect, since deception is an imperfection. Limited in this way, a deceptive God could not create a reasoning capacity that is in any sense superior in perfection to its own. Consequently, any capacity for reason that the mind possesses, if created by a deceptive God, would itself be deceptive and thereby cause the mind to go wrong even regarding things that it seems to know best, forcing it to misconstrue obscure and confused perceptions as clear and distinct. Descartes readily admits that all he perceives are ideas of external things (not the actual things in themselves that cause these ideas), ideas that he was accustomed originally to believe were derived from and resembled external objects.

Having successfully doubted external objects (but not ideas), Descartes realises that these ideas nevertheless occur in his mind, and so he must examine what the sources of his ideas could be. He must reconsider the ontological status of the sources of his ideas, since it is not immediately evident to him that these sources must exist and must correspond and resemble their ideas. In other words, he must determine whether he is the cause of all his ideas or whether some of his ideas have causes independent of him. Yet if it is the case that Descartes' mind could cause him to reason incorrectly about relationships of causality, correspondence and resemblance among ideas and objects, then it follows that God, having given him such a flawed nature, might in such a scenario be imperfect and/or a deceiver. In this scenario, any judgment that Descartes reasons out may turn out to be false. In fact, such unreliability in reasoning would imply that Descartes could never be in a position to distinguish between true notions and false ones, even armed with the truth rule that he establishes in the Third Meditation.

The only perceptions that escape the problem of unreliability of reason are “primary notions” like the cogito, because these, as explained above, are not reasoned out in the first place, but are directly perceived. The unreliability of reason problem forces solipsism to surface once
again. Although the existence of the mind (the bearer of a flawed capacity for reason) is indubitable, Descartes still cannot be certain of anything beyond the mind. He is left provisionally trapped in the solipsistic position. Knowledge of objects beyond the mind necessarily requires a fundamental assumption, an act of judgment, about the relationship between objects and ideas of them. But if the capacity for reason is flawed, then any judgment may turn out to be erroneous. The consequences (e.g., impossibility of certainty beyond the mind and solipsism) that follow from the possibility that reason might be flawed serve as yet another motivation for Descartes to demonstrate the existence of God and to prove that God is not a deceiver. Without God, Descartes cannot ever be certain of anything (else). But, if Descartes can prove the existence of a non-deceptive God, then he can be certain that his own capacity to reason is not flawed. A non-deceptive God would not give Descartes a capacity for reason that would cause him (Descartes) either to go wrong about the things he seems to know best, or to mistake obscure and confused perceptions for clear and distinct ones.

Perhaps, realising at this point that he can only discuss the ideas that he finds in his mind with any degree of certainty, Descartes naturally turns to a detailed analysis of these. Descartes categorises his ideas according to three main types: adventitious ideas, which correspond to and are caused by objects existing outside the mind, “or so [he has] hitherto judged” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 26; AT 37); fictitious ideas, which are generated by the mind; and innate ideas, which have their origin in reason alone. Presumably, Descartes shifts to analysing ideas here in the hope that this kind of analysis will lead to a solution for the problem of solipsism and, derivatively thereby, to a resolution of the object-idea relationship problem and finally to a proof for the existence of a non-deceiving God.
As Descartes points out, all ideas are equally considered modes of thought. From this point of view they can neither be subject to doubt nor ever deemed false. While it may be true that a supposedly adventitious idea does not in fact correspond to anything in reality, it cannot be true that this idea, insofar as it is a mode of thought, does not exist as such. Moreover, it can be asserted with certainty that the content (or objective reality) of adventitious ideas distinguishes these ideas from each other even if it is dubitable that such a distinction exists between objects outside the mind (or formally). As Descartes himself argues, "whether it is a goat or a chimera that I am imagining, it is just as true that I imagine the former as the latter" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 26; AT 37). Descartes contends that the same holds true for any ideas that are expressions of the faculty of will and the faculty of emotion. There is a distinction to be made between perception and judgment. While the act of perceiving the content of ideas does not produce uncertainty, ideas that take the form of judgments are especially susceptible to doubt. To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to review Descartes' discussion of the formal and objective reality of ideas and objects.

Ideas are susceptible to falsity when they take the form of judgments because the mind forms a relationship between the objective reality of its ideas and the presumed formal reality of the objects of those ideas. Specifically, the judgments with which Descartes is primarily concerned here are those that refer to the resemblance between and the causal correspondence of ideas and extra-mental objects. Descartes expresses serious concern that the judgment that a relationship exists between objects and ideas—which he describes as originating from habitual belief—may be false. When the mind judges, for example, that there is a causal relationship between an idea and an extra-mental object, the mind may be mistaken since it lacks any self-evident reason or justification for its judgment. Hence, the rest of the Third Meditation focuses
on the establishment of such a reason or justification. Since scientific investigations are concerned specifically with empirical data, and more generally with the natures of extra-mental objects, it is critical for Descartes to justify the (presupposed) judgment that ideas of extra-mental and extra-mental objects themselves share a causal relationship in the relevant cases. If a causal connection between objects and some of our ideas is merely presupposed to exist rather than justified with absolute certainty, then all scientific empirical conclusions remain unjustifiably and somewhat uncertain. Thus, Descartes’ project of certainty again depends on the establishment of God’s existence if it is to proceed any further.

In an effort to establish the independent existence of something outside the mind, Descartes attends to the nature of the relationship between seemingly extra-mental bodies and their corresponding adventitious ideas. This new focus is relevant to the overarching problem of the Meditations, to provide the sciences with a firm and stable metaphysical foundation (or justification). The observer of empirical phenomena (the scientist, for instance) at this juncture can only assume a correspondence between objects and their mental representations.

Now in order for an idea to be called adventitious, a judgment must be made regarding the origin or source of the idea. An adventitious idea requires a judgment that the idea has its origin in some independent object existing outside the mind. Yet this judgment can be nothing more than a presupposition and it is therefore susceptible to doubt. One reason, he suggests, that the mind is inclined to make this judgment regarding idea and object in the first place is that ‘nature’ has instructed it to do so. However, Descartes is quick to distinguish here between ‘nature’ and the ‘natural light’. ‘Nature’ is akin to the non-rational impulses or forces that push us in certain directions. Descartes’ example of this force is the impulse we may have towards evil; he suggests that the ‘natural impulses’ that (may) cause us to make morally incorrect
judgments are similar to the impulses that cause us to misjudge propositions in non-moral (epistemological, metaphysical) cases. By contrast, the 'natural light' is the *force of reason*, which serves as sole authority on matters of truth. Indeed, Descartes exalts the 'natural light' to the position of most 'trustworthy' means of distinguishing truth from falsity, whereas natural impulses are always suspect. The distinction is between two forces that direct the mind, the thoughtless compulsion, or natural impulse, and the rational persuasion of natural light. While it seems true, following Descartes' analysis, that we can be blind-sided by our natural impulses, it is also the case that ideas, notions, principles, and propositions that are illuminated by the natural light force assent to their truth. So, if the natural light leads us towards a particular conclusion, then we can be certain that the conclusion is true and, therefore, certain. While Descartes does not mention here, the parallel between the natural light as reason's true guide, and the truth rule, as criterion for sorting out perceptions (introduced earlier), the careful reader cannot help but notice it. Two points, however, are left unexplained by Descartes: how these two elements are related in terms of their function and why the mind needs both in order possess truth.

'Natural impulse' compels us to conclude that some ideas seem to have causes that do not come from the mind, that some ideas involuntarily appear in the mind, and that some ideas have sources that exist independently, or outside the mind. For instance, as I stare at my computer screen, I might try to cause the idea I have of the screen (the image of it in my mind) to disappear or change form. But unable to do this while still staring at my screen, I might make the judgment that the idea I have of the screen is adventitious because its presence in my mind is not a result matter of volition: I can neither cause it to disappear nor cause it to change in nature. So I judge that an extra-mental object causes the appearance of this particular idea, my computer screen, in my mind. The screen is involuntarily apprehended by sensation and objectively represented by
the mind. The activity of sensation produces ideas without any assent on the part of the will. This experience leads me to conclude that certain ideas have sources and are causally related to objects that exist outside the mind. But how can I know that my judgment about my experience accords with the truth of this matter?

According to Descartes, natural impulse leads us to believe that a causal relation exists between some ideas and extra-mental objects. Descartes reasons out why the impulse and its corresponding judgment are open to doubt. He argues that he has no justified reason (at present) for denying the claim that there is a subliminal faculty, of which the mind is unaware, that is responsible for making these ideas appear to have sources outside of it that cause involuntary impressions on the mind. Moreover, even if these kinds of ideas are truly adventitious (i.e., they truly have their origin in *something* extra-mental), there is still no reason necessarily to assent to the judgment that there exists a relationship of resemblance between object and idea. It is always possible that one, undifferentiated extra-mental object is the cause of all adventitious ideas. Thus, Descartes concludes, because these judgments of correspondence and resemblance are based on mere ‘blind impulse’, they cannot be indubitable.

Unfortunately, then, the examination of the relationship between adventitious ideas and their objects yields no escape from solipsism. If ‘blind impulse’ cannot be trusted and if the ‘natural light’ does not immediately and directly validate the relation between extra-mental objects and their ideas, then Descartes must look elsewhere to discover whether in fact some ideas (or at least one) have causes that exist outside the mind. Once again, Descartes’ strategy is to shift his attention to find another angle of attack. This time, moving away from adventitious ideas, Descartes investigates the degrees of formal and objective reality of ideas and objects to see if this approach can sort out the problem. This new investigation develops into the first of
two causal proofs for God’s existence that are found in the *Third Meditation*. Later on, in the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes also will use a version of the Ontological Argument as another means of proving God’s existence.

The first causal argument for God’s existence is an *a posteriori* causal proof. *A posteriori* is a term usually applied to propositions that are based on experience. *A posteriori* proofs are distinct from *a priori* proofs because the conclusions of the latter are based on abstract, non-empirical (*a priori*) propositions. Descartes’ new line of inquiry leads him to a proof for God’s existence that is *a posteriori* because this proof begins with the idea of God, which is included as one among the set of various ideas that exist in *his* mind. Attending to the idea of God that is represented in the mind is the same as experiencing the idea as present in the mind. The first premise of this causal proof for God’s existence states that there exists in his mind an idea of a substance that is “infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful, and which created both [Descartes] and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists” (Descartes, Vol. II p.31; AT 45). This idea of God is definitional and also figures in the Ontological Argument that Descartes discusses later in the *Fifth Meditation*. However, unlike the Ontological Argument, which argues for *the existence of God* in an *a priori* proof, the causal argument is grounded in his (Descartes’) own experience with such an idea.

Consequently, Descartes commences this new investigation by first distinguishing between the *formal* and the *objective reality* of ideas and objects.\(^1\) Descartes writes,

\[\text{[u]ndoubtedly, the ideas which represent substance to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents. Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent, and the creator of all things that exist}\]

\(^1\) My analysis of the formal and objective reality of ideas and objects is partly based on Professor Murray Miles text, *Inroads: A Historical Introduction to Ancient And Modern Western Philosophy*, p.p.274-277.
apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances.

(Descartes, Vol. II p. 28; AT 40)

In this passage, Descartes refers to the causal relationship between objects (actual infinite or finite substances and modes) and their ideas (in this case, the idea of infinite or finite substances and modes). The usage of 'formal' and 'objective' reality are taken over by Descartes from the earlier Scholastic tradition of philosophy and apply here to both ideas and objects.

Now the formal reality of objects refers to the actual existence of the object outside, or independent of the mind. So, for example, the formal reality of the object the sun refers to the actual sun that exists in the universe (whether or not it is being perceived by the mind). On the other hand, the objective reality of objects refers to the object's presence in the mind in the form of mental representation. For instance, an object such as the sun is represented in the mind through an act of thought. Conversely, the formal reality of an idea refers to the idea insofar as it is considered a mode of thought. So the formal reality of all ideas is that they are modes or accidents of the substance, mind. Objective reality of an idea refers to the idea insofar as it expresses a particular content (representational content) which varies according to what is being represented in the idea.

Formally speaking, insofar as an idea is a mode of thought, all ideas possess the same degree of formal reality. For example, there can be no formal difference between the idea of God, the idea of the 'cogito' and the idea of a unicorn because each is a mode of thought. Even though these three ideas each represent very different things, all three are no more or no less modes of thought. While ideas have the same degree of formal reality, they contain varying degrees of objective reality because they correspond to (formal) causes that differ widely from one another in terms of their formal reality. For example, the ideas of heat, the sun and God are
all equivalent, *formally* speaking, but they differ widely with respect to what they represent, or in terms of their *objective* reality: heat is a mode of substance, the sun is a finite, material substance and God is an infinite, immaterial substance.

Objectively speaking, ideas differ in several ways, in terms of: what they represent— their representational content; what *kind* of object they represent—either material or immaterial; and their *degree* of objective reality—ranging from nothingness to infinite. So, for instance, the idea of the sun differs from the idea of God with respect to its representational content (what it represents) since the former idea represents a finite, celestial substance, while the latter represents an infinite being whose attributes are complete (perfect). These ideas differ also with respect to the kinds of objects they represent: the idea of the sun is one of a *material* substance, whereas the idea of God represents an *immaterial* substance. Mind, like the idea of God, represents an immaterial substance, but unlike the idea of God, the idea of mind is an idea of a finite substance. Finally, whereas the idea of the sun has an objective reality that is *finite*, the idea of God has an objective reality that is *infinite*. So according to this scale of reality, the idea of God has greater objective reality than the idea of the sun. Moreover, it is clear that the working assumption here is that objective reality of ideas is causally influenced by the formal reality of the objects that ideas represent. The actual sun possesses a different and inferior formal reality than God, and so, consequently, the idea of God must have a different and, in this case, greater objective reality than the idea of the sun.

As mentioned above, the objective reality of ideas can range from nothingness to infinity. The idea of God, since it represents a formal substance that is infinite and absolutely perfect, must have the greatest possible degree of objective reality, since formally speaking no greater substance can exist. Following this logic, the idea of the *cogito*, which represents a finite and
imperfect substance, necessarily must have a lesser degree of objective reality than the idea of God, since formally speaking infinite substances must contain more reality than finite ones. But the idea of the cogito must have more objective reality than the idea of a modal property as finite substance because substances have a greater degree of reality than modes of substances. Finally, the idea of an accidental property or mode has a greater degree of objective reality than the idea of nothingness.

'Reality,' as Descartes understands it, refers to the ontological status of objects. But also, in the case of ideas, (objective) reality refers to and is determined by the degree to which ideas "participate by representation in a higher degree of being or perfection" (Descartes, Vol. II p.28 n; added in the French version)\(^1\). Moreover, the terms 'reality' and 'perfection' are used synonymously by Descartes. Thus, the more real a being is, the greater its degree of perfection; and the more real a thing is that is represented as an idea, the greater the perfection that is contained in the idea.

Descartes introduces the causal principle, which he articulates through three formulations, under the auspices of the trustworthy 'natural light'. The first of these is that reason dictates that "there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause" (Descartes, Vol. II p.28; AT 40). Simply put, it makes no logical sense to speak of an effect having a greater reality than its cause. Rather, causal relations imply a dependency in which effect is entirely dependent on cause for its (the effect's) existence. The

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\(^1\) In the French edition of the Meditations, Descartes argues that ideas of substances have more objective reality than ideas of modes or accidents because substances "participate by representation in a higher degree of being or perfection" (p. 28 ft 1; my emphasis). The causal connection between the formal reality of objects and the objective reality of ideas is described as a process of "participation", which Descartes, like his predecessor Plato, does not explain any further. Perhaps the absence of any full explanation of this term further calls into question Descartes' assumption that formal realities can causally affect objective realities.
cause must possess, either “formally or eminently,” all that is contained in the effect in order for the former to have the capacity to produce the latter.

Descartes recognises that this first formulation of the causal principle implies yet a second formulation, namely “that something cannot arise from nothing, and also that what is more perfect—that is, contains in itself more reality—cannot arise from what is less perfect” (Descartes, Vol. p. 28; AT 40-41). Thus, effects receive all of their reality or perfection from their causes, since none of their attributes can just simply arise without the prior existence, in each case, of a real cause. These two causal principle formulations become the cornerstone for a third formulation of the causal principle (discussed presently, below) that Descartes finally uses to establish a causal connection between objects and ideas. In addition, the causal argument for God’s existence is premised on this third formulation of the causal principle.

Thus far, then, Descartes has established three main elements of his first causal argument. First, formally speaking, all ideas are equal. Second, objectively speaking, ideas vary in terms of what they represent, in terms of kind, and in terms of their objective reality. Third, he has introduced three formulations—each one more articulated and refined to suit his purposes than the last—of the same causal principle, which, he argues, is logically indisputable, ‘transparently true’, and known by the ‘natural light’, and which governs the nature of all causal relationships. He will also argue that the causal principle (in any of its formulations) applies not only to relations between actual, or formal, objects, but that it can also be extended to apply to relations among objects and ideas. Every idea, whether adventitious, fictitious or innate, is causally dependent on the formal existence of some object, and it is necessarily true that the cause of an idea must possess formally or eminently what is found in the objective reality of the idea.

15 Cottingham et. al., Vol. II p. 28 n. 2: “In scholastic terminology, to possess a property ‘formally’ is to possess it literally, in accordance with its definition; to possess it ‘eminently’ is to possess it in some higher form.
Meditating on the relationship between ideas and objects, Descartes articulates the third formulation of the causal principle, a variant of the two earlier formulations. The third formulation combines the elements of causality expressed in the first two formulations and becomes the main expression of the causal principle upon which Descartes' argument turns. The third formulation states that "for an 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" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28-9: AT 41). If there were even just one case of an idea whose objective reality exceeded the formal reality of its cause, then this relationship would violate all the formulations of the principle of causality and, consequently, causal relations would cease to be regulated by a single and stable principle. Moreover, it would be impossible to speak of any known logical or natural order of causal relations in general.

Armed with the third formulation of the causal principle, Descartes attends to his various ideas to see if he might find at least one which has a degree of objective reality that is so great that he is forced to conclude that he himself could not be its formal cause—at the risk of contradicting the causal principle itself. To grasp the full critical and significant nature of this new line of argument, let us cite Descartes' argument in full:

If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea exists. But if no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to convince me of the existence of anything apart from myself. For despite a most careful survey, this is the only argument I have so far been able to find.

(Descartes, Vol. II p.29; AT 42; my italics)

It is clear that Descartes now sees a potentially viable way out of the solipsistic quandary, but he also acknowledges that he will be stuck in it if this thought experiment does not yield the desired result. So far, Descartes has only been able to guarantee the existence of his own mind and
thoughts. He recognises that his mind’s formal reality is as an immaterial and yet finite substance. This being true, Descartes could count himself as the conceivable cause of any idea present in his mind that has a finite degree of objective reality. No logical reason would prohibit him from being the formal cause of any idea whose objective content is equal to or less than that of a finite, immaterial substance. On the other hand, if Descartes were able to identify just one idea, especially one whose objective reality is infinite, then he would be forced to disqualify himself, or any other finite substance, as its formal cause. After all, according to the third formulation of the principle of causality, the effect (in this case the idea) cannot exceed in its objective reality the formal reality of its cause. Having identified such an idea, Descartes would then be in a prime position to assert the existence of something else besides his own mind, successfully releasing him from the solipsistic position.

By identifying the existence of some thing greater in its formal reality than his own mind, Descartes would then be poised to claim that there exists, besides himself, a being who possesses an infinite amount of power. The only thing left to prove would be that this being is no deceiver. As Descartes acknowledges in the above passage, there is no other argument that he has been able to conceive of which would resolve the quandary of solipsism, an outcome that he has already implied is totally unsatisfactory. By his own admission, Descartes believes that this argument is the only way to completely remove the doubt admitted back in the First and Second Meditations, and the only way finally to do away with solipsism once and for all. Hence, the significance and the criticality of the first causal argument cannot be overstated. Nor can Descartes’ causal argument afford to be dismissed. On the contrary, the causal argument is the mediating link that stands between Descartes and the knowledge of all things beyond his own mind. Without it, there is no possibility for any certainty in the sciences.
Recall that Descartes had earlier made a list of the ideas that have previously come before his mind. This list includes the ideas he has of himself, of "God, corporeal and inanimate things, angels, animals and finally other men like myself" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 29; AT 42-43). The upshot of the examination of the various ideas and their possible causes is that in each case, except that of God, Descartes concedes that he could himself be the formal cause since none of these ideas have an objective reality that exceeds finitude. Angels, who possess extraordinary powers, are nonetheless still finite because they were created. However, Descartes concludes even in this case that he could still be the cause of the idea of angels through combining ideas he has of himself with ideas of corporeal things and God. Thus, the idea of angels can be accounted for whether or not actual angels exist.

Unlike the situation with angels and other finite things, Descartes cannot logically conclude that he is the cause of the idea of God, which exists in his mind nonetheless. The reasoning is straightforward. Descartes describes the idea of God as of a "substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both [him] and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 31; AT 45). But he could not be the cause of an idea of a being who possesses infinite, absolute and perfect attributes, because the objective, or representational, content of such attributes surpasses in greatness the formal reality of Descartes' finite, contingent and imperfect mind. In other words, if Descartes' mind is not infinite, absolute and perfect, then he cannot be the cause of ideas of this nature. Therefore, he concludes, God must exist as the cause of the idea of God that exists in his mind, since no other suitable formal cause can be identified. Descartes' method is elegantly, perhaps even deceptively, simple: he finds God by process of elimination of
possible formal causes. But what, exactly, licenses Descartes to draw this conclusion? In short, it is the third formulation of the causal principle.

Recall from the *Third Meditation* the hierarchical scale of the degrees of objective reality that mirrors the degrees of formal reality of objects. According to these parallel scales of reality, the *idea* of an infinite substance possesses the greatest degree of objective reality because the *actual* infinite substance is said to possess the highest degree of formal reality. Accordingly, Descartes' mind, since finite, has a *lesser* degree of formal reality than *his* idea of God contains objective reality. Thus, Descartes cannot be the formal cause of his own idea of God. This conclusion must be true since the alternative, that Descartes is the cause of his idea of God, directly contradicts the third formulation of the causal principle, "for an 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" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28-9; AT 41). Violation of this formulation constitutes violation of the other formulations of the causal principle, that something cannot come from nothing and that the cause must contain formally or eminently all that is in the effect, etc. which are both known by the trustworthy natural light of reason. Since Descartes, on pain of contradiction, cannot be the formal cause of his idea of God, the only possibility left is that God himself must exist as its formal cause because only God is equal in formal reality to the objective reality of the idea of God in the mind.

Descartes is now able to add to his body of certain knowledge the claim that God also necessarily exists. Moreover, he has avoided the problem of solipsism through this sophisticated argument. He has now proved indubitably that he is not alone in the universe. But he is aware that there may still be objections to this conclusion.
Descartes introduces, and immediately counters, five possible objections to this causal proof of God’s existence. First, while he can understand how he, as a finite substance, could be the cause of his idea of substance, he argues that it does not follow from this that he could generate an idea of an infinite substance. Second, Descartes responds to the objection that his notion of God is derived through a process of negation rather than from an actual idea present in the mind. He counters that the idea of God is a ‘true idea’, not the result of merely negating the finite quality of the mind in order to arrive at the idea of infinite substance. The idea of God, or infinite substance, is a true idea because it has the highest degree of objective reality. Moreover, because the idea of the infinite is “prior to [the] perception of the finite” (Descartes, Vol. II p.31; AT 45), the latter, which can only be understood if the idea of infinity already exists in the mind, is dependent on the former. Third, Descartes disputes the idea that God is ‘materially false,’ a representation derived from nothing or no-thing, and therefore a result of the imperfect mind. For example, the idea of cold is obscure and confused, since it is unclear whether cold is merely the absence of heat, or a real idea of a property. Yet, the idea of God is so clear and distinct that it in no way represents a non-thing or an absence (the absence of finitude does not equal infinity). Consequently, the idea of God, because it is so clear and distinct, must be the most real idea that the mind possesses. Fourth, Descartes denies that an incomplete ‘grasp’ of God-- i.e. of all his attributes, or of attribute like infinity--implies that the mind cannot otherwise understand God. It is enough for the mind to know some of God’s attributes and to have a conception of attributes like infinity and perfection for it to have an understanding of God. Finally, Descartes rejects the argument that the mind--which constantly acquires new knowledge and is thus full of potential—contains in it the qualities that it mistakenly attributes to God. Part of the phenomena of mind is the intellectual experience of progressing by degrees toward the ideal of perfection, either
through various attempts at self-improvement or through the acquisition of knowledge. By reflecting on its own intellectual potential, the mind may be capable of inventing the idea of a supremely intelligent being, such as God. But according to Descartes this argument is fallacious, since the idea of God, unlike the idea of the mind, does not contain in it any potential quality or acquired attribute; rather, God’s being is fully and eternally actualized.

The result of attending to these possible objections allows Descartes to reach his desired conclusion, namely that God, an infinite substance, must be the formal cause of the mind’s idea of God, which possesses the highest degree of objective reality. Consequently, God exists and Descartes can therefore claim with certainty that he is not alone. This is the extent of the causal argument, which I will later examine in light of the argument that Descartes presents in the Fourth Meditation. The argument of the Fourth Meditation explains why the mind, although created by a perfect deity, is still prone to error. Descartes’ explanation is partly founded on his characterisation of the faculty of the will and partly on the limitation of the intellect.

Before examining the argument of the Fourth Meditation, let us briefly describe the second causal proof of God’s existence that Descartes uses in the Third Meditation. Like the first, the second causal proof is premised on the presence of the idea of God in the mind and, more importantly, at least for the purposes of this critical assessment, on the first formulation of the causal principle. Descartes arrives at the second proof by examining possible causes of his existence as a thinking substance possessing the idea of God. He admits that if he shifts his attention away from God for even just a moment, he might briefly forget that there is a being, who is most perfect (infinitely real), who necessarily exists and who is the creator (formal cause) of his mind and its idea of God. To confirm the knowledge of God’s existence, Descartes uses the second causal proof as another way to demonstrate that God is the only possible cause of his
mind and the idea of God found therein. The second causal proof uses the same logical method as the first, namely process of elimination. Descartes considers three alternative causes for the existence of his mind. If God is bracketed off, then either Descartes is his own cause (self-caused), or his parents together are his cause (reproductive cause), or a being who is less than perfect and who contains less formal reality than God, is his cause (finite cause).

Descartes first debunks the notion that he is self-caused. If he were capable of bringing himself into existence from nothing (an act that would transcend the principle of causality), then it follows that he would also have given himself perfect attributes, since it would certainly be more difficult to accomplish the former than it would to achieve the latter. Being self-caused, then, would mean that Descartes himself must be God, i.e. a being that lacks any imperfect attributes. Moreover, Descartes is aware that the duration of his existence is made up of discrete segments of time. Yet, he argues, it would require no less power to preserve his own existence from one moment to the next than it would take to create himself from nothing each moment. After carefully meditating on the (limited) capacity of his faculties, Descartes finds no evidence to suggest that he has the *infinite* power that is required for self-creation or self-preservation.

Nor can Descartes agree that his existence is caused by his parents or by some being who is less perfect than God because the principle of causality dictates that “there must be at least as much reality in the cause as in the effect” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 34; AT 49). Inasmuch as Descartes is considering the cause of his mind, a thinking substance that possesses the idea of God, he must conclude that its cause is also a “thinking thing [that possesses] the idea of all the perfection which [Descartes attributes] to God” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 34; AT 49). Moreover, when he considers the cause of his own being, he must conclude that ultimately the chain of causality that has produced him must end with an entity who is self-caused, or be caught in an
infinite regress. Infinite regression is not acceptable. Descartes is not just considering the cause that originally is responsible for his existence, but he also is considering that cause which preserves him from moment to moment (the cause in each case is one and the same). For example, if Descartes were to say that his parents were his cause, then he would need to identify the cause of their existence and so on. Eventually, this causal explanation would end with God as the ultimate cause, who by definition is self-caused, or it would collapse in an infinite regress. The same argument applies to the less than perfect being hypothesis.

Furthermore, Descartes can dismiss the notion that his parents caused him, on the grounds that they, like Descartes himself, also lack the power to preserve themselves (or any other being for that matter). It follows from this lack that his parents also cannot have the power to cause him since causing and preserving an entity require omnipotence. The power of his parents is limited to placing “certain dispositions in the matter” that belongs to his mind and does not extend beyond this capacity to the power of creation.

Descartes can also dismiss the possibility that he has several partial causes, or that the ideas that he has of each of God’s attributes have distinct causes, which are combined together by the mind. Descartes refutes the claim that the idea of God is a collection of discrete ideas, each having its own cause, on the ground that the “unity, the simplicity or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which [Descartes] understands [God] to have” (Descartes, Vol. II 34; AT 50). The same cause that allows Descartes to understand (not grasp) the ideas of perfect states, like “interconnection and inseparability,” must be the same cause that allows him to understand other perfect attributes, like infinity, which are attributable to God.
Since Descartes knows that he is a finite thinking substance possessing the idea of an infinite thinking substance, and that his cause must be great enough in its formal reality—i.e. it must itself be an infinite thinking substance possessing all of the attributes contained in the idea—to qualify logically as the idea’s total and efficient cause, therefore, on pain of contradiction, he cannot attribute the creation of his existence to any lesser cause than God, nor can he attribute it to two or more such causes (neither being perfect) nor to his parents. According to Descartes, the only logical possibility is that God must exist as the cause of the idea of God in his mind, for any other alternative either violates the laws of causality or lapses into an infinite regress.

Thus, while each causal argument employs a different strategy, both are designed to explain the presence of the idea of God in the mind, and both use the principle of causality to eliminate possible causes to arrive at the conclusion that God must be its cause, and, God must, therefore, exist.

The last two major points of the Third Meditation concern how the mind receives the idea of God and the benevolent nature of the creator. Earlier Descartes mentions that the mind can entertain three types of ideas, adventitious, fictitious and innate. The idea of God cannot enter the mind through the senses, since God, who is an infinite substance, is not an object that can be apprehended by sensation. One does not encounter God, or any of the perfections attributed to God, in the sensory world in the same way as one encounters other men, physical objects, etc. in sensory experience. Therefore the idea of God, which is not an idea of an object of sensation or sensory experience, cannot be adventitious. God cannot be labelled a fictitious idea either, according to Descartes’ causal proofs, because the mind’s formal reality is less than the objective reality contained in the idea of God. Therefore the mind alone could not generate or create the idea of God. Finally, with only one alternative left to choose, Descartes identifies the idea of God
as innate. He argues that it is placed (rather than received or created) in the mind by God, and that this endowment identifies man as God's special creation; man, who is made in the image of the Divine, carries with him the idea of his creator.

As regards God's nature, Descartes argues that God, whose existence has already been proven, and who must, if he exists, be perfect in all ways, cannot be a deceiver. If God were a deceiver, this would mean that God is imperfect, since deception is an expression of a flawed nature. However, God is by definition perfect. Therefore God cannot be a deceiver, since this would contradict the perfect nature that belongs by necessity to the supreme being. When Descartes considers the idea of God, he describes God as "the possessor of all the perfections which [Descartes] cannot grasp, but can somehow reach in [his] thought, who is subject to no defects whatsoever...[French version: and has not one of the things which indicate some imperfection]" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 35; AT 52). Thus, the very idea of God as perfect being necessitates that He is no deceiver since "it is manifest by the natural light that all fraud and deception depend on some defect" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 35; AT 52). Since God cannot actively deceive Descartes, Descartes' proof for God's existence places him closer to the goal of certainty. God's existence implies that Descartes should not go wrong when he contemplates the things that he knows best.

The sophistication, elegance and layering of the two causal proofs, and the Third Meditation in general, can now be properly appreciated. However, one question that a cautious or skeptical reader might pose at this juncture is whether or not Descartes has invalidated all possible explanations for the presence of the idea of God in the mind so as justifiably to conclude that God must exist as the formal cause of this idea. Must Descartes' fellow meditator accept the inquiry as exhaustive? If it can be demonstrated that the mind in some sense has a sufficient
degree of formal reality to serve as the cause of the idea of God, without violating the principle of causality, then what need is there for any actual God to stand as its cause? In short, in such a case, these causal proofs for God's existence would collapse and throw Descartes back to the position of solipsism.

II: ii Fourth Meditation

The Fourth Meditation, subtitled “Truth and Falsity,” is an investigation into the reasons why the mind is prone at times to make false judgments, even though God, who has been identified as its creator cannot, by definition, be a deceiver. In addition to responding to this issue, the Fourth Meditation also instructs the reader-meditator on how to make true judgments and to avoid making false ones. Descartes' concern regarding true and false judgments at first glance may seem to be a digression from the main argument the Meditations. His discussion moves from radical doubt to a proof of the existence of the mind and then on to proofs of the existence of God; why doesn’t he proceed next toward to a final proof of the existence of the external world? Consequently, some readers are tempted to dismiss the Fourth Meditation as a digression that adds nothing substantial to the Meditations. However, to view this section merely as a digression is misleading because this overlooks the necessary role that it plays in the argument as a whole. Descartes cannot ignore the problem of error once he arrives at the conclusion in the Third Meditation that God exists and is no deceiver. He is immediately forced to account for the phenomena of deception (errors of reason and judgment) in the created mind, without implying that its creator is responsible for this deception.

So it is not unwarranted for Descartes to shift his argument to an explanation of why, when and how the mind is prone to err, especially since it would seem paradoxical that a perfect
deity should produce imperfect minds. A perfect deity would never engage in deception of any kind or for any reason, since deception implies imperfection.

Moreover, the proof that God is no deceiver is critical to the overall project of certainty. If it were discovered that God wilfully engages in deceiving the mind, then Descartes would never be a position to be certain of anything else beyond his own mind, and he would permanently be confined to the position of solipsism. Hence, the relevance of the Fourth Meditation to the overall argument of the Meditations is clear. Descartes must establish the origin of error before he can proceed to the next step in his argument. Descartes must show how the mind is prone to err without implying that its design (attributable to God ultimately) causes it to be deceived or that it is fundamentally flawed in some other way. As it turns out, error does not emerge as the result of a flawed mind, but because of the misuse of the faculty of judgment.

Descartes has described God as a non-deceiver and the creator of the mind, its faculties and attributes. But this description leads to a problematic conclusion: the faculty of judgment is “incapable of ever going wrong” (Descartes, Vol. II p 38; AT 54), or it never makes errors in judgment. Descartes must concede that this scenario indeed runs counter to his actual experience, especially since he recollects that he has been prone to errors of judgment very often in the past. He reasons that the combined faculties of knowledge and will, both of which are employed by the faculty of judgment, are the sources of error on occasions when the limitations of the former are ignored or unacknowledged and the freedom of the latter is not properly restrained. More specifically, in any act of judgment, when the will affirms or denies that which extends beyond the understanding of the intellect, the faculty of judgment is then susceptible to false judgments. If the faculty of judgment makes a correct judgment concerning an object of knowledge but this
object lies beyond the limitations of reason, then the mind is only correct by chance, which does not constitute knowledge but conjecture.

This explanation does seem to account for the potential of the faculty of judgment to err. It does not, however, explain why a perfect God would deliberately create an imperfect faculty of the mind. After all, since God is omnipotent, it would, presumably, be just as easy to create minds that are perfect or at least not prone to err, as it would be to create imperfect ones.

To resolve the paradox of a perfect creator who creates imperfect minds, Descartes conceives of himself (and by implication all men) as somewhere between God's absolute perfection and nothingness, which he categorises as the "farthest removed" from perfection. Strictly speaking, there is nothing inherent in the faculty of judgment that causes it to commit errors in judgment. In other words, there is no real or positive property which God implants in the mind that causes it either to reason incorrectly, to exercise its will improperly or to make false judgments. Nonetheless, in a negative sense, any natural limitation of mind is still a "defect" or privation. Indeed, it makes sense that the mind's faculties have privations. If the mind were actually perfect, then it would be indistinguishable from God's since it too would be, among many other things, infinite and self-created, not finite and created. Insofar as mind is finite and created, therefore, it also must participate to some degree in nothingness. Descartes concludes, then, that the finite mind, unlike God's infinite intellect, must be in some sense limited in its capacity. While this natural limitation of the faculty of judgment, which is not infinite, becomes a part of the explanation for why the mind is prone to make errors in judgment, it is not a satisfactory answer to the paradox that Descartes is investigating in this section. Descartes expands the idea that the finite mind is limited by arguing that if this limitation is not acknowledged, or if it is unrecognised, the result will be the materialisation of misjudgment and
error. Interestingly, right from the very start of the *Fourth Meditation*, we find Descartes not only giving us a description of how the mind makes errors in judgment, but he is also suggesting a prescription for avoiding judgment errors.

Descartes also admits that perhaps there is no comprehensible answer for why an omnipotent God limits the mind so that it is prone to err. God must have reasons for having created imperfect minds instead of perfect ones, but the finite mind is not capable of fully or adequately understanding them. For example, Descartes argues, unbeknownst to the mind, its *limitation* might actually play a necessary role in the delicate balance or dynamic of the universe. This explanation makes sense since the universe and its purpose is such that it can only ever be grasped by an infinite intellect. So it should be no surprise that there are certain aspects of the mind, of God, and of the external world that simply defy full explanation. Instead of engaging in a futile effort to unravel mysteries of divine purpose, Descartes turns inward to meditate on his own faculties more closely in order to see if he can identify what specifically contributes to judgment errors and what might *practically* be done to prevent them.

Judgment requires both intellect and will; these two faculties work in combination, and are the "concurrent causes" of judgment errors. A limited intellect on its own, for instance, cannot be the cause of judgment errors since the intellect is mostly a passive faculty, whose function is to receive perceptions or entertain ideas, some of which may become the content of judgments. But *ideas alone are not judgments*. While Descartes admits that his intellect is limited since he does not have a corresponding idea in his mind for everything existing in the universe, he cannot conclude from this that his limited intellect is therefore deprived in any real sense. After all, he knows of no reason why God ought to have provided him with a greater intellect. Since ideas alone are not judgments, they cannot be true or false. It is when the faculty
of judgment affirms or denies a certain idea, or when it makes some claim regarding the nature of an idea, that the potential for error emerges. The potential arises in this situation precisely because judgments are capable of being either true or false.

Likewise, the will cannot be the sole cause of error, if it is considered independent from its relation to the intellect, from its role in the faculty of true judgment. The function of the will is simply to affirm, deny, pursue and avoid. Unlike the intellect, which is inherently limited in its capacity to perceive, Descartes observes that the will is not limited in its activity in any essential way. According to his experience, there is not an exterior force that restrains the will, and it is not restricted by its own nature. In this sense, the will is perfect. Descartes writes,

Besides, I cannot complain that the will or freedom of choice which I receive from God is not sufficiently extensive or perfect, since I know by experience that it is not restricted in any way. Indeed, I think it is noteworthy that there is nothing else in me which is so perfect and so great that the possibility of a further increase in its perfection or greatness is beyond my understanding.

(Descartes, Vol. II p. 38; AT 57; my italics)

The faculties of memory and imagination, like intellect, also are limited in their natures. The will, then, is the only faculty that Descartes finds to be without limitation. It resembles in perfection and nature the will of God, his creator. Descartes demonstrates two points here. First, none of the faculties possess real properties or inherent flaws that cause judgment errors; the intellect has certain privations, which are not flaws per se, and the will is described as perfect. Second, the interaction between the ‘faculty of knowledge’, or intellect, and the ‘faculty of choice or freedom of the will’, or will, in the act of making judgments, is the cause of all judgment errors. While judgments may be imperfect (incorrect), the will, or the power to judge is not. So how exactly does error occur in judgment?

As stated above, the main activities of the will are to affirm, deny, pursue and avoid. God has an infinite intellect and has, therefore, an infinite range of intellectual material to act upon or
to affirm, deny, etc. Since God’s will works in conjunction with his supreme attributes, such as
his omnipotence and omniscience, it is always “firm and efficacious”, and in this sense, it is
superior to Descartes’ will. But considered strictly in terms of function, God’s will and
Descartes’ will are essentially equivalent, since in itself neither is (or can be) restrained or
limited in its activity. More specifically, Descartes reasons that both God’s will and his own have
an identical function, to affirm, deny, etc., and these activities are unrestricted either by the will’s
intrinsic nature or by any outside force. For instance, Descartes can affirm that the moon is made
of green cheese or that five and five add to nine. These affirmations are not prohibited by
anything at all, not even by the actual facts or the mathematical realities, respectively, that
determine these propositions as false. Thus, whatever is placed before the intellect may be
judged true or false, good or evil, pleasurable or repugnant by the will, whose activity is perfect
precisely because it is absolutely unrestricted. The unencumbered will may assert false claims
and deny true ones, or vice versa, since nothing can stop it from extending its activity in any
direction of judgment.

It is interesting to note here the connection that Descartes makes between freedom of the
will and certainty. Descartes defines ‘freedom’ of the will by carefully distinguishing freedom
from ‘indifference’. Perfect freedom is not achieved when the mind can judge an object of
thought in a variety ways. In this scenario, the mind is not compelled to judge the object one way
or another. When the will is faced with several options, all of which it perceives as equally true
or good, then it is not free but indifferent. Indifference, Descartes argues, is the lowest grade of
freedom. To the contrary, the will is most free when it is strongly inclined by reason, truth,
goodness, or by divine revelation to choose one option over another. Essentially, the will is most
free when it is constrained by any or all of the above conditions. He claims that “[neither] divine
grace nor natural knowledge ever diminishes freedom... they increase or strengthen it” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 40; AT 58). The notion of a constrained freedom at first seems to generate a paradox. Descartes resolves this tension by reasoning that if he were always capable of perceiving clearly the “right judgment or choice,” then he would not be required to weigh up choices before his mind, and, thus, he would always be perfectly free to choose what is true or good. Absence of choice rather than choice ultimately conditions the will’s freedom. Choice inevitably leads the will to a state of indifference, out of which potential to make judgment errors emerges.

Recall that Descartes does not locate the cause of judgment errors in the will, which he argues is “perfect of its kind,” nor in the faculty of understanding, which he argues is bestowed by God and contains ideas that can be correctly understood. Instead, he identifies the sufficient condition of judgment errors in the discrepancy that exists between the unrestricted power of the will to affirm, deny, etc., and the limited capacity of the understanding. The will is misused when it extends itself by affirming, denying, etc., ideas beyond the scope of the understanding, since “the perception of the intellect should always precede the determination of the will” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 41: AT 60). The will judges these ideas from a position of indifference, or in other words without being constrained by reason, truth, the good, or divine revelation; as a result, the mind is susceptible to error.

Consequently, to avoid making judgment errors the will only ought to affirm, deny, etc, intellectual objects that are well within the limits of the intellect’s understanding. Errors never occur when judgment is the result of a “great light in the intellect” that is “followed by a great inclination of the will,” since “spontaneity and freedom of ... belief [is] all the greater in proportion to [the] lack of indifference” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 41: AT 59). Accordingly, the will
ought to refrain from using its power to judge when it is in a state of indifference, that is, when the intellect (completely or partially) lacks the necessary knowledge to determine a true and certain judgment, because judgments made under this condition may be false. Finally, Descartes can confidently conclude that God is not the source of judgment errors, and that God has not equipped the mind with properties that cause its self-deception. Error is the result of the misuse of the will, and nothing more.

Descartes ends the Fourth Meditation by providing several reasons for why the cause of error consists in the misuse of the will and not in the faculties of the mind that God has created. He urges his reader, at least over the course of the Meditations, once again to deliberate only on what is perceived by the mind clearly and distinctly, and he also reminds his reader to withhold judgment in all cases where the mind does not perceive its object clearly and distinctly. He vows that he will follow these instructions since now he sees that this is the only way to avoid errors in judgment.

III. i. The first causal argument and the characterisation of the will are combined to discover what impact this has on the proof of the existence of God. Is the idea of God capable of being derived from the idea of the will and the idea of substance?

By the end of the Third Meditation, Descartes claims to have discovered something that goes beyond mere conjecture or belief. He has proved the existence of the cogito and of God, both of which are necessary to achieve the overall goal of certainty in the sciences. Certainty in the sciences requires a provable, justified metaphysical foundation and a coherent epistemological framework to guarantee that the contents of scientific investigations, empirical objects, in fact exist as they appear to the investigator, and that they are knowable. For apodictic certainty, the universe must be knowable by a mind that is designed to acquire true knowledge of it. If there is
a discrepancy between external objects and the mind’s perception of them, then any investigation into the nature of empirical objects will be threatened by falsity. The scientific investigator uses innate, abstract principles but also sensory perceptions to study and learn about the nature of things. If either reason or sensory perception is somehow distorted, either by some external cause or by a defect of the mind, the process of scientific investigation will be compromised. Moreover, this distortion would go unrecognised because the investigator would have no means of testing whether or not things really are as they appear. An investigator cannot unconditionally transcend her cognitive and perceptual abilities to evaluate the degree of their accuracy; so, any distortion introduced by the mind cannot be corrected or adjusted for.

Once Descartes establishes the existence of God (who is no deceiver), he has eliminated the problem of distorted cognition and perception and all that these deficiencies might entail. The proof of God’s existence is the metaphysical foundation that supports epistemological inquiry and that guarantees the truth of all knowledge in the sciences that is acquired through proper use of the mind. Moreover, the proof of God’s existence allows Descartes to proceed to the last proofs of the Meditations, regarding the existence of material (empirical) objects and regarding the “real distinction between mind and body” (immaterial and material substance) and their interaction in the Sixth Meditation.

In the Third Meditation, Descartes divides his ideas into innate, adventitious and fictitious to see whether any these classes contains an idea that must have a cause existing outside the mind. At first, the most promising class seems to be adventitious ideas, since these are ideas of extra-mental objects. Not one adventitious idea, however, possesses a self-evident guarantee that it is caused by something that exists independently. In fact, Descartes argues that

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16 Fictitious ideas are derivative from adventitious perceptions. While they are created by the mind, they are also aggregates of ideas that represent extra-mental objects.
it is only a "spontaneous" or "blind impulse" that drives us to judge that there is a connection between object and idea.¹⁷

This conclusion leads to a very strange realization for Descartes concerning the nature of the mind and its perceptions of external objects. Innate ideas about objects in general, such as extension, position, shape, size, number, etc., provide the mind with more certain knowledge than sensory perceptions of objects, which form adventitious ideas, because the former are perceived more clearly and distinctly than properties coming through sensation. The understanding contains certain ideas regarding the nature of external objects that precede and are more certain than any sensory perceptions of particular objects. As an example, Descartes considers the two perceptions he has of the sun, one based in reason and the other derived from sensory perception. He argues that the "idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 27; AT 39). By means of reasoned, astronomical calculations, the actual sun is known to be many times greater in size than the sensory perception of the sun suggests. The important point here is that sensory perceptions of objects may be (somewhat) inaccurate; of course, this conclusion agrees with the message of the First Meditation, which warns the reader not to trust the senses. However, it is known with certainty by means of the innate knowledge the mind has of material objects that if the sun exists as an external object, then it must possess extension, be of a certain size, have a certain mass, and exist in a location, etc. Because of their nature, the accumulation of adventitious ideas only leads to more doubts regarding the possibility of certainty. Moreover, their nature means that the ideas that belong to this classification are insufficient to establish a causal connection or a relationship of resemblance between object and idea. Since Descartes has

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¹⁷ This claim is very similar to David Hume's discussion of the role of 'habit' and 'custom' in the connexion between causes and their effects. Hume, like Descartes, asserts that on its own this connexion is merely a belief or a
shown that adventitious ideas reveal little about objects that exist outside the mind, his investigation must proceed by considering the problem from another point of view.

To form his causal argument for God’s existence, Descartes applies the causal principle to the formal/objective distinction and to the different kinds of ideas that he finds in his mind. Only one idea, the idea of God, cannot possibly be produced by his own mind, since this idea’s infinite objective reality exceeds the formal reality of Descartes’ finite mind. Hence, God exists and is the formal cause of the idea of God. This argument eliminates the possibility that the mind alone is the formal cause of the idea of God, but it has two other purposes for Descartes. First, it proves that something else exists besides his mind, which eliminates the problem of solipsism. Second, it establishes that God’s existence is certain, that God is infinitely perfect, and that God, therefore, cannot be a deceiver on pain of contradiction. Thus, God becomes for Descartes the ultimate guarantor of metaphysics, epistemology, and of mathematical and scientific knowledge. The mind can know what is within the limits of reason because God guarantees the truth of all that the mind perceives clearly and distinctly. Whatever is perceived clearly and distinctly is true and remains true, even if the mind is not presently meditating on these objects of perception. This proof is the first and the most important step toward a foundation for science and a stable body of scientific knowledge.

For the careful reader of the Meditations, there certainly is no doubt about the great importance of this argument for the overall project of the Meditations. Descartes himself acknowledges its significance in the following passage:

If the objective reality of any of my ideas turns out to be so great that I am sure the same reality does not reside in me, either formally or eminently, and hence that I myself cannot be its cause, it will necessarily follow that I am not alone in the world, but that some other thing which is the cause of this idea also exists. But if no such idea is to be found in me, I shall have no argument to convince me of fiction of the mind since it lacks any ultimate justification to qualify it as knowledge.
Descartes' statement underscores the precarious position in which he now finds himself. Radical doubt has effectively reduced all knowledge, except knowledge of the existence of the mind, to uncertainty. Knowledge of the existence of the mind has little value on its own. Alone, it cannot support epistemological or metaphysical claims regarding the nature and structure of the outside world, nor can it guarantee the truth of anything beyond itself. So, the point here is very clear: what bridges the gap between the mind and all other knowledge is the presence in the mind of the idea of God, which guarantees God's ontological status. If he can eliminate himself as the idea's formal cause, Descartes can prove that he is not a solipsistic being incapable of knowing anything for certain. But what if it turns out that Descartes, not God, is actually the formal cause of the idea of God that he finds in his mind? Is this question too disturbing for Descartes to have entertained seriously?

Considered on its own, there seems to be no problem with the causal argument's formal structure, with its application of the formal/objective distinction or the use of the causal principle. However, an intriguing problem emerges if the causal argument is placed in juxtaposition with the characterisation of the will from the Fourth Meditation. Specifically, the argument cannot be sustained given Descartes' characterisation of the will, because this characterisation qualifies the will as perfect (at least in terms of its specific activity) to account for the phenomenon of judgment error. The attribution of perfection to the will emanates from the experience the mind has of its power to will without limitation. According to Descartes' argument, then, it can be argued that the idea of perfection is derivative of the finite mind. With respect to the idea of God, the idea of perfection provides half of what is needed to represent the
idea of a perfect being in the mind. The attribution of perfection to the will does indeed release Descartes from the problems associated with judgment errors and a non-deceiving God as we have shown. At the same time, however, this attribution might throw the main argument, the causal argument, which Descartes claims is the only way to escape solipsism and all of its implications, into serious jeopardy. A closer examination of this juxtaposition and its implications will demonstrate why this outcome is the case.

In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes distinguishes the faculty of knowledge or intellect from the faculty of the will. The intellect is passive because it is restricted to perceiving ideas that come before the mind. While the intellect is not deficient (flawed) in any way, it is limited because it contains only a finite number of ideas that it perceives. There are things, such as unknown attributes of God, for which the intellect has no corresponding ideas. Because the intellect does not have an idea for everything that exists, it is described as having a limited function. But Descartes argues that its limitation is in no way an indication of an inherent defect of mind. Unlike the intellect, on the other hand, the will is not limited in any way, especially when considered strictly in terms of its function of affirming and denying propositions or desiring and not desiring objects. In terms of its activities, the will is completely free to function because it is unhindered by anything internal or external. The will knows no limitations when making judgments or expressing volition. Because the will is unlimited, it is also perfect, according to Descartes, and similar to the will of God.

This characterisation of the will (as perfect) is reiterated and expanded upon in other texts of Descartes. For example, in “Part One” of the Principles of Philosophy (principle 35), while Descartes does not use the term “perfect” to describe the will, he implies its perfection and refers to it as “infinite.” Also, in Conversation with Burman, Descartes characterises the will as both
“perfect” and “absolute”. Descartes tells Burman that everyone should “go down deep into himself and find out whether or not he has a perfect and absolute will, and whether he can conceive of anything which surpasses him in freedom of the will […] the will is greater and more Godlike than the intellect” (Descartes, Vol. III p.342; AT 159). Thus, the unqualified position that the will is perfect, then, should be interpreted as a firm position that Descartes maintains consistently across the corpus of his writings. From these connections, we can also safely conclude that Descartes saw perfection as implying an infinite reality, in God’s case and in the case of human will. But perhaps Descartes has overestimated the perfection of the will to buttress his argument regarding error. For instance, an objector might challenge Descartes’ claim by arguing that the will is merely perfect in its kind, rather than perfect without qualification. However, Descartes most likely would have answered this charge by simply insisting (as he does in his response to Burman’s objection to a perfect human will in the passage above) that perfection in its kind is still an expression of perfection. True, human will cannot make anything happen the way that God’s will can. But this deficit does not originate in the will itself, which is perfectly free in its activity to wish for something to happen or to deny that something has happened. Instead, this deficit in humans originates in a limited power to act, to create, or to control the ordering of the cosmos. This kind of limitless power is reserved for God alone, who is, after all, an omnipotent being. Descartes freely admits that his will, unlike God’s, does not have range over all things. However, ‘range over all things’ is distinct from the activity of the will, and it is this activity alone that Descartes says is perfect.

As mentioned above, Descartes does distinguishes his own perfect will from that of God contending that God’s will is greater due to the infinite knowledge and power that accompanies it. Specifically, infinite knowledge and power give God’s will a greater range or scope than
Descartes’ will has, and so in this respect God’s will is superior. When considered ‘strictly’ in terms of its volitional function or essence—that is, apart from intellectual capacity—however, (and this is the crux of the matter) Descartes finds that his will and God’s are not only similar, but that both are properly to be described as perfect. He even goes so far as to argue that it is “only the will, freedom of choice, which [he] experience[s] within [him] to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond [his] grasp” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 40; AT 59). And, Descartes adds, it is “in virtue of the will that [he] understand[s] [himself] to bear in some way the image and likeness of God” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 40; AT 59).

For this paper’s argument, it is important to acknowledge that this characterisation of the will implies that a faculty of extraordinary (measure and) power, a representative instance of perfection, exists in the finite mind. The will also has unlimited and perfect power to suspend judgment until the truth of any proposition can be known with certainty. Descartes knows he must emphasise the will’s unlimited capacity to judge and suspend judgment in order to solidify his argument regarding judgment errors. Yet he does not seem to recognise in the Fourth Meditation (or anywhere else, for that matter) that characterising the will as perfect opens up the possibility that the finite mind, which possesses this perfect faculty, might then justly be considered the formal cause of the idea of perfection, without violation of the causal principle. The idea of a perfect being proves that something, God, exists outside the mind if, and only if, there is no other way to argue that the mind could be the source of the idea of perfection. Earlier, in the Third Meditation, Descartes had already acknowledged that if he cannot find one idea which must have a formal cause that exists outside the mind, then the argument of the Meditations can go no further. It is precisely this possibility, that the mind is the formal cause of the idea of perfection, which represents the greatest threat to the proof for God’s existence, and,
consequently, to the overall goal of the *Meditations*, certainty in the sciences. If God cannot be shown to exist outside the mind, then there is no way for the mind to be certain it is not alone, and solipsism cannot then be ruled out.

The conclusion of the causal argument is that God is the *only* being who possesses enough formal reality to be the cause of the idea of God in the mind. But the subsequent characterisation of the will implies that if the mind were to only meditate on its own perfect capacity to will and from this concentrated effort derive an idea of perfection, then it could conceivably be the formal cause of the idea of God. By meditating on its will, the mind would immediately become aware of the perfection of this faculty. Just as Descartes was able to establish criteria for truth by meditating on the clarity and distinctness of his existence as a thinking thing, so would he be able to generate an awareness of perfection in general by meditating on the perfection of his own will. If the *perfection of the will* is sufficient to derive a general notion of perfection, then the mind, which already has displayed the ability to combine ideas to form fictitious ideas, could apply its notion of perfection to its idea of substance to form the idea of God on its own. In such a case, God’s existence would not strictly be *necessary* to explain the presence of the idea of God in the mind; the existence, perceptions and natural powers of the finite would be sufficient to form the idea.

The idea of God, as Descartes describes it, is of a supreme being, who is “eternal, infinite, <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent…and the creator of all things”. As such, God must possess “more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28; AT 40). So far this paper has argued that the idea of perfection in the mind could be accounted for without introducing a proof for God’s existence. In other words, God need not exist as its formal cause. However, the above definition of God does not use “perfect” as a
descriptor. So, it should be asked, can it legitimately be argued that a mind which can independently form the idea of perfection also form the idea of God as he is described above? If the idea of God is derived from 'perfection' ultimately, where then does the mind get the ideas of additional attributes such as eternity, infinity, immutability, omniscience or omnipotence?

The success of what I call the alternative argument that the idea of God originates in the mind depends absolutely on its ability to prove that all attributes pertaining to the awareness God can be located in or generated by the mind. To answer the question, "where does the mind get its idea of eternity, infinity etc. if not from God?", one first must consider what the term 'perfection' means. Generally speaking, the term perfection refers to something that is incapable of improvement and is, in this sense, absolute, complete, and independent. A being which is incapable of improvement, in turn, implies that this being must be such that no greater being can be conceived. If something is imperfect, then it can be added to, altered, or improved in some way, and it is, therefore, not perfect or complete. Moreover, something that can be improved is not independent because if it were, it would also be capable of making itself perfect. Perfection is a critical part of the concept of God since it is one of the common features (the other is existence) which underlies each of His attributes. For example, omniscience or omnipotence refers to complete knowledge and complete power, respectively. Omniscience is equivalent to a perfect or complete body of knowledge just as omnipotence is perfect or complete power. So, just as it is inconceivable to imagine anything greater than perfection, it is also impossible to conceive of any greater knowledge than omniscience, or any greater power than omnipotence.

Perfection is implicit in all of God's other attributes, just as it is implied by his omniscience and omnipotence. God's attributes must each be perfect for God to be the Supreme Being—that than which no greater can be conceived. Once God is understood in this proper way,
it must be conceded that nothing more can be added to his attributes without contradicting this conception. God must be complete or perfect in an infinite number of ways. As it turns out, the mind can have an idea of perfection independently, if it meditates on the nature of the will. Once it apprehends this idea of perfection, it can then apply it in combination with any given attribute to form independent ideas of attributes that are of the highest degree and worthy of describing the Divine. Therefore, there is no known attribute of God of which the mind cannot form an idea of on its own, provided that it already has its own idea of perfection. Perfection applied to an attribute is the basic formula of a supreme attribute.

But divine attributes are only half of what is needed to form an idea of a Supreme Being. In “Part One” of *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes, in principle 56, defines the term ‘attribute’ as describing in a “general way...what is in a substance” (Descartes Vol. I p.211: 26; my italics). The attributes of God are the different expressions of his substance or being. Attributes, like modes, are “in” substance\(^\text{18}\). The viability of the argument that the idea of God is mind-made demands a demonstration that the mind not only can form ideas of divine attributes, but that it can also independently form a unified idea of these attributes “in” a substance. This problem is easily resolved, however.

Descartes’ characterisation of the will allows the mind independently to form an idea of perfection. While he never acknowledges the above, he does, in the *Third Meditation*, claim that the mind on its own can form a general idea of substance (both material and immaterial) by simply reflecting on itself. The mind itself is an immaterial substance and, therefore, contains formally everything that belongs to other immaterial substances and eminently what belongs to

\(^{18}\) In the *Principles*, attributes and modes are distinguished from one another. The term mode is used when “thinking of substance as being affected or modified,” whereas attribute is used more generally because it does not affect substance but in is contained in it. Attribute is always used in God’s case since any modification of God’s substance
material substance. Also, the mind, as a substance that contains certain properties (such as modes, attributes, qualities, duration, number, capacity for thought, etc.) must have a general idea of what it means for them to be unified in one substance. Because these properties are "contained in" a substance, a principle of integration is understood. Integration is unity of difference. Once the mind has the ideas of perfection and substance, it can then combine these, by a simple act of the imagination, to form a general idea of substance containing attributes, modes or qualities that are unified in the substance. The unity presupposed in the general idea of substance containing properties is analogous to the unity of attributes that is contained in the idea of God.

The alternative causal argument yields an end result that is vastly different from Descartes' conclusion. Instead of proving God's existence, the alternative argument supports the outcome that the formal cause of the idea of God is the mind itself, and that therefore this idea in the mind can be accounted for without introducing a proof for God's existence. Not only is this conclusion different from Descartes', it is the very conclusion he wants to avoid. Unless Descartes can show that there is at least one idea that cannot be formed by the mind, he must concede that the existence of extra-mental objects, including God, is uncertain and at best probable. Such a weak conclusion is unsatisfactory because it can neither remove the threat of solipsism nor eliminate uncertainty in the sciences. Unlike Descartes' causal argument, the alternative causal argument does not prove either that God exists or that He does not exist, and it does not introduce God as the formal cause of the idea of God. Instead, it avoids all ontological questions concerning God by attributing formal causality to the mind. Yet, like Descartes' argument, this alternative also offers a full and apparently cogent explanation of how and why

cannot occur without implying that God is somehow imperfect. Attributes describe God's nature without implying that his nature is modified by any particular quality.
the idea of God is present in the mind, which it does by exploring causal possibilities, pertaining specifically to the function and the idea of the will.

The alternative causal argument changes the nature of the idea of God dramatically. To understand why, think again of Descartes' classification of ideas in the *Third Meditation* into three kinds: adventitious, innate, and fictitious. The idea of God must be re-categorised to accord with the definitional parameters of these classifications. Descartes argues that the idea of God is innate, but in the context of the alternative causal argument it would no longer fit this definition; rather, it would be regarded as a fictitious idea. The alternative argues that this idea is not *planted* in the mind (as innate ideas are described) but that it is *created* by means of intellect (perceiving) and imagination (combining).

Descartes is correct to maintain that there is a logical reason that prohibits the idea of God from being adventitious. The idea cannot be adventitious because God is not a corporeal (physically present) external entity who is perceived by the mind through sensation. Rather, the mind has a perception of God that is based in the understanding. The mind *understands* that God, if real, is an infinite, immaterial (non-physical) substance possessing divine attributes, but it does not *experience* God in this way. There is no sensory correlate for a perfect and infinite substance; consequently, an external, sensory object cannot be the cause of this idea. Since the idea of God is not adventitious, Descartes rightly argues that it must be must either innate or fictitious. He concludes that the idea of God is innate by process of elimination. Descartes, knowing that the idea cannot be adventitious, claims that it cannot be fictitious since, he says, he does not find that the idea contains perceptions that could be formally derived from the mind alone. In fact, as we saw earlier, he argues that the mind does not have enough formal reality to cause ideas such as perfection and infinity. So, Descartes concludes, this idea must be innate. However, if it could be
shown that the idea of God contains perceptions that are found in the mind and that the mind could combine these perceptions to form an idea of God, then the conclusion that the idea is innate would be incorrect or at least uncertain. In this scenario, the idea would need to be reclassified as fictitious, since it would be the result of the mind manipulating its own perceptions in order to create a new idea which did not previously exist.

III ii. The purpose of the following discussion is to determine whether or not the alternative causal argument is inconsistent with any or all of the key factors that Descartes uses to support his causal argument for God’s existence. This examination will involve scrutiny of individual parts of each argument as well as comparative analysis.

So far, the alternative causal argument has shown that Descartes’ characterisation of the will allows for the possibility that the mind, which is capable of having its own idea of perfection, can autonomously form an idea of God. It has also been established that the alternative causal argument requires the idea of God to be reclassified from innate to fictitious, according to the categories of Descartes’ analysis. Will a more detailed analysis of the alternative causal argument expose challenges to its viability? Is the alternative inconsistent with the main tenets of Descartes’ argument? Is it contradicted by other factors? In short, is it cogent? To answer these questions, I will consider whether or not there is anything in Descartes’ causal argument that strictly prohibits or undermines the alternative from being a viable substitute. To prove its viability, I will demonstrate that a mind-made idea of God violates neither the causal principle, nor the formal/objective distinction, key elements of Descartes’ causal argument.

I include below formal breakdowns of Descartes’ causal argument and the alternative causal argument. These breakdowns are useful in the following section, in which I analyse individual elements of each argument and I make several comparisons.

**Descartes’ causal argument:**
Premise 1) The idea of God is located in the mind.

Premise 2) The formal reality of all ideas is the same, but ideas vary in objective reality from nothingness to infinity (application of the formal/objective distinction).

Premise 3) The idea of God is the idea of an immaterial substance, which is infinitely perfect in every way. The nature of this substance is unchanging, eternal, infinite, self-dependent, self-created, the creator of all things, omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent, etc., and all these attributes are unified in God.

Premise 4) The idea of God has the highest possible degree of objective reality because it represents an infinite substance.

Premise 5) The causal principle: "there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause" because the cause must possess formally or eminently all the reality contained in the effect, for "something cannot arise from nothing" nor can that which is "more perfect...arise from what is less perfect"; so, when it comes to the causes of ideas, the proper application of these causal principles necessitates that "in order for an 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" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28; AT 40-41).

Premise 6) If one of the ideas found in the mind contains more objective reality than the mind has formal reality, then the mind cannot be its cause, but something else must exist and be its cause. If something else other than the mind exists, then Descartes will have certain proof that he is not alone (resolution of solipsism).

Premise 7) The mind is a finite thinking substance, and so it has a finite formal reality.

Premise 8) Since the mind is a finite substance, it is possible that it is the cause of every idea it has with the exception of the idea of God.

Premise 9) The (finite) mind cannot be the formal cause of the idea of God because this idea has a greater degree of objective reality (infinite) than the mind possesses formally.

Premise 10) God is the only being whose formal reality is as great as the objective reality contained in the idea of God, and there is no other way to account for the idea of infinity, one of God's attributes, in the mind unless God exists as its cause.

Conclusions: Therefore, God must exist as the cause of the idea of God in the mind.

By definition God is no deceiver (resolution of the problem of certainty in the sciences).

Alternative causal argument:
Premise 1) The idea of God is located in the mind.

Premise 2) The formal reality of all ideas is the same, but ideas vary in their objective reality, from nothingness to infinity (application of the formal/objective distinction).

Premise 3) The idea of God is the idea of an immaterial substance, which is infinitely perfect in every way. The nature of this substance is unchanging, eternal, infinite, self-dependent, self-created, the creator of all things, omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent, etc., and all these attributes are unified in God.

Premise 4) The idea of God has the highest possible degree of objective reality because it represents an infinite, perfect (perfection = most reality) substance.

Premise 5) The causal principle: “there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause” because the cause must possess formally or eminently all the reality contained in the effect, for “something cannot arise from nothing” nor can that which is “more perfect...arise from what is less perfect”; so when it comes to the causes of ideas, the proper application of these causal principles necessitates that “in order for an 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” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28; AT 40-41).

Premise 6) If one of the ideas found in the mind contains more objective reality than the formal reality of the mind, then the mind cannot be its cause. Something else must exist and be its cause. If something else other than the mind exists, then Descartes will have certain proof that he is not alone (resolution of solipsism).

Premise 7) If Descartes can prove that he is not the cause of the idea of God, he can conclude that God exists. By definition, God cannot be a deceiver (resolution of the problem of certainty in the sciences).

Premise 8) The mind is a finite thinking substance, so it has a finite formal reality.

Premise 9) However, the faculty of the will, with respect to its function, is perfect. The faculty of the will affirms and denies propositions or it pursues (desires) and avoids objects and ideas. It is experienced as unlimited in this activity and perfect since it is incapable of being improved in terms of its essential function.

Premise 10) The mind can generate the idea of a substance by reflecting on itself since it is a finite thinking substance. Likewise, the mind can also generate an idea of perfection by reflecting on the will, since the will is described as perfect and unlimited in terms of its function.

Premise 11) An analogy exists between perfection, the highest degree of reality and infinity.

Premise 12) The faculty of imagination is capable of combining ideas together to form new ideas.
Premise 13) The mind can combine the idea of substance with the idea of perfection to create the idea of a perfect substance.

Premise 14) Moreover, the idea of perfection is contained in each one of God’s attributes listed in premise 3, so the mind can create an idea of each divine attribute by adding its own idea of perfection to the said attribute.

Premise 15) The idea of God, while it has an objective reality that is infinite, can be generated by the finite mind, if the mind meditates on the faculty of the will, which itself is perfect (in terms of its function).

Premise 16) The faculty of the will, then, has in one significant respect a formal reality that corresponds to the degree of objective reality that is contained in the idea of God.

Conclusions: Therefore, God need not necessarily exist to account for the idea of God in the mind. The idea of God in the mind does not prove that God exists in reality (problem of solipsism and of certainty in the sciences is unresolved).

Now to state the conclusion at the outset, there is nothing that is built into Descartes’ overall argument, like a rule of thought or concept, which definitely or logically prohibits the alternative argument from being viable substitute for the causal argument. Moreover, the alternative does not violate the principle of causality or the formal/objective distinction. But perhaps what is even more compelling than these points is that the alternative applies the causal principle and the formal/objective distinction in the same way that Descartes’ original argument does, but it (the alternative) uses these to demonstrate the exact opposite conclusion: the mind is the formal cause of the idea of God. In other words, the same key elements in the causal argument are applied by the alternative, yet each argument reaches opposite conclusions.

Descartes’ argument is framed by three key factors: 1) its structure or the form that the argument takes and its stated purpose; 2) the application of the causal principle; 3) the application of the formal/objective distinction. This section of my analysis will begin by examining the structure of the causal argument to see if the alternative causal argument has a
similar structure. Structural similarity between these two arguments is essential, since the viability of the alternative causal argument as a substitute depends on its ability to function like the causal argument. So it must be determined whether or not these two arguments are the same kind of argument and whether they have a similar purpose.

If the formal breakdown of the causal argument above is carefully considered, it is clear that it is an example of an a posteriori argument for God's existence. The causal argument contains structural elements that are very different from those of the Ontological Argument, which appears in the Fifth Meditation and is an a priori argument. The criterion for an a posteriori argument is that it must begin with a concrete experience of some particular thing or event. This experience in a causal a posteriori argument is what initiates the reasoning process that moves from the effect (the experience) to its cause, and, finally, to the conclusion, which is a statement induced from the premises. The causal argument meets the criterion of an a posteriori argument. It begins with the experience or the awareness of the presence of the idea of God in the mind, and not with an abstract principle. Arguments that begin with non-empirical, abstract propositions form the basis of a priori arguments. So, the causal argument and the alternative causal argument are structurally similar since each one is a posteriori. Moreover, both the causal argument and the alternative are based on the same kind of experience, namely the experience of the idea of God in the mind. Yet, what exactly does it mean for these arguments to be based on the experience of the idea of God in the mind?

One way to understand what Descartes means here by "experiencing" is to distinguish this phenomenon from that of rationally understanding a proposition. We can easily distinguish experiencing the idea of God in the mind from rationally understanding the concept of God by examining the differences between a posteriori qualities of the causal argument and the a priori
conditions of the Ontological Argument. In a certain sense, the causal argument and the Ontological Argument are similar because they both include statements that define God’s nature, they each rely on statements “known by the light of reason” to justify logical relations\(^{19}\) and they both represent proofs for God’s existence.

Despite these similarities, these arguments are radically different in their logical forms. The Ontological Argument exclusively uses non-experiential, a priori propositions, such as the definition of God’s essence, to support its conclusion that God exists. Conversely, while the causal argument does rely on non-experiential statements (the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle), it is firmly grounded in the experience of the idea of God in the mind. Unlike the Ontological Argument’s conclusion, which is logically deduced from its a priori statements, the causal argument reasons from the initial experience of the idea of God to its conclusion that God exists. The causal argument traces the origins of this experience rather than unpacking what is contained in the concept of God. Notice also that the Ontological Argument makes no mention of the presence of the idea of God in the mind. Any reference to this idea’s presence would constitute a direct appeal to experience. Descartes cannot begin this kind of a priori proof by searching his mind for an experience or an awareness of some idea or image. Instead, he must initiate the Ontological Argument with a definitional (a priori) statement regarding God’s essence, one that is analytically known rather than experienced by all men.

According to the Ontological Argument, God’s essence, which is absolutely perfect in every

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\(^{19}\)For the use of definitions in each argument, see Descartes, Vol. II p.31; AT 45, “[b]y the word ‘God’ I understand a substance that is infinite <eternal, immutable> independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else...that exists” and see Descartes, Vol. II p. 45; AT 65, “the idea of God, or a supremely perfect being, is one which I find within me just as surely as the idea of any shape or number. And my understanding that it belongs to his nature that he always exists is no less clear and distinct than is the case when I prove of any shape or number that some property belongs to its nature”. For the use of statements that define relations, see the causal principle and its variations in Descartes, Vol. II p. 28-29; AT 40-4, and the statement in Descartes’ discussion of the Ontological Argument where he claims that existence cannot be separated from God’s
way, implies his existence. Descartes argues that absolute existence is an expression of perfection, and that God, who is perfect, must necessarily exist, since the non-existence of God contradicts the definition of God as perfect. Notice here that this argument is conceptually based and that there is no appeal to any kind of experience. The Ontological Argument unpacks conceptual relations, not causal phenomena, to prove God's existence.

On the other hand, the causal argument investigates the causes of ideas in the mind, from the ideas of modes and accidents to the idea of a perfect being. The process of investigating causal relations ordinarily begins with the experience of the effect. In the case of the causal argument, specifically the effect is the experience of God in the mind. Accordingly, Descartes begins this proof by reference to his experience of having several kinds of ideas in order to see whether there is at least one of which he can say with certainty that he is not the cause. Descartes runs through the list of the various kinds of ideas that he recalls having an awareness of in the past (Descartes, Vol. II p.29; AT 42-43). The very act of making this list is an indication that this argument, unlike the Ontological Argument, will exploit experience to establish God's existence. So the focus of the causal argument is not on the logical implications following from the definition of God but on the presence of the idea of God in the mind, which is experienced rather than being rationally understood.

Now the alternative causal argument is consistent with Descartes' causal argument in terms of its logical structure; both arguments meet the experience criterion of an a posteriori argument. Furthermore, both arguments are equally unlike the Ontological Argument because they ultimately depend on experience, rather than deductive reasoning, to prove God's existence. But in addition to their logical structure, these two arguments are also consistent in terms of their

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essence, since it is a "contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley" (Descartes, Vol. II, p. 46; AT 66).
purpose, i.e. to explain the presence of the idea of God in the mind. The causal argument expressly states its purpose as identifying the formal cause of the idea of God, and likewise the alternative aims to establish the formal cause of this idea. Yet while these arguments share the same purpose, they in fact disagree in their respective conclusions. The conclusion of the causal argument is that God is the formal cause of the idea of God in the mind, which in turn means that this idea is innate and, consequently, that something other than the mind exists. On the other hand, the alternative’s conclusion is that the idea of God is fabricated by the mind, which means that this idea is fictitious. Unlike the causal argument’s conclusion, this conclusion implies that God need not exist in order to account for the presence of the idea of God in the mind, so the alternative does not produce a proof for God’s existence. The causal and alternative arguments are similar in terms of their structure and with respect to their purpose. But appropriately, these two arguments have very different outcomes. A different outcome is necessary if the alternative is to be a substitute for the causal argument.

Before examining possible causes for his ideas (including the idea of God), Descartes applies the formal and objective reality distinction to ideas and objects and he employs the causal principle to produce the proof for God’s existence. So, in conjunction with the argument’s logical structure (its form and goal), the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle serve as the remaining key factors framing the causal argument. So far it has been established that the alternative and causal arguments are structurally similar. In order to claim that the alternative is a viable substitute for the causal argument, it must be demonstrated that the alternative is consistent with these two other key factors as well.

The application of the formal/objective distinction introduces yet another consistency between the causal and alternative arguments. In the causal argument, the idea of God represents
a supremely perfect being. According to Descartes’ hierarchy of reality, this idea contains the greatest degree of objective reality because it represents a perfect, infinite, immaterial substance.

The alternative applies this same hierarchy of reality to the objective content belonging to the idea of God that it is considering, and like the causal argument, the alternative also concludes that this idea has the greatest degree of objective reality among all possible ideas. Although the alternative argument must contend that the idea of God is fictitious, rather than innate, the qualities and attributes contained in this idea are the same as those that belong to the idea of God employed by the causal argument. Therefore, it is no surprise that the application of the hierarchy of objective reality in the alternative argument results in the same the degree of reality attributed to the idea of God as the causal argument.

Following the application of the formal/objective distinction, each argument must apply the principle of causality to this distinction. The application of the causal principle to the formal/objective distinction is critical in the identification of the formal cause of the idea of God because this application limits what can constitutes a plausible formal cause of this idea. The formal cause must contain as much reality as the idea contains objectively in order to account for the presence of this effect in the mind without, at the same time, violating the causal principle. The formal and objective reality distinction combined with the causal principle elucidate causal relationships that exist between ideas (effects) and objects (causes). Unlike the unreliable ‘natural impulse’ encouraging us to blindly make conjectural judgments about objects and ideas, these two rules of reason are known by the ‘natural light’ and are consequently most reliable. Both the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle not only help Descartes to understand how objects and ideas are causally related and ordered, but they also enforce rational constraints on this relationship. These constraints, in turn, ensure that any causal judgments made
about the relationship between ideas and objects are correct because these judgments conform to strict laws or principles of causality, not variable phenomena of sensory experiences.

Interestingly, the causal argument aims at explaining an experiential phenomenon, the presence of the idea of God in the mind, and yet it can only justify this explanation by appealing to non-empirical principles and rules. Such an appeal is necessary, however, since any judgment must ultimately prove that it accords with the rules of thinking. Specifically, in the causal argument, the formal/objective distinction and the principle of causality both place necessary limitations on possible judgments by stipulating what can and cannot constitute a formal cause for the idea of God. This limitation, in turn, assists Descartes in making certain (rather than blind) judgments about the causes of his ideas. But how exactly does this distinction function, and how does it help Descartes’ causal argument?

Briefly recall the summary discussion of the formal/objective distinction in section II:i. Descartes distinguishes between the formal and objective reality of ideas by claiming that the formal reality of an idea refers to the idea insofar as it exists in the mind as a mode of thought, while objective reality of an idea corresponds to its representational content. Now, insofar as ideas are considered formally, as modes of thought, they all have the same degree of reality. But insofar as ideas are considered objectively, as representations, they vary in what they represent, in kind (material/immaterial), and in degree of objective reality, which ranges from nothingness to infinite substances. The formal/objective distinction applies to objects as well. The formal reality of an object refers to its degree of reality (or ontological status), whereas the objective reality of an object refers to an object insofar as it is represented in the mind.

Descartes compares ideas to explain the varying degrees of objective reality. He states that the idea of substance represents a being that “amounts to something more” and thus
possesses a greater degree of objective reality than the idea that represents modes. Likewise, the idea of an infinite substance represents more, or has a greater degree of objective reality, than the idea that represents finite substances (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28; AT 40). The reason that the degrees of formal and objective reality are ordered in this way becomes apparent a few lines later when Descartes fuses the causal principle and formal/objective distinction. In its third and final formulation, the causal principle is used to support the hierarchical ordering of the degrees of formal/objective reality and this application produces a principle that bridges the gap between objects and ideas. An examination of the causal principle will follow presently, but first it must be decided whether the alternative is consistent with the formal/objective distinction.

There is nothing inherent in the alternative causal argument that necessarily prevents the proper application of the formal/objective distinction to the idea of God and its formal cause. Not only does the alternative allow for the application of the formal/objective distinction, but it also does not interfere with the description of the hierarchy of reality. The hierarchy of degrees of reality corresponds to a continuum of being that accords with a particular view of substance and property. Admittedly, this view may be fundamentally flawed and it may be subject to the criticism that it is arbitrary or unjustified. However, these arguments take us outside the parameters of the causal argument to an evaluation of the metaphysical suppositions held by Descartes and which he used to contextualise the causal argument. There is nothing inherent in the alternative argument that prevents the acceptance of this framework, however. Any challenge to this acceptance would constitute a different argument altogether. Besides, we generally experience objects as possessing properties (since an object with no properties is inconceivable), and from the experience of properties we infer that some underlying substance must exist as the bearer of these properties. While this inference requires justification (hence Descartes' need to
prove that God exists), it certainly is not unreasonable as a working presupposition. Descartes' acceptance of the substance/property model accords with his experience, or so he claims. It is justified only later through the proof that God exists and is no deceiver. Neither is the alternative argument prohibited from accepting this model as a working presupposition since this argument does not employ a rule of thought or a factor in any experience that makes it a problematic supposition. Since the alternative argument accepts this metaphysical framework at the outset, the formal/objective distinction and the hierarchy of the degrees of reality may be applied to the idea/object question. But once the alternative argument has been made, the absolute correctness of this framework and the appropriateness of the formal/objective distinction break down because the alternative implies that these presuppositions remain unjustified rather than certain. The alternative does away with the notion that the presence of the idea of God in the mind necessitates God's existence; without God's existence, there is no other, ready-made justification in the *Meditations* for accepting these presuppositions.

The formal/objective distinction is a useful device for the development of both the alternative and the causal argument, especially since both arguments aim to establish the formal cause of the idea of God in the mind. In the alternative argument, the idea of God turns out to be a creation of the mind rather than implanted by God. In the alternative, the idea is formally caused by the mind but in the causal argument, God is the formal cause. Even though the alternative causal argument argues for a different formal cause than the causal argument, both arguments identify the formal cause by applying the same devices in similar ways. Each argument applies the objective degrees of reality to the representational content of the idea, and then identifies a being whose formal reality corresponds to the idea's objective reality.
Also, in both cases, the arguments reason from effect (idea) to cause (being that causes the idea) by applying the objective and formal hierarchy of degrees of reality respectively to each and comparing the objective degree of the effect to the formal realities of possible causes. In the causal argument, this application and comparison produces a candidate for formal cause, God. But in the alternative, this application and comparison follows the introduction of the characterisation of the will from the Fourth Meditation into the argument. Once the formal hierarchy of degrees of reality is applied to the will, the will can be combined with other ideas in the mind to stand as an alternative formal cause that corresponds to the objective content of the idea appropriately. The will is described as perfect, and according to the hierarchy of the degrees of reality perfection equals the highest degree of reality. Set into this scale of reality, then, the will’s capacity is comparable to God’s will, a comparison Descartes himself makes in the Third Meditation when he supposes that God made us with a perfect will because we are made in his image. Hence, the will can supplant God as part of the formal cause without effecting the integrity of the formal/objective distinction or the application of a hierarchy of formal/objective degrees of reality. This distinction and hierarchy can be applied to the will to generate a formal cause of the idea of God. For this reason the alternative is consistent with the second key factor of the causal argument.

Note that the formal/objective distinction makes reference to two kinds of realities, each of which are described using a hierarchical scale of degrees of reality. The hierarchical scale orders various kinds of ideas and objects according to their objective and ontological status,

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20 In one of the formulations of the causal principle, Descartes states that “…what is more perfect— that is, contains in itself more reality- cannot arise from what is less perfect” (Descartes, Vol. II p 28; AT 41). This formulation is one of the implications of the “something cannot come from nothing” principle. But in addition to being an expansion of this principle, this formulation also presupposes an important semantic connection. Descartes conceives of perfection as synonymous with having the greatest degree of reality. What is most perfect must also be most real.
respectively. However, the causal argument is not solely based on this hierarchical scale of
degrees of reality. Rather, the hierarchical scale orders the relationship between effect (idea of
God) and its cause (God), for example, in conjunction with the causal principle, a rule that
governs the relationship between cause and effect. Interestingly, in the causal argument, the
cause and effect ordered by this principle represent two separate kinds of realities, objective and
formal. The causal principle is flexible enough to bridge these two realities. Moreover, because it
is the only principle that is used in the argument, we must assume that Descartes thought that the
only kind of relationship that can exist between idea and object, or between formal and objective
realities, is a causal one. Relations of resemblance and correspondence that exist between ideas
must ultimately be causal in nature. Without too much consideration, Descartes blends together
the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle to articulate the third formulation of the
causal principle, which unites causality and the formal/objective reality (distinction).

The third formulation of the causal principle, the one used in the causal argument, states
that “in order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive
from a cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the
idea” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 28: AT 41). This principle allows the mind to be capable of making
certain judgments about the relationship between objects and ideas. Previously, Descartes had
argued that his judgment that a causal link exists between ideas and objects was based on habit,
or influenced by the unreliable ‘blind impulse’ of nature. In other words, this judgment was
deprived of any justification because it was not based on a principle. However, both the causal
principle and the formal/objective distinction have their origin in the ‘natural light of reason,’ a
reliable source for knowledge, and they are critical components for elevating these kinds of
judgments from conjecture to knowledge. Like the causal argument, the alternative does not
dismiss or exclude the causal principle but uses it in a similar way, as a justification for the formal cause that it attributes to the idea of God. The alternative makes use of the third formulation, the blending of the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle, because it too must establish the causal relationship between two realities in order to explain how the idea of God is formed by the mind. So the alternative does not only argue for its conclusion without violating the causal principle, it makes use of this principle to guarantee the truth of it.

Recall the conclusion of Descartes’ causal argument. God, whose being possesses the greatest degree of formal reality, is the only possible formal cause of the idea of God in the mind, since the idea of God is of an immaterial, infinite substance, and accordingly it possesses the greatest degree of objective reality. Descartes thinks that there is nothing that contains enough formal reality to act as an alternative cause of this idea. As we have seen above, his conclusion is an implication of the causal principle, which originates via the natural light of reason, and which states that the formal cause of an idea must contain as “at least much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea”. Descartes describes the mind in the Third Meditation as a finite substance. The only logical conclusion that he can draw here is that the mind as such does not possess sufficient formal reality to be the cause of the idea of an infinite and perfect being. Therefore, God, an infinite substance, must be the cause of the idea of God, and therefore He must exist. Descartes must draw this conclusion in order not to violate the formal/objective distinction and the causal principle. Thus, when strictly considering the content of the Third Meditation and what comes before it, I find that there is nothing erroneous in Descartes’ reasoning, nor are there any structural problems that prohibit Descartes from making the causal argument. However, if the characterisation of the will in the Fourth Meditation is introduced into
the context of the causal argument, another alternative formal cause for the idea of God manifests itself.

If Descartes is unable to prove that God exists (God has formal ontological status), then he cannot resolve the issue of solipsism. Solipsism is both epistemologically and psychologically repugnant. As a possible state, it stunts the development of any kind of knowledge beyond a very abstract and general understanding of the mind. Psychologically, it isolates the individual by forcing a skeptical response to the idea that one can have a connection with things (nature) or with other people. Moreover, without the proof of God's existence, Descartes will not have any certain guarantee that the external world exists, nor will he ever be certain of any judgments, such as those he makes about ideas and their relationship to objects. Ultimately, both of these are undesirable consequences because they render scientific investigations problematic and scientific conclusions uncertain. Certain science, at least for Descartes, must begin with certain metaphysics as its justification. Without certain knowledge that the external world exists more or less as it is experienced and without the assurance that it is possible for one (within the limitations of reason) to make sound judgments, science cannot be based on anything more substantial than 'blind impulse' and mere probability. However, 'blind impulse' and probability are unsatisfactory foundations for scientific knowledge, since they are, at best, unreliable guides to truth, and at worst deceptive mechanisms that can disguise ignorance as knowledge. While probability and conjecture may be considered an acceptable starting point for a particular scientific investigation, these cannot be the content of its general foundations since science ultimately aims to know the truth, and to move beyond mere probabilities. Probable or conjectural foundations in the sciences would have been a repugnant outcome for Descartes. The aims of both the causal argument and the alternative attempt to explain the presence of the
idea of God in the mind, but each argument reaches very different conclusions. Consequently, each argument has a direct effect on the problem of solipsism and certainty in the sciences, two key issues of the *Meditations*. When the causal argument is considered apart from the characterisation of the will, then the problems of solipsism and certainty in the sciences are sufficiently resolved. But if the alternative is accepted as a viable substitute for Descartes' causal argument, then the overall argument of the *Meditations* is dramatically weakened.

IV. Consideration will be given to whether Descartes either did not notice or purposely neglected the alternative argument. Finally, some suggestions as to how Descartes might defend his argument from the implications of the alternative arguments.

At this juncture, it is obvious that Descartes does not consider the impact of the characterisation of the will on the causal argument. However, the question that still remains is whether Descartes simply overlooked the problems that ensue from the will's characterisation or whether he intentionally, though perhaps for good strategic reasons, chose to neglect it. If we argue that Descartes simply missed the negative consequences, then we might be forced to accept that he suffered a momentary lapse of reason. Under this interpretation, Descartes is not cognisant that his own philosophical system, which he went to great lengths to consider and scrutinise, is open to the possibility that the idea of God is *not* innate. The absence of any discussion of how the will might affect the causal argument may be read as an unintentional omission on Descartes' part. Such an omission might well constitute a major lacuna threatening his overall argument. A gap in reasoning is a plausible explanation that still suggests a degree of negligence on the part of Descartes. But this explanation is not conducive to further discussion or analysis since neglect of this type can be understood as a lapse of reason. This explanation leaves the reader simply to
accept that the problematic combination of these two factors (the causal argument and the characterisation of will) points to just one more unforeseen weakness of the *Meditations*.

However, if we consider another explanation – that Descartes *intentionally* neglected the consequences of the alternative explanation – then there are certainly more issues to discuss. This interpretation would lead to some obvious questions, such as: why does Descartes decide to neglect these consequences; and what sort of strategic value does this neglect have for the sustainability of the conclusions of the *Meditations*? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what, exactly, is accomplished by the inclusion of the first causal argument for God’s existence.

The first causal argument is the first proof for God’s existence that appears in the *Meditations*. Its prominent placement may indicate the relatively important role that Descartes believed it to have for the overall success of the *Meditations*. I have focused on two specific goals of the *Meditations* (this is not to say that these goals are the only goals of the text), namely the resolution of the problem of solipsism and the establishment of certainty in the sciences. I have shown at length that both of these goals can only be met if the first causal argument stands. While I have not tried to demonstrate any inherent illogicality in Descartes’ argument considered in isolation from the rest of the text, I have shown that an alternative argument can be produced which mimics the pattern of reasoning of the causal argument and uses its key principles. The alternative has pragmatic value: it changes our interpretation of the *Meditations* because it has an impact on what can legitimately be concluded therein. The alternative argument calls into question the conclusion that the idea of God is innate or implanted in the mind by God Himself. It does this by demonstrating that there is reason (according to categories detailed in the
 Meditations) to argue that the idea of God is fictitious, that is, a construct generated by a mind adept at combining pre-existing ideas.

The strength of Descartes' causal argument lies partly in its use of argument by elimination. As far as Descartes is concerned, the idea of God is the only one, of which he is aware, which cannot be fabricated in or by the mind. Since the mind cannot then be its cause, Descartes is free to infer God's actual existence from the presence of this idea in the mind. God's existence is on this scenario the only possible way to explain the origin of the idea of God. The alternative argument, however, provides another possible explanation, which Descartes did not think to eliminate. If there is an alternative way to explain the origin of the idea of God within the parameters that Descartes sets up in the Meditations, then there is no guarantee that the causal argument is the sole proof for God's existence. There is no necessary reason to accept the one explanation over the other: the origin of the idea of God may be the mind or it may be God. Quite simply, there is no way to eliminate either as a possible cause, and there is no sure way to tell which explanation is in fact the true one.

If Descartes cannot prove that God is the cause of the idea of God, and if the Ontological Argument of the Fifth Meditation is also unsuccessful, then he cannot know that God exists for certain. If he cannot know that God exists for certain, then he can eliminate neither the possibility that he is alone in the universe, nor the possibility that he has a mind which causes him to make erroneous judgments even when it considers the simplest of propositions (such as mathematical equations). This latter implication, as we have seen, has a dramatic impact on the idea of any foundation for the sciences. If the sciences are not grounded in metaphysical certainty, or if they lack a substantial justification such as proof of the existence of the external world supplies, then any scientific investigation is subject to the application of doubt. Science
can only avoid scepticism if it is firmly grounded on irrefutable foundations. Descartes' argument is designed to keep God as its centrepiece. God is the crucial difference between the mind knowing only itself and the mind knowing itself and the world with certainty.

For all of the above reasons, the value of the causal argument for the success of the *Meditations* should be clear. If Descartes were aware of the problematic effect that the characterisation of the will would have on the causal argument, then he might not, perhaps, have brought it up as an objection. For to do so would undermine his attempts to prove God's existence and to reinforce God's centrality in the universe, as well as the critical role that He plays in our investigation of it. This conclusion amounts to an accusation, it seems, because it would charge Descartes with dishonest scholarship. But how could this be true, any generous reader of Descartes would demand?

Descartes went to great lengths to test the strength of his own argument. The *Objections and Replies* attest to this fact. While some of his objectors are less effective at attacking the *Meditations* than others (recall Caterus' feeble attempts to trick Descartes), Descartes solicits the critical talents of formidable opponents such as Arnauld. Presumably, he takes on sharp opponents because he believes that if his arguments can withstand the sharpest kind of scrutiny, then they must be true, or that if they are true, they will withstand all scrutiny. Encouraging opposition and open dialogue is surely the hallmark of an honest scholar. Descartes asked his contemporaries, as he asks all his readers, to take his work seriously and to judge it accordingly. So unless we are ready to accuse Descartes of dishonest scholarship by claiming that he intentionally suppressed faults in his argument in order to reach foregone conclusions, we must accept the first offered explanation, that Descartes most likely overlooked the alternative explanation altogether.
Yet it may still be wondered, if this alternative argument were presented to Descartes, how might he have responded to it? Would he have seen the alternative as reason to dismiss the causal argument as unsound, or would he have been able to circumvent the objection?

As a strategy, Descartes may have objected to the assertion that the idea of God is fictitious. According to Descartes’ classification of ideas, an idea that is constructed by the mind is fictitious. He argues in the *Meditations* (and also in the *Objections and Replies*) that the idea of God cannot fall under this classification. In the *First Set of Objections*, his opponent, Caterus, attacks Descartes’ version of the Ontological Argument from the *Fifth Meditation* by arguing that while the conception of God entails God’s existence, this entailment does not prove that God exists in reality. In other words, ‘God,’ according to Caterus, could be a fiction. Descartes agrees with Caterus insofar as he also thinks that the notion that God’s essence is indistinct from his existence is troublesome since in all other cases we perceive essence and existence as separable. In the end, however, Descartes denies Caterus’ objection to the Ontological Argument by claiming that the latter does nevertheless prove that God exists in reality just as he is conceived in the mind. He argues that if one pays attention to the relevant distinction between necessary and possible existence, one will be forced to conclude that God exists.

To counter the attack, Descartes distinguishes between possible and necessary existence as well as between “what belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing [and] what is attributed to it by the mind” (Descartes, Vol. II p 83; AT 116). Descartes asserts that the mind often fails to distinguish what “belongs to the true and immutable essence of a thing from what is attributed to it merely by a fiction of the intellect” (Descartes, Vol. II p. 83; AT 116). If these points are not given due consideration, then, like Caterus, we might mistakenly argue that it is only our conception of God that implies his necessary existence. In other words, Descartes says,
the mistake is to think that the necessary existence attributed to God is a fiction of the intellect. When we consider all the concepts that come before the mind, we find that only in God's case is existence necessary; the existence of everything else is merely possible. Our understanding of the idea of God tells us that necessary existence is always conjoined with the other attributes belonging to God, and therefore God must exist. Since the alternative argument draws the conclusion that the idea of God is fictitious, we can assume that Descartes would have responded to it in a manner similar to the way in which he countered Caterus' objection.

Existence is a quality that we habitually attribute to things, but there is nothing inherent in any thing that necessitates its existence, Descartes claims. Accordingly, when we consider the existence of any thing, we can always conceive of its non-existence. When we conceive of God, we cannot but conceive of him as existing since "existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God" (Descartes, Vol. II p 83; AT 116-7). Descartes next contends with the objection that the attribution of necessary existence to God is a mere act of intellect, a fiction. To make his case, Descartes draws yet another distinction. This time he distinguishes ideas that contain "true and immutable natures" from ideas that contain invented natures, or fictions. To avoid Caterus' trap, Descartes asks him to consider the nature of fictitious ideas. Fictitious ideas are aggregates; they contain two or more separable ideas which the mind fuses together. Since fictitious ideas represent objects whose natures are constructed by the mind and since the fused components belonging to these ideas can just as easily be separated again from one another by the mind, fictitious ideas can never represent things that have truly immutable natures. By definition, a fictitious idea is of something changeable.

To demonstrate this point about fictitious ideas, Descartes uses the example of the idea of the existence of a perfect body. The actual existence of a perfect body cannot be deduced from
the notion that 'it is greater to exist in reality than in the imagination alone,' which is a premise from an older version of the Ontological Argument. The idea of a perfect body can only represent a possible existence, for "existence does not arise out of the other bodily perfections because it can equally be affirmed or denied of them" (Descartes, Vol. II p. 84; AT 118).

Existence is not a necessary attribute that must be contained in the idea of perfect body in order for the mind to conceive of it. To the contrary, existence is a quality that is separable from the idea of perfect body and, like the quality of perfection, it is added to the notion of body to create the idea. Thus, 'existing perfect body' is a construct or a fiction of the mind.

The same cannot be said as regards the idea of God. In the case of 'God,' the attribute of existence is no more separable from God's essence than is the attribute of perfection. We cannot conceive of God, a perfect and all-powerful being, without conceiving of his existence at the same time. God, like all other things, must at least be granted possible existence. Yet God is not like all other things because each of his attributes is supreme and implies his existence. For example, God is an all-powerful being. An all-powerful being by definition exists by means of its own power. If another being created it, then as a creation it would not be all-powerful, but its creator would be instead. God, who is all-powerful, must also be self-created, and consequently must have always existed from eternity. Thus, God's existence is not just possible, it must be necessary. When the idea of God is considered carefully, it is understood that necessary existence belongs to it. Necessary existence is not conjoined to the idea of God by the mind, nor can the mind separate God's existence from God's nature. Existence belongs to God's true and immutable nature, and so the idea of an existing God cannot be a fiction.

If Descartes were to apply this type of analysis of the idea of God to the alternative argument, he would at the very least confound its conclusion that the idea of God is fictitious.
The alternative argument contends that the mind can construct the idea of God by meditating on itself as thinking substance and on the faculty of the will as perfect. In this meditation, the mind gathers the necessary ideas – substance and perfection – to form the idea of perfect substance. Descartes might argue that the idea of ‘perfect substance,’ as a fiction of the mind, is like the idea of ‘perfect body’ because in each case existence is only possible. Nothing in the idea of perfect substance necessitates its existence. Descartes might have tried to refute the alternative causal argument by asking how, then, we obtain the idea of a perfect substance whose existence is inseparable from its essence?

Interestingly, however, even if Descartes were to respond in this way to the alternative, the causal argument considered in isolation would still be threatened by the alternative. To manufacture this refutation, Descartes would be forced to invoke a version of the (original) Ontological Argument, which he did not discover independently, and use it to rescue the causal from the alternative’s conclusion that the idea of God is a fiction. While this kind of refutation might have satisfied some of Descartes’ contenders, it can be asked whether it would have satisfied Descartes himself. Perhaps it would not. The original Ontological Argument harbours its own set of logical difficulties, including Caterus’ objection that it only suggests something about our conception of God rather than proving God’s actual existence. Even while adding his own modifications to the Ontological Argument, Descartes still finds it necessary to warn Caterus that the Ontological Argument does not convince every mind of its truth. He reminds him that it can naturally be misinterpreted by less advanced minds (a situation which could potentially undermine Descartes’ credibility and the persuasiveness of his argument). There are only two sure-fire ways to prove God’s existence, he argues, “by means of his effects, and... by means of his nature or essence” (Descartes, Vol. II p 85; AT 120). Descartes includes both
presumably to ensure that if one is not convincing to his reader, the other will be. All the same, each argument ought to be capable of resisting objections on its own. If the alternative argument weakens the persuasiveness of the causal argument, the Ontological Argument nevertheless ought not to be used to prop the causal argument back up, especially since it (OA) only gives rise to its own set of troublesome problems.


Appendix: Selected Annotated Bibliography on Descartes


A discussion of the usage of the term ‘idea’ before the seventeenth-century and the original way that Descartes employs it in his writings.


Baier reconsiders the idea of God as it is developed in the Meditations. Her interpretation challenges the traditional one by arguing that the idea of God, which Descartes finds in his mind by the Third Meditation, is not the same idea of God that is held by Christian theologians. Rather, she argues that the idea of God is subtly reconfigured by Descartes to be the ‘converse, or reverse, of one’s own idea of one’s self,’ and to contain all of the qualities that one aspires for one’s self. She claims that this reinterpretation provides a more solid reading of the Meditations than does the orthodox interpretation of the idea of God.


In this article, Costa aims to sort out the various meanings Descartes attaches to ‘image’ and ‘idea’ in several texts by explaining how these terms are applied to corporeal and non-corporeal representations. Costa argues that when Descartes refers to ideas or images of corporeal things, he does not mean that these are states of mind or mental acts. Rather, he seems to suggest that images or ideas of corporeal things are brain states, or acts of the imagination. Descartes also uses the term ‘idea’ in the Meditations to refer to the representations of immaterial things (e.g. the idea of God) which Costa claims is best understood as a mode of mind. Costa’s purpose here is partly to respond to Anthony Kenny criticism that Descartes uses the term ‘idea’ ambiguously leads to inconsistencies in Descartes’ arguments.


Cress explores Descartes’ discussion of the will in the Fourth Mediation in order to assess whether it successfully resolves the problem how human error occurs if human beings are created by an infinitely perfect God. According to Cress, Descartes develops his ‘doctrine of volitional infinity’ in order to resolve this problem. Yet this resolution creates difficulties for other doctrines. A paragraph in Cress’ article mentions in passing (p. 157) the issue which I analyse at length and seek to resolve in my thesis. (I came across this article only recently, having developed my argument independent of it. I am pleased to be able to situate my inquiry in reference to some specific piece of published work.). Cress simply suggests that ‘volitional infinity seems to cloud’ the premise that Descartes, as a ‘finite and limited’ creature could not possibly be ‘the real cause of the idea of God.’ Cress suggests, then, but does not go on to explore or analyse the idea. Cress says he believes that ‘Descartes could answer this objection’ and adds that he was unfortunately ‘never questioned about it.’ My thesis goes some way to supplying the unfortunate lack to which Cress alludes, since I take both the objection and Descartes’ possible responses to it seriously.

Flage and Bonnen show that a careful examination of the various kinds of ideas in Descartes (innate, adventitious and factitious) reveals that categories of adventitious and innate are exhaustive since factitious ideas are either composed of adventitious or of innate ideas or of some combination of the two. The aim of their paper is to reconcile Descartes’ response to Hobbes (Second Set of Objections and Replies), where Descartes disagrees that the idea of can be derived from an external source, but he concedes that we can construct this idea by amplifying attributes we possess indefinitely. Here Descartes suggests that the idea of God is factitious. But in the Third Meditation, Descartes seems to take a contrary stance by classifying the idea of God as innate. To reconcile these conflicting classifications of the idea of God, Flage and Bonnen argue that the “formation of a factitious idea of God is an early step in the process leading to a more adequate idea of God.” According to the authors, the Third Meditation’s reformulation of the idea of God as an being with infinite attributes and then a perfect being approaches a more adequate idea than is derived from the factitious idea that Descartes suggests to Hobbes.

To reconcile these conflicting classifications and descriptions of God, and to render Descartes’ position consistent, Flage and Bonnen argue that Descartes moves from the Hobbsian description of God to the Third Meditation’s ideas of God by means of a process of reasoning. This process ‘triggers’ an innate idea, which is a disposition of the mind. These dispositions of the mind allow for the Hobbsian idea of God as factitious to be systematically replaced with the idea of God (a being with infinite attributes and a perfect being) in the Third Meditation. The systematic replacement of the idea of God is a process of concept construction, which means that the idea of God is a factitious idea complex that is composed of innate ideas.


Frankfurt examines Descartes and Rogers Albritton’s claims that the will is free in order to arrive at a clear explanation of what this position’s claim entails. He considers whether freewill implies that the will has unlimited freedom or power. Frankfurt argues that Descartes’ characterisation of the will suggests that there is no greater or lesser will imaginable, so one can neither say coherently that the will is unlimited freedom or power since ‘freedom’ and ‘power’ are quantitative terms which suggest degrees. Instead, Frankfurt claims that Descartes (and Albritton) conceive of the will as an activity. It either is acting or it is not: the will cannot half act or act to a degree. This interpretation of the will’s nature can support the qualifiers ‘perfect’ and ‘absolute.’ The will should be thought of as ‘absolutely and perfectly active.’ While there are certain things the will cannot possible act on, whatever it is capable of acting on, it acts on without limitation.


Hatfield stresses the significance of Descartes’ use of the genre of meditation and meditative exercise to thrust the reader into an experiential apprehension of philosophical arguments and for eliminating sensory distractions that blind the mind’s eye.

Kenny reviews contrasting descriptions of judgment (judgments are independent acts of will [*Regulae*] and judgments are acts of the intellect [*Meditations]*) to determine whether these signify a radical shift in Descartes’ conception of the will. He also argues that Descartes’ the notion of freewill is ambiguous because he conflates will as want and desire with will as the power to affirm and deny.


Rorty situates Descartes’ *Meditations* in the literary tradition of meditative writing to demonstrate how the genre invites Descartes’ readers to undergo the transformation from uncritical believer to scientific inquirer by actively accompanying him on his mission to construct new foundations for science. The genre allows Descartes to advocate his anti-authoritarian position in the context of a traditional spiritual exercise.


Rosenthal give a thorough account of the role that the will plays in the *Meditations*. He argues the tendency in Cartesian scholarship has been to ignore the will or to downplay its importance for the overall argument of the *Meditations*. But an intensive study of the will not only reveals it to be a well integrated aspect of Descartes’ argument, but suggests also that it plays a necessary role in the development of the argument’s conclusion. In addition, the will, as Descartes characterises it, contributes to a more complete understanding of ‘the nature of mental acts’. This understanding of the will’s involvement in mental acts clarifies for the reader Descartes’ conception of mind.


Schouls argues that freewill, as it is understood by Descartes, plays a primary role in achieving the overall goals of the *Meditations*. It possesses primacy over reason (because reason, unlike the will, is constrained by truth), and it even has primacy over the Cogito, whose truth is only discovered when the will is exercised in the act of doubting and denying all that is uncertain. The act of meditation requires the meditator to exercise his will to doubt what is not self-evidently true and to suspend his judgment: an activity that Schouls describes as ‘liberty of opportunity.’


Sinkler’s argument examines two sets of objections to Descartes’ ‘Cosmological argument’ and in the end supports Descartes’ claim that an idea of infinite perfection (God) cannot be derived by extending ideas of finite perfection.


Stout examines the three grounds for certainty in the Meditations: the cogito, the truth rule and God's veracity. He discusses each of these by considering their relationship with each other and to Descartes' overall argument. The cogito and the truth rule, Stout concludes, do not require God's veracity to escape doubt, and so these are grounds for certainty. He distinguishes retentive memory from memory as reminiscence and argues that only the latter requires God's veracity in order to be of doubt. Finally, he argues that the cogito and the truth rule do not serve as the basis for the causal proof for God's existence or the Ontological proof.


The famous charge of circular reasoning states that Descartes proves God's existence by exploiting the clear and distinct rule—a rule that can only be guaranteed by God's existence. To avoid this charge, Descartes claims that as long as we are attending to the proofs for God's existence, we can be certain of them because they are clear and distinct. But Descartes admits that their certainty may be compromised when we merely recollect them. To avoid the charge of circularity, Tweyman argues that Descartes must show that the demonstration of God's existence is not dependent on memory, whether one or not one is actually running through the demonstration, since memory (not reason) is what Descartes suggests is unreliable until God's existence is proved. To further Descartes' case against the charge, Tweyman examines the arguments that Descartes raises concerning his dependence on God. Here Tweyman suggests that 'the idea of God is contained in the intuition of the self'. This claim can receive some support from the text. Tweyman uses the 'intuition' claim in order to sidestep the reliability of reason problem that is at the heart of the circularity charge. The knowledge of God's existence depends on the cogito, which independently supports the 'belief in a veracious God' and which guarantees the reliability of reason. Thus, Tweyman employs a novel interpretation of the idea of God as contained within the self-awareness that belongs to the cogito in order to circumvent the circular reasoning problem that has traditionally plagued Descartes' use of the clear and distinct rule to prove God's existence.


Wolz shows in his article that human understanding is passive and thus records or is aware of certain ideas, like the idea of God. However, the will, which is an active aspect of the mind, finds that it encounters resistance when it tries to affirm that the idea of God is restricted to the mind, or, conversely put, when it denies that the idea has a cause that exists outside the mind. The will in a sense receives the idea of God by making a judgment about its origin. It is only in the context of making a judgment, such as that the idea of God is constructed in the mind, that reason concludes that the idea cannot be caused by the mind, which does not contain formally all that is objectively contained in its idea.