

CARTESIAN CONCEPTS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Descartes advocates very strict epistemic standards, maintaining that we should only accept propositions which are “completely certain and indubitable” or “evident and irrefutable”. However, it also appears that Descartes accepts many metaphysical propositions that fall far short of these standards. Descartes’ epistemology and metaphysics thus appear radically opposed. I believe this appearance is misleading. While I do not think that Descartes managed to meet his own extremely strict epistemic standards, I believe he did not violate them as severely as many people believe. To show this, the first step is to clarify Descartes’ concepts. In this work, I examine and clarify many Cartesian concepts, including the concepts of attributes, perfections, formal reality, objective reality, higher forms, formal containment, eminent containment, implication, inconceivability apart, formal causation, efficient causation, clarity, obscurity, distinctness, confusion, things, inherence, substances, modes and ways of existing. I then use these clarifications to explicate one of Descartes’ crucial arguments, his first argument for the existence of God.

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Introduction

“However, I am convinced that those who study my arguments for the existence of God will find them the more cogent the more they try to fault them. I claim that they are clearer in themselves than any of the demonstrations of geometers; in my view they are obscure only to those who cannot withdraw their minds from their senses...”
(III, 53)

§1. Introduction

While there are many objections one might raise against Descartes’ philosophical system, there is one objection in particular worth considering. This objection is universally accepted. It is easy to explain. And it does not pertain to just some detail in one of Descartes’ arguments. Instead, it aims to dismantle Descartes’ system almost completely by convicting him of radical and thoroughgoing inconsistency.

It is the purpose of this work to take a first step towards defending Descartes against this objection.

§2. The Objection

Let us begin with two questions. First: “What propositions does Descartes say one should accept while philosophizing?” Second: “What propositions does Descartes actually accept while philosophizing?”

§2.1. What Descartes says

Regarding the propositions Descartes says one should accept, there is no shortage of passages. Here is just a small sample. In the preface to the French edition of his metaphysical textbook, the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes writes:

First of all, I would have wished to explain what philosophy is, beginning with the most commonplace points. For example, the word ‘philosophy’ means the study of wisdom, and by ‘wisdom’ is meant not only prudence in our everyday affairs but also a perfect knowledge of all things that mankind is capable of knowing, both for the conduct of life and for the preservation of health and the discovery of all manner of skills. In order for this kind of knowledge to be perfect it must be deduced from first causes; thus, in order to set about acquiring it – and it is this activity to which the term ‘to philosophize’ strictly refers – we must start with the search for first causes or principles. These principles must satisfy two conditions. First, they must be so clear and so evident that the human mind cannot doubt their truth when it attentively concentrates on them; and, secondly, the knowledge of other things must depend on them, in the sense that the principles must be capable of being known without knowledge of these other matters, but not *vice versa*. Next, in deducing from these principles the knowledge of things which depend on them, we must try to ensure that

everything in the entire chain of deductions which we draw is very manifest. (I, 179-180)

In the First Meditation of his primary work, the *Meditations*, he writes:

Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false. (II, 12)

From the *Discourse on the Method*:

The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth: that is, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it... And the last [rule], throughout to make enumerations so complete, and reviews so comprehensive, that I could be sure of leaving nothing out. (I, 120)

In a letter to his protégé Regius, dated May 24th, 1640:

Consequently, even at the moment when we deduced them from those principles, we did not have *knowledge* of them, but only a *conviction* of them. I distinguish the two as follows: there is conviction when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but knowledge is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason. (III, 147)

From the *Principles of Philosophy* again, Part Four:

And I would not wish anyone to believe anything except what he is convinced of by evident and irrefutable reasoning. (I, 291)

What propositions does Descartes say one should accept? The passages here and elsewhere give different formulations. Putting aside the differences for a moment though, the big picture is clear: Descartes is proposing standards that are very, very strict. He is not looking for propositions protected from mild doubt. He is looking for propositions that are “completely certain and indubitable”. Descartes does not want merely plausible arguments. He wants “evident and irrefutable reasoning”. It’s not just about clarity. It’s about propositions “so clear and so evident” that the mind cannot doubt them while concentrating on them.

In fact, as Descartes reveals elsewhere, his standards are so strict that he believes many people never fulfill them at any point in their lives:

Indeed there are very many people who in their entire lives never perceive anything with sufficient accuracy to enable them to make a judgment about it with certainty. (I, 207)

...and are supposed to be strict enough to yield greater certainty than mathematics:

It is because philosophers have not followed this advice that they can never distinguish proofs from probable arguments in philosophy and physics; moreover, they nearly always try to argue in terms of probabilities, since they do not believe that there can be a place for demonstrative proofs in the sciences which deal with reality. And this is why the sceptics and others have believed that the existence of God cannot be proved, and why many still think that it is unprovable; whereas in fact it is conclusively provable and, like all metaphysical truths, is capable of a more solid proof than the proofs of mathematics. For if you were to go to the mathematicians and cast doubt on all the things the author [i.e., Descartes] cast doubt on in his

metaphysical inquiries, then absolutely no mathematical proof could be given with certainty; whereas the author went on to give metaphysical proofs in spite of the doubt. So the proofs in metaphysics are more certain than those in mathematics. (III, 352)

So Descartes has very strict standards for what propositions he says one should accept. Now let's consider the propositions he actually does accept.

§2.2. What Descartes does

Let's consider Descartes' primary work, the *Meditations*. The First Meditation is devoted to skepticism. In it, Descartes raises successively more radical skeptical arguments.

Through them, he casts doubt on more and more of his beliefs. He finally concludes:

I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty. (II, 14-15)

The Second Meditation begins with Descartes' attempt to find a proposition that can withstand the skeptical arguments from the First Meditation. He soon alights upon the *cogito*:

In that case am not I, at least, something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am I not so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced

myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (II, 16-17)

There are various objections one might have so far. One might think that Descartes is pursuing certainty unnecessarily. One might think that his doubt is either too radical or not radical enough. One might think that Descartes fails to achieve certainty with the *cogito*. Whatever one thinks about his method or whether he succeeds with it, though, it is highly plausible that Descartes is at least *trying* to adhere to his own standards. It is highly plausible that with the *cogito* he is aiming for a proposition that is “completely certain and indubitable”, “evident and irrefutable” and “so clear and so evident” that the mind cannot doubt it while concentrating on it. It is not implausible to think he is aiming for a degree of certainty he thinks most people never experience in their lives, a degree of certainty beyond the certainty of mathematics. Whatever faults there may be in the first two Meditations, we can at least say that Descartes is diligently attempting to adhere to his own extraordinarily strict standards.

Then we come to the Third Meditation and Descartes’ first argument for the existence of God. And everything changes. Descartes’ strict standards seem to vanish

entirely and he begins to employ propositions that seem to be nearly the opposite of what his standards had called for.

Let's consider an example. As Descartes leads up to his first argument for the existence of God, he introduces a proposition we will call the "Perfection Causal Principle" (i.e., the PCP):

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality>¹ in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. (II, 28)

In addition to stating the principle itself, Descartes gives a few examples:

A stone, for example, which previously did not exist, cannot begin to exist unless it is produced by something which contains, either formally or eminently everything to be found in the stone <i.e. it will contain in itself the same things as are in the stone or more excellent things>; similarly, heat cannot be produced in an object which was not previously hot, except by something of at least the same order <degree or kind> of perfection as heat, and so on. (II, 28)

We must ask: is Descartes' proposition, the Perfection Causal Principle, "completely certain and indubitable"? "Evident and irrefutable"? "So clear and so evident" that the mind cannot doubt it while concentrating on it? The universal answer from subsequent philosophers is "No."

Let's consider clarity first. The statement of the PCP given above employs the term "reality". Some other statements of the PCP, as well as the last passage cited above, employ the term "perfection" instead of "reality". What are these? Descartes does not say. Descartes does indicate in several places that "reality" and "perfection" are the

¹ As in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Volumes I-III, by Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch (henceforth, "CSM"), we will indicate additions from the French version of the *Meditations* using angle brackets (i.e., "< ... >").

same.² Beyond this, though, Descartes provides almost no explanation of “reality” or “perfection” anywhere in his philosophical corpus.³

Descartes also employs the terms “formally” and “eminently”. He uses these in the discussion of the examples above, as well as in one of his formulations of the PCP.⁴ “Formally” is no problem. As Descartes indicates in the passage with the examples of the stone and heat above, “formally” just means “literally”. To contain something “formally” is just to contain it literally, which is just to contain it. “Eminently”, though, is far less clear. Descartes attempts to explain: to contain something “eminently” is to contain “more excellent things” than it. But what does this mean? What does it mean for things to be “more excellent” than other things? Descartes never explains this clearly.⁵

We do not clearly understand several of the terms Descartes uses to state the PCP. It follows that we do not clearly understand the PCP. Of course, one might point out that we can at least get the gist of the PCP from context and from Descartes’ examples. From what Descartes says, for instance, it seems fairly clear that he thinks causation is somewhat like giving and that he means to assert something like the proposition: “You cannot give what you do not have.” But even if we grant that this is roughly what

² For passages where Descartes seems to equate “reality” and “perfection”, please see II, 28, 29, 116; III, 86.

³ In II, 117, Descartes seems to equate “reality” and “being” or “degrees of reality” and “degrees of being”. He also gives some examples of “degrees of being” in II, 117. None of this, however, amounts to a clear explanation of the concept in question.

⁴ In III, 166, Descartes writes: “It is certain that there is nothing in an effect which is not contained formally or eminently in its EFFICIENT and TOTAL cause.” See also II, 97, where Descartes writes: “The fact that ‘there is nothing in the effect which was not previously present in the cause, either in a similar or in a higher form’ is a primary notion which is as clear as any that we have...”

⁵ In II, 114, Descartes writes: “Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of that which does so correspond.” Descartes never explains what it is for one thing to “fill the role” of another or what “greatness” is or what one has to do with the other.

Descartes is trying to say,⁶ it still seems to fall far short of the level of clarity Descartes himself demands.

So we do not clearly understand the PCP. Can we doubt it? As far as we can understand it, it seems quite obvious that we can. Of course, one might think that this is not a problem for Descartes by itself. In particular, one might think that Descartes intends the PCP to be doubtable when considered alone, but to become indubitable when we consider it along with the arguments that are used to derive it. There are two problems with this proposal. The first problem is that it seems that we can doubt the PCP whether we consider it with the attending arguments or not. In the Third Meditation, for instance, Descartes attempts to derive the PCP via the argument in the following passage:

For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? It follows from this both 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. (II, 28)

The argument here seems to rely on a principle of sufficient reason as well as the idea that causation is something like giving. Unfortunately, though, those are things we can doubt. We can doubt whether everything has a cause, whether every portion of “reality” in an effect has a cause and whether causation is either roughly or exactly like giving.

⁶ It cannot be that Descartes thinks causation is literally giving. It also cannot be that the PCP is literally the proposition: “You cannot give what you do not have.” Why not? There are several reasons. First, if X gives Y to Z, then X does not have Y anymore. But Descartes believes that God causes everything that happens in the world and does so without losing anything from itself. Thus Descartes cannot believe that causation is literally giving. It follows that the PCP, a proposition that talks about causation, should not be rendered as a proposition that talks about giving. Second, if causation is giving, then what happens when the cause contains the “reality” or “perfection” contained in the effect not formally but eminently? If X has warmth, perhaps it can literally give Y warmth. But if X lacks warmth and instead has something “more excellent” than warmth, can it give Y warmth? Not in the literal sense of giving, no.

Whatever claims Descartes is making here, it seems that we can doubt them along with the PCP.

The same holds of the argument Descartes gives in the Second Set of Replies. Regarding the PCP, he writes:

The fact that ‘there is nothing in the effect which was not previously present in the cause, either in a similar or in a higher form’ is a primary notion which is as clear as any that we have; it is just the same as the common notion ‘Nothing comes from nothing.’ For if we admit that there is something in the effect that was not previously present in the cause, we shall also have to admit that this something was produced by nothing. And the reason why nothing cannot be the cause of a thing is simply that such a cause would not contain the same features as are found in the effect. (II, 97)

In this passage, Descartes seems to argue from the PCP to the claim “nothing comes from nothing” and from that claim back to the PCP. Whichever way we perform the derivation, though, it seems that we can easily doubt both of the claims in questions.

The second problem with the above proposal is that it seems that Descartes simply does not agree that the PCP is doubtable on its own. In the passage just cited, he calls the PCP a “primary notion”. This seems to indicate that Descartes thinks that we can become certain of the PCP even if we consider it without any attending arguments.

Descartes’ acceptance of the PCP thus seems to be a severe violation of his standards. Is it the only such violation? Unfortunately, the answer seems to be no. And we don’t need to go far to find the next violation. Immediately after introducing the PCP, Descartes introduces another proposition, a principle we will call the “Representative Perfection Causal Principle” (i.e., the RPCP):

The nature of an idea is such that of itself it requires no formal reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode. But in order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea. For if we suppose that an idea contains something which was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing. (II, 28-29)

The RPCP, however, seems to have at least the same problems as the PCP. Regarding clarity, Descartes uses the terms “reality” and “imperfect”, but as we have said, never explains “reality” or “perfection”. In other formulations of the RPCP, Descartes uses the term “eminently”,⁷ but as we have said, never clearly explains what that is either. Thus the RPCP shares at least the same obscurities as the PCP. It also employs the terms “objective reality” and existing “objectively or representatively in the intellect by way of an idea”. Some might judge these to add even more obscurity. “Objective reality”, though, poses no problem. We can simply take “X has objective reality Y” to mean “X represents something that has reality Y”. As for existing “objectively or representatively in the intellect by way of an idea”, we will leave the discussion of that until later. For now, we already have enough to conclude that the RPCP is at least as obscure as the PCP.

Regarding indubitability, it seems quite clear that the RPCP can be doubted. More than that, it seems that there have been very few philosophers since Descartes who have accepted the RPCP, let alone found it indubitable. It also seems clear that the RPCP can

⁷ In II, 118, Descartes writes: “The objective reality of any of our ideas requires a cause which contains the very same reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently.” For other passages where Descartes formulates the RPCP using the terms “formally” and “eminently”, see I, 198-199; II, 97, 116; III, 211, 214.

be doubted even while holding in mind the examples and arguments Descartes presents.

For instance, Descartes writes:

V. It follows from [the PCP] that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently. It should be noted that this axiom is one which we must necessarily accept, since on it depends our knowledge of all things, whether they are perceivable through the senses or not. How do we know, for example, that the sky exists? Because we see it? But this ‘seeing’ does not affect the mind except in so far as it is an idea – I mean an idea which resides in the mind itself, not an image depicted in the corporeal imagination. Now the only reason why we can use this idea as a basis of the judgment that the sky exists is that every idea must have a really existing cause of its objective reality; and in this case we judge that the cause is the sky itself. And we make similar judgments in other cases. (II, 116-117)

Here, Descartes attempts to derive the RPCP in two ways. First, he attempts to derive it from the PCP. Second, he attempts to argue that we are forced to accept it because our knowledge of “all things” depends on it. Neither of these arguments, though, are persuasive as stated. It seems quite possible to doubt them along with the RPCP.⁸ Finally, just as with the PCP, Descartes seems to indicate that we should be able to grasp it with certainty without relying on arguments. He writes:

⁸ For the examples Descartes attempts to use to make the RPCP seem plausible, please see I, 198-199; II, 75-76, 97 for the example of an intricate machine; please see III, 214 for the example of a beautiful painting.

It is also a primary notion that ‘all the reality or perfection which is present in an idea merely objectively must be present in its cause either formally or eminently’. (II, 97)⁹

So it seems it does not matter whether some argument makes us certain of the RPCP. It should be indubitable on its own. As we have said though, it seems quite clear that this is not the case.

Thus Descartes’ acceptance of the RPCP seems to be another severe violation of his standards. That’s two, back-to-back. Let’s consider just one more. As before, we do not have to look far. In the very next paragraph, Descartes writes:

And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea. (II, 29)

Most of this passage concerns the RPCP. The beginning of it, however, contains a new claim: “there cannot be an infinite regress of ideas causing ideas”. This claim seems much better than the PCP and the RPCP in one way. In particular, it seems quite clear. We seem to understand exactly what Descartes is saying.

Despite its clarity though, this third claim still seems to fall far short of Descartes’ standards. Descartes is looking for claims that are “completely certain and indubitable”, “evident and irrefutable” and “so clear and so evident” that the mind cannot doubt them while concentrating on them. But it seems that Descartes’ claim about infinite regresses

⁹ In II, 97-98, Descartes adds insult to injury: “But there may be some whose natural light is so meagre that they do not see that it is a primary notion that every perfection that is present objectively in an idea must really exist in some cause of the idea. For their benefit I provided an even more straightforward demonstration of God’s existence based on the fact that the mind which possesses the idea of God cannot derive its existence from itself.”

of ideas is none of these things. On its own, it seems easily doubtable. Does Descartes argue for it? The remainder of the *Meditations* yields only the following passage:

It is clear enough that an infinite regress is impossible here, especially since I am dealing not just with the cause that produced me in the past, but also and most importantly with the cause that preserves me at the present moment. (II, 34)

But this does not help. Whether simultaneous or over time, it seems easy enough to conceive of an infinite regress of ideas causing ideas.

It thus appears that while Descartes begins the *Meditations* with a diligent attempt to adhere to his extremely strict standards, by the Third Meditation he is routinely violating those standards. This problem persists beyond the above three examples. In Descartes' second argument for the existence of God, he writes:

Now it is certainly very evident by the natural light that a thing which recognizes something more perfect than itself is not the source of its own being; for, if so, it would have given itself all the perfections of which it has an idea. (I, 200)

Regarding his ontological argument, which has the conclusion "Therefore it may be truly affirmed of God that necessary existence belongs to him, or that he exists",¹⁰ Descartes writes:

And its conclusion can be grasped as self-evident by those who are free of preconceived opinions, as I said above... (II, 117-118)

Discussing a principle of sufficient reason, he writes:

What does seem to me self-evident is that whatever exists either derives its existence from a cause or derives its existence from itself as from a cause. (II, 80)

¹⁰ II, 117.

These are but a small sample of the propositions that Descartes claims are certain and wants to be perfectly clear, but that seem to almost everyone unclear, easily doubtable or both.

We can now state the objection we referred to initially. The objection has two parts. The first part is as follows: “As we have seen, Descartes’ epistemology proposes extremely strict standards for the acceptance of propositions. We must either accept this epistemology or reject it. If we reject it, we have rejected a major part of Descartes’ philosophy. If we accept it, we must also accept its extremely strict standards. As part of accepting those standards, we must then reject all of the doubtable principles Descartes introduces. If the description above is correct, though, then this means we must reject a very large number of principles, including principles that are essential to all of Descartes’ arguments for the existence of God. The description is correct; thus if we accept Descartes’ epistemology, we must reject a large number of principles and all of his arguments for the existence of God. Much of the rest of his metaphysics, though, depends on the existence of God. Thus if we accept Descartes’ epistemology, we must reject much of Descartes’ metaphysics. It follows that we must reject a major part of Descartes’ philosophy: either the epistemology or the metaphysics.”

The second part is as follows: “Moreover, the conflict just noted between Descartes’ epistemology and metaphysics is not deeply hidden. It does not merely appear after a subtle examination of his philosophy. It is *obvious*. This is because Descartes’ violation of his epistemological requirements is not minor and occasional. It is frequent and severe.”

§3. My Defense

§3.1. What I claim

I cannot defend Descartes against both parts of the above objection. This is because I believe that the first part of the objection is correct. As I see it, Descartes' metaphysics does not fulfill the standards of his epistemology. As a result, I believe we must jettison the metaphysics, the epistemology or both.¹¹

I do not, however, believe that the second part of the objection is correct. In particular, I do not believe that there is a discontinuity between the First and Second Meditation and the rest of Descartes' philosophy. It is not the case that beginning with the Third Meditation, Descartes discarded or began to ignore his standards. He did not embrace obscurity or lose his grip on what was doubtable. He did not throw caution to the wind or begin to rely on esoteric views drawn uncritically from other philosophers. On the contrary, it is my contention that in the Third Meditation and elsewhere, Descartes was doing exactly what he was doing in the First and Second Meditation: diligently attempting to live up to his extremely strict standards. He may not have succeeded. In fact, I believe he did not succeed. But his failure was not nearly as catastrophic as it might seem.

§3.2. What I will do

A full defense of Descartes against the charge of radically violating his own standards would include several steps. The first step would be to clarify Descartes' concepts, giving us a thorough understanding of each. The second step would be to present Descartes'

¹¹ I personally believe that it is the metaphysics that must be discarded. Descartes' epistemology, in my view, is very close to being correct. I hope to elaborate on this elsewhere in the future.

axioms, so that anyone with a thorough understanding of his concepts would grasp, as much as possible, the truth of his axioms. The third step would be to present constructions of Descartes' arguments, starting from his axioms and ending with his conclusions.

In an earlier version of this work, I sought to complete all three of these steps for a large large number of Descartes' conclusions. This task proved too lengthy, though, for a single work. As a result, in what follows I will limit myself to the first step, and an informal taste of the second and third. That is to say, in this work my primary task will be to *clarify Descartes' concepts*. After I have clarified and presented his concepts, I will provide an example of how these clarified concepts can give us a far better understanding of Descartes' arguments. In particular, I will discuss Descartes' first argument for the existence of God from the Third Meditation.¹² I have selected this argument because it is where most readers first encounter Descartes' alleged violation of his own epistemic standards. It is my hope that my discussion of this argument will make it plausible that a better understanding of Descartes' concepts will reveal Descartes to be adhering much more closely to his strict standards than is typically believed.

§3.3. Clarifying concepts

When it comes to clarifying concepts, some cases are easy and some are not. In the easiest cases, a philosopher defines his concepts, gives examples, distinguishes his concepts from nearby concepts and uses his concepts in arguments in ways that render them quite clear. In such cases, clarifying a concept may only require one to give a few more examples, make a few more distinctions, or exhibit the application of the concept in

¹² Henceforth, I will refer to this as "Descartes' first argument for the existence of God".

some tough cases. In the hardest cases of conceptual clarification, the philosopher provides no clear definitions, gives few or no examples, makes few or no distinctions and uses the concepts only in arguments which are themselves obscure. In such cases, clarifying a concept requires much more work. Roughly speaking, it is the job of the interpreter to explain what the philosopher does not. If the philosopher speaks clearly and completely, the job of the interpreter is easy. If the philosopher speaks briefly and only in riddles, the job of the interpreter is much more difficult.

Descartes does not make it easy to clarify his concepts. He frequently gives obscure definitions or no definitions at all. He often fails to give examples. And he frequently uses concepts only in arguments which are themselves very hard to understand. As a result, the task of clarifying Descartes' concepts requires somewhat extreme measures. Of course, I will draw every last drop of guidance that I can from Descartes' texts, looking at every part of his philosophical corpus. But I will also permit myself to go beyond what Descartes explicitly writes. If Descartes hints, I will follow the hints. If Descartes speaks in metaphor, I will decode the metaphor. Sometimes there is reason to believe that Descartes is obscuring his views on purpose; in these cases, I will try to pull back the curtain. In many cases, it will be useful to have knowledge of arguments that Descartes only mentions, but does not give. In these cases, I will construct the arguments myself, assuming I can do so in a manner consistent with the spirit of Descartes' philosophy.

On the basis of what I have just said, one might think that the purpose of this work is to offer a rational reconstruction of Descartes' conceptual scheme. This is not the case. My goal here is not to provide a description of concepts Descartes could have used,

had he only had clearer concepts. My goal is to present the concepts that Descartes himself was using.

§3.4. Interpretative methodology

Some people may find the procedure I have just described objectionable. If Descartes never clarifies a concept, how can I clarify it and then reasonably attribute the clarification to him? If I give constructions of arguments that Descartes never gives himself, how can I justly say that those are Descartes' arguments? More generally, how can I claim to report what Descartes thinks when I "permit myself to go beyond what Descartes explicitly writes"?

These are excellent questions. To answer them I will describe some difficulties involved in interpreting philosophical texts. I will then propose a solution to these difficulties and from that solution I will derive my interpretative method. Finally, I will argue that while the resultant interpretative method should not be applied in every case, it clearly should be applied when interpreting Descartes.

Let's begin with some difficulties extracting a philosopher's views from a text. First, a philosopher may *want* to transmit his views obscurely. This might sound outlandish. But it is clearly a possibility. The philosopher may want to disguise his views from various authorities. He may want to maintain a degree of mystique. He may even want to use the obscurity to force serious readers to think for themselves.

Second, even if a philosopher has no positive reason to transmit his views obscurely, he may still not try to transmit them with maximum clarity. There are several possibilities. The philosopher may value good writing and be willing to sacrifice some

clarity in the service of style. The philosopher may value brevity and be willing to give up some clarity to keep things concise. Or perhaps it was not premeditated. In many cases, especially in cases of personal correspondence, perhaps the philosopher simply wrote the piece quickly, never anticipating that interpreters would be picking it apart with tweezers 350 years later.

Let's suppose though that a philosopher values nothing more than to convey his ideas clearly. Even then he might still make technical mistakes. For instance, he might accidentally misuse some of his own terminology. Or he might unintentionally introduce a new term. More significantly, he might try to illustrate a concept by giving an example, but actually give an example that fails to illustrate the concept.

There is also the possibility that the philosopher will make strategic errors in choosing how best to convey his views. He may choose to tailor his presentation to particular audiences. This would have the benefit of making the texts clearer to that audience, but it might also have the disadvantage of making the texts less clear to everyone else. Or he may choose to simplify the philosophical material. This might draw people in more easily, the idea being that they would then reflect more and remove the simplifications themselves. But it might also lead people to reject arguments and explanations because those arguments and explanations appear to be oversimplified. Deciding what audience to write for and whether to simplify is difficult. Inevitably some philosophers will make mistakes.

Finally, even if a philosopher values only clarity and commits no technical or strategic errors in presentation, it is still nearly or completely impossible to write without

using sentences that permit multiple natural interpretations. This is true of sentences generally, but is especially true of philosophical sentences.¹³

This brings into view some of the problems with texts. Are these problems serious? I maintain that they are. First, it seems easy to conceive of realistic scenarios in which the above factors cause interpreters to go astray. Second, it is a fact that interpreters disagree with each about the correct interpretation of texts in a fairly thoroughgoing manner. How can we explain this? I think that part of the best explanation is that the problems I have just mentioned are significant obstacles to correct interpretation. If they aren't, why don't we all agree already?¹⁴

I have argued that texts have serious imperfections. Is there anything we can do?

Consider the challenge of interpretation in another context. Suppose, for instance, we are climbing a mountain and we come across a person staring out over the landscape. We want to know what the person is looking at, so we ask. The person responds by pointing. What do we do now? As interpreters we would like to know how to interpret the pointing. One way to interpret the pointing would be to hold the person's pointing finger steady and mentally extend a perfectly straight line through the end of the finger out to whatever object it meets, be it a tree or a blade of grass or a tiny patch of sky above the horizon. We could then conclude that the person was looking at that object. A different way to interpret the pointing would be to *look out at the landscape ourselves*

¹³ This problem cannot be avoided by writing in a formal language. If one writes only in a formal language, no one else will understand what one is writing without some informal explanation. If one gives an informal explanation, however, the sentences one uses in the informal explanation will almost certainly be multiply interpretable.

¹⁴ It is true that as the discipline is currently constituted, an interpreter can only receive professional rewards for disagreeing with other interpreters. Thus one might propose that disagreement among interpreters is a result of the fact that the only people who become interpreters are those who believe they have a good chance of being able to disagree. I agree that this is one cause. But I believe the imperfections in the texts are responsible as well.

and see what sorts of noteworthy objects were present. Then if there was only one noteworthy object in the rough vicinity of where the person was pointing, we could conclude that that was what the person was looking at.

Obviously, the first method here is preposterous. We do not expect the person on the mountain to point with laser-like precision. For one thing, pointing directly at faraway objects is difficult. For another thing, the person may well have had goals other than accuracy when pointing, such as ease and style. The correct interpretative method here is clearly the second one. We look out at the landscape and see a grassy plain, a stream and a gorgeous sunrise. The stream was off to the side; the plain was unremarkable. We conclude, correctly, that the person must have been pointing to the rising sun.

Things are no different with philosophical texts. Philosophers are looking out into the philosophical landscape. They are pointing with their words. The best way to determine what they are looking at is to look out at the landscape ourselves. The philosophers may have pointed imprecisely. They may have stumbled at the last moment. They may have chosen to nod ever so slightly instead of pointing. Depending on the landscape they are looking at, this may be enough for us to grasp their intention.

This reflection leads me to adopt the following interpretative method. I begin with the texts. The texts put me into some general region of the philosophical landscape. I then put the texts down and search for the best philosophical material in the vicinity. Once I've found it, I return to the texts and see whether I can read those texts as presenting that material. In doing so, I keep in mind the imperfection of the texts. Keeping the imperfection of texts in mind enables me to read away a large number of passages. Of course, I prefer to interpret passages as straightforwardly as I can. But I also prefer better

philosophical material where possible and I usually will not hesitate to read away passages if it is useful and I can tell a halfway plausible story.

§3.5. Interpreting Descartes

Of course, different circumstances may call for different interpretative methods. Thus I agree that the method I have just described is not right for every case. Is it right when interpreting Descartes?

A few things can help us tell whether the above method is best in a particular case. First, one should consider the skill of the philosopher one is interpreting. If the philosopher is not sufficiently skillful, it makes no sense to try to ascertain his views by looking for the best philosophical material in the vicinity of his texts. Second, one should consider whether the philosopher gives good reasons to believe that the texts are imperfect for any of the reasons described above.

Finally, one can give the method a shot. If one finds that one can reconstruct all sorts of seemingly bad arguments in philosophically superior ways and read them back into the texts with a degree of plausibility, that's a very good sign. What are the chances that an excellent philosopher gave a bad philosophical argument when there was a good one right nearby? I grant that even excellent philosophers may sometimes select bad arguments when there are nearby good arguments. But as the skill of the philosopher goes up, the frequency of this should go down.

I have just stated three criteria. Do these criteria indicate that we should apply the proposed interpretative method to Descartes? I believe that there is extremely strong

evidence in favor. First, I believe that Descartes is an excellent philosopher.¹⁵ This is a hard point to justify concisely, so I will simply assert it. Second, I believe Descartes gives a very large number of reasons to believe that his texts present his views only imperfectly. Let's consider some.

First, we know that Descartes was willing to take extreme steps to avoid the censure of the church. He was a hair's breadth from publishing the *World* before he learned that Galileo had been condemned for asserting that the Earth moves. The *World* contains the proposition that the Earth moves; Descartes' response was to suppress the work entirely. In letters to his friend Mersenne, he writes:

But I have to say that in the mean time I took the trouble to inquire in Leiden and Amsterdam whether Galileo's *World System* was available, for I thought I had heard that it was published in Italy last year. I was told that it had indeed been published but that all the copies had immediately been burnt at Rome, and that Galileo had been convicted and fined. I was so astonished at this that I almost decided to burn all my papers or at least to let no one see them. For I could not imagine that he – an Italian and, as I understand, in the good graces of the Pope – could have been made a criminal for any other reason than he tried, as he no doubt did, to establish that the earth moves. I must admit that if the view is false, so too are the entire foundations of my philosophy, for it can be demonstrated from them quite clearly. And it is so closely interwoven in every part of my treatise that I could not remove it without rendering the whole work defective. But for all the world I did not want to publish a discourse in which a single word could be found that the Church would have

¹⁵ In fact, I personally rank Descartes as history's second greatest philosopher. First, of course, is Immanuel Kant.

disapproved of; so I preferred to suppress it rather than to publish it in a mutilated form. (III, 40-41)

Besides, knowing your virtue as I do, I hope that you will think even better of me when you see that I have decided wholly to suppress the treatise I have written and to forfeit almost all my work of the last four years in order to give my obedience to the Church, since it has proscribed the view that the earth moves. (III, 41-42)

Doubtless you know that Galileo was recently censured by the Inquisition of the Faith, and that his views about the movement of the earth were condemned as heretical. I must tell you that all the things I explained in my treatise, which included the doctrine of the movement of the earth, were so interdependent that it is enough to discover that one of them is false to know that all the arguments I was using are unsound. Though I thought they were based on very certain and evident proofs, I would not wish, for anything in the world, to maintain them against the authority of the Church. I know that it might be said that not everything which the Roman Inquisitors decide is automatically an article of faith, but must first be approved by a General Council. But I am not so fond of my own opinions as to want to use such quibbles to be able to maintain them. I desire to live in peace and to continue the life I have begun under the motto 'to live well you must live unseen'. And so I am more happy to be delivered from the fear of my work's making unwanted acquaintances than I am unhappy at having lost the time and trouble which I spent on its composition. (III, 42-43)

Descartes' efforts at suppression went beyond the *World*. In a letter to Denis Mesland, Descartes tentatively expresses a potentially heterodox view about the Eucharist. In a letter soon after, he asks Mesland to destroy the original letter.¹⁶ The fact that Descartes was willing to go to such lengths to conceal his doctrines gives us good reason to believe that he holds views that differ from what he presents or that he holds views he has formulated but never presents.

Beyond suppression, we know that Descartes explicitly advocated concealing one's doctrines. Writing to his protégé Regius, Descartes proposes that Regius not explicitly state new opinions, but instead offer new opinions under the guise of old opinions:

I agree with [M. Alphonse] entirely that you should refrain from public disputations for some time, and should be extremely careful not to annoy people by harsh words. I should like it best if you never put forward any new opinions, but retained all the old ones in name, and merely brought forward new arguments. This is a course of action to which nobody could take exception, and yet those who understood your arguments would spontaneously draw from them the conclusions you had in mind. For instance, why did you need to reject openly substantial forms and real qualities? Do you not remember that on page 164 of my *Meteorology*, I said quite expressly that I did not at all reject or deny them, but simply found them unnecessary in setting out my explanations? If you had taken this course, everybody in your audience would have rejected them as soon as they saw they were useless, and in the mean time you would not have become so unpopular with your colleagues. (III, 205)

¹⁶ For Descartes' explanation of his view of the Eucharist, see his 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland (III, 242-244). For his request that Mesland destroy that letter, see Descartes' May 1645 letter to Mesland (III, 249).

Regarding himself, Descartes writes:

As for myself, there is nothing I would more strenuously avoid than letting my opinions seem paradoxical, and I would never want them to be the subject of disputations. (III, 254)

Descartes obviously recognized his own opinions to be “new”. Taking this into account, these passages strongly suggest that Descartes is willing to hide his doctrines and to leave his conclusions unstated with the idea that readers would grasp those conclusions anyway. This gives us good reason to expect that we will sometimes need to decode what Descartes is saying and look beyond what he has explicitly written. And this is not merely true in cases that directly pertain to church doctrine. In the example just above, Descartes encourages Regius to conceal his views on the topic of real qualities and substantial forms, even though these do not directly pertain to church doctrine.

Those are the more blatant ways in which Descartes reveals his texts to be imperfect transmitters of his views. But they are not the only ways. Above, I suggested that philosophers might sacrifice clarity for the sake of style or brevity. In one passage, Descartes explicitly states that he is making such a tradeoff:

You find obscure the sentence where I say that whatever has the power to create or preserve something separate from itself has *a fortiori* the power to preserve itself. But I do not see how to make it clearer without adding many words, which would be inelegant since I only mention the matter briefly by the way. (III, 166)

Unfortunately, this is not a trivial point. Descartes never actually clarifies the idea he refers to here, and it ends up being rather important. Of course, this is just one case. But it would be surprising if Descartes ended up mentioning the only time he ever made the

tradeoff. On the contrary, I think this case gives reason to suspect that Descartes withheld details in a number of cases for the sake of style or brevity.

Let's consider another passage. In a letter, Descartes writes:

It is true that I have been too obscure in what I wrote about the existence of God in this treatise on Method, and I admit that although the most important, it is the least worked out section in the whole book. This is partly because I did not decide to include it until I had nearly completed it and the publisher was becoming impatient. But the principal reason for its obscurity is that I did not dare to go into detail about the arguments of the sceptics, or say everything which is necessary to withdraw the mind from the senses. The certainty and evidence of my kind of argument for the existence of God cannot really be known without distinctly recalling the arguments which display the uncertainty of all our knowledge of material things; and these thoughts did not seem to me suitable for inclusion in a book which I wished to be intelligible in part even to women while providing matter for thought for the finest minds. I confess also that this obscurity arises partly – as you rightly observed – because I suppose that certain notions, which the habit of thought had made familiar and evident to me, ought to be equally so to everyone. Such, for instance, is the notion that since our ideas cannot receive their forms or their being except from external objects or from ourselves, they cannot represent any reality or perfection which is not either in those objects or in ourselves. (III, 85-86)

There is a lot of material here that serves my case. The passage just cited includes (1) an underdeveloped section, (2) purposeful obscurity as a result of tailoring the work to a

particular audience, and (3) accidental obscurity as a result of inadequate explanation.

The point I want to make now, however, has to do with the end of the passage.

At the end of the above passage, Descartes derives the RPCP from the claim that “our ideas cannot receive their forms or their being except from external objects or from ourselves”. We should note two things here. First, as we will discuss later, this argument is important in understanding why Descartes affirms the RPCP. Second, we should note that Descartes gives the argument in one of his letters and does not give it anywhere else in his philosophical corpus. Why does this matter? Because Descartes gives this argument only in a single letter, we should either believe that Descartes expected this letter to reach the public or we should believe that Descartes had an important argument that he did not intend to convey to a broader audience. I find the former option unlikely. I thus conclude that the above argument is an important argument Descartes did not intend to convey to the world.

Of course, the argument from the above passage is not alone. If we were to scour Descartes’ works, we would find a large number of claims and arguments he makes in his correspondence but not in his published writings. From this I believe we should conclude two things. First, we should conclude that Descartes did not make adequate provision to convey a significant part of his philosophy to the world. Second, we should conclude that it is quite likely that there is even more of Descartes’ philosophy that he never put into his letters or his published works. To suppose otherwise would be to suppose that Descartes was sure to convey all of his important philosophical views and arguments through his letters, even though he did not try to ensure that the letters would be seen by the world.

These are some reasons to believe that Descartes' texts are imperfect transmitters of his views. Thus the first two conditions for applying my method are fulfilled.

Descartes is an excellent philosopher; his texts are imperfect. It now remains to try my method and see what we come up with. If we find that we can construct high-quality philosophical material in the general vicinity of Descartes' texts, then all three conditions are fulfilled, and I think we have good reason to ascribe that material to Descartes.

§3.6. A final hedge

My goal in this work is to correctly interpret Descartes' texts, and on that basis to clearly explain several of Descartes' critical concepts. Because of the way I intend to interpret the texts, some will judge that my interpretation strays too far from the texts, and hence cannot be an admissible interpretation. In such a case, I submit that instead of understanding my work as an explanation of the concepts Descartes actually used, it could instead be considered a rational reconstruction. A rational reconstruction – a piece of philosophy in the vicinity of the texts, though not attributed to the philosopher in question – might still be worthwhile for strictly philosophical reasons.

And now, without further ado, let's begin to clarify Descartes' concepts.

Part I: Conceptual Clarification

§4. Introduction to Part I

Many of Descartes' concepts stand in need of elucidation. In Part I, we will examine:

- (§5) attributes
- (§6) perfections and higher forms
- (§7) implication
- (§8) inconceivability apart
- (§9) causation
- (§10) clarity and obscurity
- (§11) distinctness and confusion
- (§12) things, inherence, substances and modes,
- (§13) ways of existence, and
- (§14) God.

Along the way, we will clarify a few other concepts as well, such as simple natures, composite natures and true and immutable natures (§5), reality (§6), necessity and possibility (§7), and formal and efficient causation (§9).

§5. Attributes

Many of Descartes' concepts depend on the concept "attribute". So that is where we should begin. Descartes explains the concept "attribute" in a few places. He writes:

By *mode*, as used above, we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by an *attribute* or *quality*. But we employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as a substance of such and such a kind, we use the term *quality*; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of what is in a substance, we use the term *attribute*. Hence we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible. (I, 211)

We must take care here not to understand the word 'attribute' to mean simply 'mode', for we term an 'attribute' whatever we recognize as being naturally ascribable to something, whether it be a mode which is susceptible of change, or the absolutely immutable essence of the thing in question. Thus God has many attributes, but no modes. (I, 297)

How should we interpret these passages? First, let's introduce the relation of "being in".

We can conceive of things and mentally break them down. Furthermore, we can do this in more than one way. One way to mentally break things down is to break them into parts. For instance, we can conceive of a particular chair and mentally decompose it into legs, a seat and back. Now consider any thing and mentally break it down in any way other than decomposing it into parts. The result at any stage of the process is something

that is *in* the original thing. That is to say, anything reached at any stage of the process stands in the “being in” relation to the original thing.

This explains the concept of “being in”. Regarding this explanation, it is important to note that we have not defined “being in” in terms of being able to mentally break something down. The fact that we can mentally break X down into Y without breaking X into parts shows us that Y is in X. But it is not an explanation of what it is to be in X. We will leave the relation “being in” undefined.

With the concept “being in” in hand, we can now define the concept “attribute” and a few related concepts. Let’s say that X *is an attribute of* Y iff X is in Y. Let’s say that X *is an attribute* iff X is in something. Let’s say that X *has attribute* Y iff Y is in X. Let’s also stipulate that “consists of Y₁, Y₂, etc.” is synonymous with “has exactly attributes Y₁, Y₂, etc.”.

- X being an attribute of Y =_{def}
 - X being in Y
- X being an attribute =_{def}
 - X being in something
- X having attribute Y =_{def}
 - Y being in X
- X consisting of Y₁, Y₂, etc. =_{def}
 - X having exactly attributes Y₁, Y₂, etc.

We have now explained the requisite concepts and defined the concept “attribute”. It would be useful to give some examples of attributes to illustrate the definition, but unfortunately it is difficult to give uncontroversial examples of attributes.

For example, consider a particular chair. What attributes does the chair have? According to some philosophers, the chair has the attribute [being chair-shaped].¹⁷ According to other philosophers, the chair does not have the attribute [being chair-shaped]. These latter philosophers will agree that the proposition “the chair is chair-shaped” is true; nevertheless, they deny that the attribute [being chair-shaped] stands in the “being in” relation to the chair. As part of denying that the chair has the attribute [being chair-shaped], they also deny that one can mentally break down the chair and eventually end up with the concept of “being chair-shaped”.¹⁸

If one wants to generate proposals for what could be an attribute, one easy way to do this is to look at the true propositions that refer to a thing. If the proposition “René is happy” is true, then one might propose that [being happy] is an attribute, and moreover, an attribute of René. If the proposition “René is happy or sad” is true, then one might propose that [being happy or being sad] is an attribute and also an attribute of René. Again, not all philosophers will accept all of these proposals. One might accept that [being happy] and [being sad] are attributes but doubt that [being happy or being sad] is something that could be *in* a person in the relevant sense. One would then doubt that [being happy or being sad] is an attribute.

Attributes can be divided into two types. In particular, we can conceive of an attribute that includes a reference to the thing it is an attribute of. We can also conceive of an attribute that does not include a reference to the thing it is an attribute of. Let’s call the former type of attribute “individualized” and the latter type “non-individualized”. Let’s

¹⁷ Henceforth, I will use square brackets (i.e., [...]) to indicate attributes and proposed attributes.

¹⁸ In fact, I believe that Descartes himself would deny that there is an attribute [being chair-shaped]. I think Descartes would judge that our idea <chair> is an obscure idea (see §10), and that there are no attributes of the form [being X-shaped], where <X> is an obscure idea.

indicate individualized attributes by including the name of the thing the attribute is an attribute of when we refer to the attribute, and let's indicate non-individualized attributes by failing to include the name of the thing. Thus, for example, individualized attributes might include:

- [X being chair-shaped]
- [René being happy]

while the corresponding non-individualized attributes would be:

- [being chair-shaped]
- [being happy].

What does Descartes believe about individualized and non-individualized attributes? For various reasons, I believe it is best to interpret Descartes as believing that all attributes are individualized. One reason comes from the following passage:

These universals arise solely from the fact that we make use of one and the same idea for thinking all individual items which resemble each other: we apply one and the same term to all the things which are represented by the idea in question, and this is the universal term... In the same way, when we see a figure made up of three lines, we form an idea of it which we call the idea of a triangle; and we later make use of it as a universal idea, so as to represent to our mind all the other figures made up of three lines. (I, 212)

In this context, I believe that a “universal” is simply a non-individualized attribute. This means that the “universal idea of a triangle” is nothing other than the concept of the non-individualized attribute [being triangular]. Now in this passage, Descartes says that we “make use” of an idea of a particular thing “as a universal idea”. This seems to indicate

that Descartes does not believe that there really are “universal ideas”, i.e., concepts of non-individualized attributes, but that all we have instead are concepts of individual things and individualized attributes.¹⁹ Given this, it would be a performative contradiction for Descartes to maintain that there are non-individualized attributes. Thus I interpret this passage as indicating that Descartes believes that all attributes are individualized.

There are at least two other reasons to interpret Descartes as believing that all attributes are individualized. One is the following passage:

As I have explained before, we do not separate out these general propositions from the particular instances; rather, *it is in the particular instances that we think of them.*”
(III, 333; italics added)

The other comes from the consideration of a complicated metaphysical argument that can be constructed from Cartesian premises.²⁰

¹⁹ In this regard, it seems that Descartes agrees with George Berkeley and David Hume. Of course, he disagrees with them over the issue of whether it is possible to conceive anything with the pure intellect: Descartes says yes, Berkeley and Hume say no.

²⁰ To wit: “I distinctly conceive two extended substances existing, one moving at 2m/s to the left, the other moving at 2m/s to the right. If one distinctly conceives something, then it is possible. Therefore, it is possible that two extended substances both exist, one moving at 2m/s to the left and the other moving at 2m/s to the right. Let’s call the first substance S_1 and the second S_2 . Let’s also assume for *reductio* that every attribute is non-individualized. Given that every attribute is non-individualized, a substance that is moving at 2m/s to the left has the attribute [moving at 2m/s to the left] and a substance that is moving at 2m/s to the right has the attribute [moving at 2m/s to the right]. Call the first of these attributes A_1 and the second A_2 . Thus S_1 has A_1 and S_2 has A_2 . Now because every attribute is non-individualized, the attribute A_1 is inconceivable apart from an attribute [moving at 2m/s]. Call this [moving at 2m/s] attribute A_3 . Also, because every attribute is non-individualized, the attribute A_2 is inconceivable apart from an attribute [moving at 2m/s]. Call this [moving at 2m/s] attribute A_4 . If X is inconceivable apart from Y and X is an attribute of Z , then Y is an attribute of Z as well. It follows that A_3 is an attribute of S_1 and A_4 is an attribute of S_2 . Now all [moving at 2m/s] attributes are perfect intrinsic duplicates of one another. Thus A_3 is a perfect intrinsic duplicate of A_4 . And if X is inconceivable apart from Y and Y is a perfect intrinsic duplicate of Z , then X is inconceivable apart from Z . It follows, given the assumption for *reductio*, that in the possible scenario described, the attributes A_1 and A_2 are both inconceivable apart from A_3 and hence are both attributes of S_1 . In other words, given the assumption for *reductio*, it is possible for a substance to be moving at 2m/s to the left and 2m/s to the right simultaneously. This however is not possible. Thus we reject the assumption for *reductio* and conclude that not all attributes are non-individualized. Now it is either the case that every attribute is individualized or every attribute is non-individualized. It follows that

Accepting now that Descartes believes that all attributes are individualized, we can give a few examples of attributes Descartes believes things have:

- [X being chair-shaped]
- [X being extended]
- [X being happy]
- [X being aware of a red patch]
- [X having unlimited power]
- [X being eternal]

Two final notes on attributes. First, if we want to say that some thing has some attribute, there are two ways to do this. For instance, if we want to say that a thing X has the attribute of unlimited power, we can say either of the following:

- Way #1: “X has unlimited power.”
- Way #2: “X has [X having unlimited power].”

In some contexts, the first way is more natural. In other contexts, the second way is more natural. In what follows, we will switch back and forth between the two manners of expression as needed. No difference in meaning will ever be intended. “X being chair-shaped” and “X having [X being chair-shaped]”, for instance, should always taken to be perfectly synonymous. To be clear, this does not mean that every expression of the form “X being Y” is synonymous with the corresponding expression “X having [X being Y]”. “X being Y” is synonymous with “X having [X being Y]” if and only if [X being Y] is an attribute.

every attribute is individualized. Q.E.D.” I imagine that the claim in this argument people might find most objectionable is the claim that every attribute is individualized or every attribute is non-individualized. For this claim, all we need is for Descartes to think that the answer to the question of whether an attribute is individualized or non-individualized is determined by the nature of attributes in general. The answer would then be the same from attribute to attribute. This is not implausible.

Lastly, a point pertaining to the interpretation of Descartes' writings. In the texts, Descartes frequently mentions "natures". He talks about "simple natures", "composite natures" and "true and immutable natures".²¹ I believe we should interpret all discussion of natures as a discussion of attributes. Why? Descartes maintains that what our ideas represent involve only simple natures:

Fifthly, it is not possible for us ever to understand anything beyond those simple natures and a certain mixture or compounding of one with another. (I, 46)

Our ideas represent things and attributes. But according to my rendition, things consist of attributes. It follows that what our ideas represent are attributes or consist of attributes. Consistent with this, we can interpret the passage just quoted as indicating that simple natures are nothing other than attributes. Composite natures are combinations of simple natures. Thus composite natures are just conjunctions of attributes. Lastly, "true and immutable natures" are either simple natures or composite natures. There are no other possibilities here. This enables us to read all of Descartes' discussion of natures as a discussion of attributes. This fact will play a role in the interpretation of some of the texts we will examine later.

²¹ Passages where Descartes discusses simple and composite natures include: I, 21, 22, 32, 44-46, 48-49; III, 343. Passages where Descartes discusses "true and immutable natures" include: I, 198; II, 45, 47, 83-84; III, 183, 343; see also II, 261-262.

§6. Perfections and Higher Forms

§6.1. Introduction

Let's move into more difficult territory. Throughout his works, and especially in connection with his causal principles, Descartes employs a number of concepts he never explains clearly. These concepts include “perfection”, “imperfection” and “reality”, as well as the concept of one thing containing another “eminently” or “in a higher form”.

For instance, Descartes writes:

There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God. For example, the nature of body includes divisibility along with extension in space, and since being divisible is an imperfection, it is certain that God is not a body. Again, the fact that we perceive through the senses is for us a perfection of a kind; but all sense-perception involves being acted upon, and to be acted upon is to be dependent on something else. Hence it cannot be supposed that God perceives by means of the senses, but only that he understands and wills. (I, 200-201)

VI. There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than an accident or a mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance. (II, 117)

It is also a primary notion that ‘all the reality or perfection which is present in an idea merely objectively must be present in its cause either formally or eminently’. (II, 97)

In this section we will explain all of these concepts.

§6.2. Texts pertaining to perfection, etc.

Let's start with "perfection", "imperfection" and "reality". In various passages, Descartes gives us clues regarding how to understanding these concepts. In the first passage quoted in §6.1, he seems to equate imperfection and "limitation". In the following passage, Descartes equates perfection and reality:

It follows from this both 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. (II, 28)²²

In the second passage quoted in §6.1, Descartes seems to equate reality and "being".

In addition to these things, Descartes also gives us some clues regarding how the different concepts are supposed to work. In the second passage in §6.1, Descartes says that there are degrees of reality. In the following passage Descartes infers from "being X is more perfect than being Y" to "being Y is an imperfection":

The very nature of a body implies many imperfections, such as its divisibility into parts, the fact that each of its parts is different and so on; for it is self-evident that it is a greater perfection to be undivided than to be divided, and so on. (II, 99)

In the first passage in §6.1, Descartes says that a thing can contain both perfection and imperfection. In that passage he also seems to infer from "X implies Y" and "Y is an imperfection" to "X is an imperfection".

Finally, scattered throughout his works, Descartes gives a very large number of examples of perfections, imperfections, cases where one attribute is more perfect than another and cases where one thing has more reality than another. He gives the following

²² For other passages where Descartes seems to equate reality and perfection, please see II, 29, 116; III, 86.

as cases of perfections: infinitude, omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, immutability, necessary existence, actual existence, possible existence, inseparability of attributes, variability, voluntary action in humans and bodily strength and skill.²³ He says that perceiving through the senses is a perfection “of a kind”,²⁴ and he implies that a few other attributes are perfections as well.²⁵ Descartes states that the following are imperfections or indicate imperfection: doubt, sadness, inconstancy, confusion in ideas, deception, malice, weakness, divisibility, having parts that differ from one another, being acted on and existing representatively.²⁶ Finally, Descartes gives a number of cases of things having more reality or being more perfect than other things. He says that infinite substances have more reality than finite ones and that substances have more reality than modes.²⁷ He also says that an infinite substance is more perfect than him and his modes, that knowing is a greater perfection than doubting, that knowing is a greater perfection

²³ Infinitude, omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, immutability: I, 128. Necessary existence, possible existence: II, 263. Actual existence: II, 47. Inseparability of attributes: II, 34, 100. Voluntary action in humans: I, 205. Bodily strength and skill: III, 270.

²⁴ Descartes says this in the first passage quoted in §6.1. (I, 200-201).

²⁵ In II, 29, Descartes writes: “For if we suppose that an idea contains something which was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing.” I take this to indicate that representative existence involves a degree of “being” or reality, and thus to indicate that representative existence is a perfection. In II, 75, Descartes writes: “For in order for the idea of the machine to contain such and such objective intricacy, it must derive it from some cause; and what applies to the objective intricacy belonging to this idea also applies to the objective reality belonging to the idea of God... But notice that all the intricacy which is to be found merely objectively in the idea must necessarily be found, either formally or eminently, in its cause, whatever this turns out to be.” I take this to indicate that intricacy involves a degree of reality and thus to indicate that intricacy is a perfection.

²⁶ Doubt, sadness, inconstancy: I, 128. Confusion in ideas: I, 130. Deception, malice, weakness: II, 37; see also II, 35. Divisibility: I, 201; see also II, 99. Having parts that differ from one another: II, 99. Being acted on: I, 200-201. Representative existence: II, 29.

²⁷ Descartes says that an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance in II, 31, 117, 130. He adds that this is self-evident in II, 130. Descartes says that a substance has more reality than a mode in II, 117. He adds that that is self-evident in II, 130. Descartes also says that the idea “infinite substance” has more objective reality than the idea “finite substance” and that the idea “substance” has more objective reality than the idea “mode” in II, 28, 117.

than ignorance and that existing actually is more perfect than existing merely representatively.²⁸

These statements and examples are helpful. They provide us with various (more or less flexible) data points that an interpretation of the concepts “perfection”, “imperfection” and “reality” should meet. This said, the texts alone leave it very unclear what exactly Descartes means when he talks about “perfection”, “imperfection” and “reality”. This unclarity drives Thomas Hobbes to write:

Moreover, M. Descartes should consider afresh what ‘more reality’ means. Does reality admit of more and less? Or does he think one thing can be more of a thing than another? If so, he should consider how this can be explained to us with that degree of clarity that every demonstration calls for, and which he himself has employed elsewhere. (II, 130)

To this, Descartes responds:

I have also made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode; if there are real qualities or incomplete substances, they are things to a greater extent than modes, but to a lesser extent than complete substances; and finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of

²⁸ In II, 31, Descartes writes: “On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired – that is, lacked something – and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?” In I, 127-128, Descartes writes: “Next, reflecting upon the fact that I was doubting and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I saw clearly that it is a greater perfection to know than to doubt)...” In III, 268, he writes: “Consequently, seeing that it is a greater perfection to know the truth than to be ignorant of it, even when it is to our disadvantage, I must conclude that it is better to be less cheerful and possess more knowledge.” In II, 75, Descartes writes: “By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect. Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing.”

a thing than a finite and dependent substance. All this is completely self-evident.²⁹

(II,130)

Unfortunately, Descartes is simply wrong here. He has not made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less. And if all of this can be completely self-evident, it is not self-evident to the vast majority of his readers.

Now let's consider the concept of "eminent containment". In one place, Descartes gives a definition:

Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that it can fill the role of that which does so correspond. (II, 114)

In another place, he seems to equate one thing eminently containing another with the former being more perfect than the latter:

A stone, for example, which previously did not exist, cannot begin to exist unless it is produced by something which contains, either formally or eminently everything to be found in the stone, <i.e. it will contain in itself the same things as are in the stone or other more excellent things...> (II, 28)

In a third place, Descartes restates the Perfection Causal Principle (PCP) in a way that equates eminently containing something with "having something in a higher form":³⁰

²⁹ In this passage, Descartes says that he has "made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less" and then gives three examples. Descartes' assertion and examples can be interpreted in two ways. First, they can be interpreted as both being a response to a single question from Hobbes. Second, they can be interpreted as being sequential answers to sequential questions. According to the first interpretation, Hobbes asks: "Does reality admit of more and less?" Descartes then answers: "I have also made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less" and gives some examples. According to the second interpretation, Hobbes asks: "Does reality admit of more and less?" Descartes answers: "I have also made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less." Then Hobbes asks: "Or does he think one thing can be more of a thing than another?" Descartes then answers with various examples of cases where he thinks one thing is more of a thing than another. Which interpretation we give is important because the first interpretation may incline us to explicate the concept of "reality" in terms of how much of a thing some thing is, whereas the second interpretation will not at all incline us to do this. I believe that the second interpretation is better on purely textual grounds and better overall.

The fact that ‘there is nothing in the effect which was not previously present in the cause, either in a similar or in a higher form’ is a primary notion which is as clear as any that we have; it is just the same as the common notion ‘Nothing comes from nothing.’ (II, 97)

As for examples, Descartes says that God contains the attributes of number and length eminently.³¹ He also entertains the idea that extension, shape, position and movement might be contained in him eminently.³²

These statements and examples are somewhat helpful. They give us some (more or less flexible) data points that an explanation of eminent containment should meet. On the basis of the three passages quoted just above, for instance, it seems that a good explanation of eminent containment should affirm that if X contains Y eminently, then X contains Z, where Z is “greater” than or “more excellent” than or a “higher form” of Y.

Of course, while being helpful, it should be clear that Descartes’ statements and examples regarding “eminent containment” are not enough to give us a clear understanding of it. We found the same thing for “perfection”, “imperfection” and “reality”. It follows that if we are to understand these concepts, we will have to make sense of them ourselves. Thus we will now step away from the texts and see if we can find anything that makes sense in the general conceptual vicinity of what Descartes says. Doing this, I believe we find what follows.

³⁰ In III, 166, Descartes formulates the PCP in a way that includes eminent containment. He writes: “It is certain that there is nothing in an effect which is not contained formally or eminently in its EFFICIENT and TOTAL cause.”

³¹ In II, 99, Descartes writes: “Now we recognize that some of these (such as knowledge and power) are contained formally in the idea of God, whereas others (such as number and length) are contained in the idea merely eminently.”

³² In II, 31, Descartes writes: “As for all the other elements which make up the ideas of corporeal things, namely extension, shape, position and movement, these are not formally contained in me, since I am nothing but a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and I am a substance, it seems possible that they are contained in me eminently.”

§6.3. Being a higher form of

Let's begin by explaining the relation of "being a higher form of". "Being a higher form of" is a relation between attributes. To understand this relation, let's return to our pre-theoretical way of thinking and consider a few pairs of attributes. In particular, let's consider some pairs of attributes pertaining to power, knowledge, speed and color:

- Power
 - [having unlimited power] vs. [having limited power]
 - [having limited power] vs. [being powerless]
 - [having unlimited power] vs. [being powerless]
- Knowledge
 - [being omniscient] vs. [having limited knowledge]
 - [having limited knowledge] vs. [having no knowledge]
 - [being omniscient] vs. [having no knowledge]
- Speed
 - [moving at 4 meters per second] vs. [being at rest]
 - [moving at 8 meters per second] vs. [moving at 4 meters per second]
 - [moving at 8 meters per second] vs. [being at rest]
 - [moving at 12 meters per second] vs. [moving at 8 meters per second]
- Color
 - [being red] vs. [being colorless]
 - [being blue] vs. [being colorless]

Pre-theoretically, it is natural to think that for each of these pairs of attributes, having the first attribute involves everything having the second attribute involves and more. What does having unlimited power involve? Everything having limited power involves and more. What does having limited power involve? Everything having no power involves and more. This can also be put in terms of additions and subtractions. Start with something colorless; it takes an addition for it to become red. Start with something red; it takes a subtraction for it to become colorless. Start with something in motion; it takes an addition for it to move faster, but a subtraction for it to stop moving. Start with something with limited knowledge; it takes an addition for it to become omniscient and a subtraction for it to become entirely ignorant. And so on.

We have now introduced the concept in question. From our pre-theoretical perspective, the first attribute in each of the above pairs of attributes stands in a particular relation to the second. Let's call that relation the "being a higher form of" relation. So, from our pre-theoretical perspective, it is natural to think that [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [having limited power], [being red] is a higher form of [being colorless], and so on.

A few notes on this. First, while we did introduce the concept "being a higher form of", we did not attempt to define it. The talk of having attribute X as "involving everything having attribute Y involves and more" and the talk of "additions" and "subtractions" were meant only to draw one's mind to the right concept, not to give or suggest a definition.

Second, while we introduced "being a higher form of" by giving a number of examples, once the concept is grasped those examples can and should be called into

question. Is [having unlimited power] really a higher form of [being powerless]? Is [moving at 4 meters per second] really a higher form of [being at rest]? It is open at the beginning of the investigation that our pre-theoretical perspective is correct, and that the first attribute from each of the pairs above is a higher form of the second. But it is also open that our pre-theoretical perspective is thoroughly mistaken, and that none of the attributes in the pairs above is a higher form of any of the others. Which attributes are higher forms of which is something that should be determined in the course of the investigation.

Third, whether it is clear from the examples above or not, we now stipulate that the “being a higher form of” relation holds only between mutually inconsistent attributes. If X has attribute A and A is a higher form of attribute B, then X does not have attribute B. In the talk of “additions” and “subtractions”, to go from an attribute to a higher form of that attribute, one should add something, subtract nothing and end with something incompatible with what one started with.

Finally, consider the attributes [having unlimited power] and [having limited power]. I said above that having unlimited power involves having everything having limited power involves and more. But one might think that this is incorrect. One might argue, for instance, that [having limited power] involves two things: (1) some amount of power, and (2) a limit. Having unlimited power involves having that amount of power (i.e., (1)), but does not involve having the limit (i.e., (2)). Doesn’t that entail that [having unlimited power] does not involve everything [having limited power] involves and more? The answer is no. The amount of power in question is *something*. The lack is *not* something. It is a mere *lack*. [Having unlimited power] involves *everything* that [having

limited power] involves; the lack in [having limited power] is not *something* any other attribute could have.³³

We have now introduced the concept “being a higher form of”. Using this concept, we can define “eminent containment”, “perfection”, “imperfection” and “reality”. Before we do this however, it will be useful to discuss “being a higher form of” a little more.

We introduced the concept “being a higher form of” without defining it or insisting on any particular example of it. Does this mean that one can understand the concept “being a higher form of” without being able to define it and without being able to give any examples of it? The answer is yes. This may seem strange, but the concept “being a higher form of” is not unique in this regard. A person can understand the concept “being spatially related to”, be unable to define it and, baffled by the arguments of Zeno and Berkeley, be undecided about whether anything is spatially related to anything else. Similarly, a person can understand the concept of causation,³⁴ not be able to define it and, undecided between Malebranche and atheism, be unsure about every particular alleged case of causation.

Which attributes are higher forms of which? This depends on the true natures of the attributes in question. Consider the attributes [being omniscient] and [being completely ignorant]. According to our pre-theoretical perspective, [being omniscient] is

³³ One might be tempted to introduce the concept of a *presence* and the concept of an *absence*. One could then define “X is a higher form of Y” as “X involves every presence that Y involves and at least one other presence”. (One then might be tempted to say that presences are nothing other than *perfections* and use that to give a different account of “perfection” than what will follow.) Unfortunately, I think that this gets the order of understanding wrong. As far as I can tell, we understand presences and absences only by understanding pairs of attributes that stand in the “higher form of” relation. That is why I have taken “X is a higher form of Y” as basic.

³⁴ Non-Humean causation.

a higher form of [being completely ignorant]: being omniscient involves everything being completely ignorant involves and more.

But now consider two different theories of knowledge and ignorance. The first theory says: “Ignorance is actually a mental fog. It fills our minds and obscures our vision of our concepts. Disperse the fog and knowledge is obtained.” The second theory says: “Ignorance is nothing other than missing concepts or gaps in the concepts we have. Add in the concepts, fill in the gaps, and knowledge is obtained.” According to the first theory, knowledge requires ideas without mental fog; ignorance requires ideas and a mental fog. According to the second theory, knowledge requires concepts without gaps; ignorance requires either failing to have concepts or having concepts with gaps.

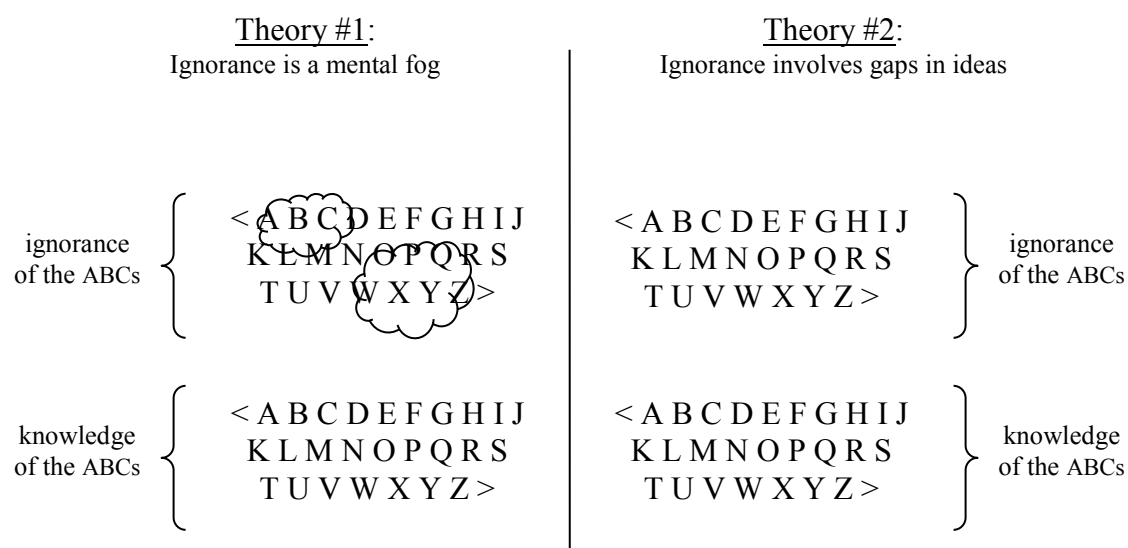


Figure 1. Two theories of knowledge.

Which of [being omniscient] and [being completely ignorant] is a higher form of the other? If the first theory here is correct, then [being completely ignorant] is a higher form

of [being omniscient]: being ignorant involves everything being omniscient involves and more. If the second theory is correct, then [being omniscient] is a higher form of [being completely ignorant]: being omniscient involves everything being completely ignorant involves and more.

This illustrates the fact that which attributes are higher forms of which depends on the true natures of the attributes in question. It also allows us to see why we did not insist on the examples we first gave. Those examples were given from our pre-theoretical perspective, a perspective that includes at least tacit beliefs about the natures of power, knowledge, speed and color. If those beliefs are true, then the initial examples are truly pairs of attributes such that the first is a higher form of the second. But if those beliefs are false – if our pre-theoretical ways of thinking about power, knowledge, speed and color are mistaken – then one or more of the initial examples may be mistaken as well. [Being omniscient] might not be a higher form of [being completely ignorant]; [being red] might not be a higher form of [being colorless]. As a result, prior to accepting any of the examples above, the true natures of the attributes involved should be determined. Once this is done, the examples above can be properly accepted or rejected.

The preceding discussion allows us to correct a few misunderstandings that occasionally arise regarding the concept “being a higher form of”. First, it is sometimes thought that whether an attribute is a higher form of another is determined by the surface structure of language. One might think, for instance, that one attribute is a higher form of another if the English word for the latter is the same as the English word for the former, only with the addition of the prefix “un-”. Thus one might think that the word “friendly” refers to one attribute, “unfriendly” refers to another, and the presence of the “un-” in

“unfriendly” makes it so the former attribute is a higher form of the latter. However, this is not how things work. Whether one attribute is a higher form of another has only to do with the natures of those attributes, not with the words we use to refer to them. Of course, one could conceive a circumstance where the gods managed the surface structure of languages to ensure that languages always neatly indicated which attributes were higher forms of which. But even in such a circumstance, languages would only indicate the facts regarding which attributes were higher forms of which; they would not determine those facts.

Second, it is sometimes thought that the fact that it is difficult to determine which attributes are higher forms of which shows that the concept “being a higher form of” itself is somehow incoherent. It is true that it is often difficult to determine which attributes are higher forms of which. But it is also true that it is difficult to determine which propositions are true and which are false, and this does not in any way tell against the ideas of truth or falsity. Furthermore, the difficulty in determining which attributes are higher forms of which is entirely explicable: it is often difficult to determine the true nature of a particular attribute. For instance, if there is any difficulty in determining what knowledge is, then there may be a corresponding difficulty in determining whether [being omniscient] is a higher form of [being completely ignorant] or vice versa.

Third, it is sometimes thought that accepting that some attributes are higher forms of others requires one to accept other claims, such as the claim that it is consistent that a single thing have every attribute that has no higher form. Now it may be that various consequences follow from the claim “at least one attribute is a higher form of at least one other attribute”. But if there are such consequences, they must be demonstrated. At the

beginning of the investigation, it is open that some attributes are higher forms of others but that it is inconsistent that a thing have every attribute that has no higher form.

§6.4. Eminent containment

Using the concept “being a higher form of”, we can now define “eminent containment”.

Let’s say that X *eminently contains* Y iff X has some attribute that is a higher form of Y .

- X eminently containing $Y =_{\text{def}}$
 - X having some attribute that is a higher form of Y

For example, suppose that [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [having limited power]. Then any thing that has the attribute [having unlimited power] eminently contains the attribute [having limited power].

§6.5. Perfection and imperfection

Using the concept “being a higher form of”, we can also define “perfection” and “imperfection”. Let’s say that X *is a perfection* iff X is an attribute and X is a higher form of the attribute [being nothing].³⁵ Let’s say that X *is an imperfection* iff X is an attribute and either some attribute is a higher form of X or having X implies having some attribute Y , such that some attribute is a higher form of Y .

- X being a perfection $=_{\text{def}}$

³⁵ I argued in §5 that Descartes’ talk of simple natures should be interpreted as referring to attributes. Now, Descartes affirms that nothing is a simple nature: “Moreover, it is as well to count among the simple natures the corresponding privations and negations, in so far as we understand these. For when I intuit what nothing is, or an instant, or rest, my apprehension is as much genuine knowledge as my understanding what existence is, or duration, or motion.” (I, 45) It follows that Descartes believes that nothing, or [being nothing] is an attribute. Now, one might question whether Descartes believes that [being nothing] is an attribute, since Descartes clearly maintains that nothingness has no attributes (I, 196, 210; II, 214), and these propositions may seem to be inconsistent. However, I do not believe there is a conflict here. Descartes can maintain that [being nothing] is an attribute, and that that attribute itself does not have further attributes. As far as I can tell, this renders his claims consistent.

- X being an attribute and X being a higher form of the attribute [being nothing]
- X being an imperfection $=_{\text{def}}$
 - X being an attribute and either it being such that some attribute is a higher form of X or it being such that having X implies having some attribute Y, such that some attribute is a higher form of Y

For example, suppose that the attribute [being independent of parts] is a higher form of [being dependent on parts] and that both are higher forms of [being nothing]. Then [being independent of parts] and [being dependent on parts] are both perfections and [being dependent on parts] is also an imperfection. Suppose further that [being extended] implies [having parts] and that [having parts] implies [being dependent on parts]. Then by the transitivity of implication, [being extended] implies [being dependent on parts] and is thus an imperfection.

§6.6. Additional terms

In addition to the terms we've just defined, it will be useful to introduce a few more.

While Descartes never actually uses the following terms, they are a natural extension of his lexicon.

Let's say that *X is a pure perfection* iff X is a perfection and X is not an imperfection. Let's say that *X is a pure imperfection* iff X is an imperfection and X is not a perfection. Let's say that *X is a lower form of Y* iff Y is a higher form of X. And let's say that *X encompasses Y* iff Y is an attribute and either X has Y or X eminently contains Y.

- X being a pure perfection =_{def}
 - X being a perfection and X not being an imperfection
- X being a pure imperfection =_{def}
 - X being an imperfection and X not being a perfection
- X being a lower form of Y =_{def}
 - Y being a higher form of X
- X encompassing Y =_{def}
 - Y being an attribute and either X having Y or X eminently containing Y

For example, suppose that the attribute [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [being nothing], that no attribute is a higher form of [having unlimited power] and that [being nothing] is not a higher form of itself. Then from the fact that [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [being nothing], we can infer that it is a perfection. Because no attribute is a higher form of it, we can infer that it is not an imperfection. Then, from the fact that [having unlimited power] is a perfection and not an imperfection, we can infer that it is a pure perfection. From the fact that [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [being nothing], we can infer that [being nothing] is a lower form of [having unlimited power]. From that it follows that [being nothing] is an imperfection. From the fact that [being nothing] is not a higher form of itself, it follows that [being nothing] is not a perfection. From that and the fact that [being nothing] is an imperfection, it follows that [being nothing] is a pure imperfection. Finally, it follows that anything that has the attribute [having unlimited power] eminently contains the attribute [being nothing], and hence encompasses that attribute as well.

§6.7. Fit with the texts

In §6.3, we introduced and explained the concept “being a higher form of”. In §§6.4-6.6, we used this concept to define “eminent containment”, “perfection”, “imperfection” and other concepts. In doing this, our goal was to present concepts that are simultaneously (a) clear, and (b) plausibly taken to be the concepts Descartes himself has in mind when he uses the relevant words. Thus when we presented the concept “perfection”, our goal was to have what we explained be clear and to have what we explained be plausibly taken to be what Descartes means when he uses the word “perfection”.

Are the concepts we presented clear? I will leave this judgment to the reader. Are the concepts plausibly taken to be Descartes’? I believe that the answer is yes.

I take Descartes’ terms “eminent containment” and “being a higher form of” to be synonymous with my “eminent containment” and “being a higher form of” respectively. I take Descartes to sometimes use the terms “perfection” and “imperfection” as count terms and sometimes as mass terms.³⁶ I take Descartes’ count terms “perfection” and “imperfection” to be synonymous with my terms “perfection” and “imperfection”. I take his mass terms “perfection” and “imperfection” as meaning “one or more perfections” and “one or more imperfections”. I read Descartes’ terms “reality” and “being” as being synonymous with his mass term “perfection”. I read Descartes’ term “limitation” as being synonymous with his mass term “imperfection”. I take variations of “being X is more perfect than being Y” as meaning “being X is a higher form of being Y” with “is a higher

³⁶ In II, 34, Descartes writes: “Nor can it be supposed that several partial causes contributed to my creation, or that I received the idea of one of the perfections which I attribute to God from one cause and the idea of another from another – the supposition here being that all the perfections are to be found somewhere in the universe but not joined together in a single being.” In this passage, Descartes uses “perfection” as a count term. In I, 200-201, Descartes writes: “There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God.” In this passage, Descartes uses “perfection”, “imperfection” and “limitation” as mass terms.

form of” being taken in my sense. Lastly, I read “X has more perfection/reality/being than Y” as meaning “X encompasses every perfection Y has and has at least one perfection Y does not have”.

This is a natural reading of Descartes. It also plausibly fits all of the textual data points noted in §6.2, as I will now argue. In that section, I noted a number of general claims that Descartes says hold of “perfection”, “imperfection”, “eminent containment” and so on. I also noted a number of examples that Descartes says are cases of these things. It should be clear that the interpretation I am proposing verifies the general claims. For instance, in §6.2 I noted that Descartes says that a thing can “contain” (i.e., consist of) both perfection and imperfection. My interpretation verifies this. I also noted that Descartes seems to employ the principle “if being X is more perfect than being Y, then being Y is an imperfection”. My interpretation verifies this as well. Likewise for the other general claims.

This leaves the examples. It is relatively easy to tell that my interpretation verifies some of the examples. For instance, Descartes states that [being infinite], [being omnipotent], [being omniscient], [being immutable], [having inseparable attributes], [being variable], [acting voluntarily], [having bodily strength] and [having bodily skill] are “perfections”. These are all clearly higher forms of [being nothing]. Thus my interpretation judges them to be perfections.

Not all examples are so easy to judge. In some cases, the only way to see that my interpretation plausibly gets the examples right is by importing other claims from Descartes and by giving arguments. Let’s consider just a few of these cases. For each case, my procedure will be as follows. I will select an example which Descartes says is an

example of X. I will then assume that my interpretation of Descartes' terminology is correct, import various claims Descartes makes and then argue on that basis that consistency requires Descartes to classify the example as an example of X. Every case where I can successfully do this provides some evidence that my interpretation is correct.

First case: Descartes says that [actually existing] is a perfection. Assuming that my interpretation is correct, Descartes' claim is true iff [actually existing] is a higher form of the attribute [being nothing]. Now if [actually existing] is an attribute at all, then it will be a higher form of [being nothing]: actually existing involves everything being nothing involves and more. And Descartes affirms that [actually existing] is an attribute. It follows that Descartes must affirm that [actually existing] is a perfection.³⁷

Second case: Descartes indicates that God contains the attribute [having length] eminently. Assuming my interpretation is correct, Descartes' claim is true iff God has some attribute which is a higher form of the attribute [having length]. Now Descartes says that God contains formally (i.e., literally) or eminently every attribute which implies having some perfection.³⁸ [Having length] is a perfection and so implies having some perfection. It follows that God has the attribute [having length] or contains it eminently. But Descartes also says that God is not extended.³⁹ If something has length, it is extended. It follows that Descartes must affirm that God does not have length and hence

³⁷ In §13.8, I argue that Descartes is committed to denying that there is an attribute of actual existence. I argue instead that Descartes' term "actual existence" should be taken as a disjunction of two other types of existence, subsistent existence and inherent existence. The argument of this paragraph works on [subsistently existing] and [inherently existing in X], just as well as it works on [actually existing].

³⁸ In II, 32, Descartes writes: "It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God either formally or eminently."

³⁹ In III, 361, Descartes writes: "It is not my custom to argue about words, and so if someone wants to say that God is in a sense extended, since he is everywhere, I have no objection. But I deny that true extension as commonly conceived is to be found in God or in angels or in our mind or in any substance which is not a body." See also I, 201; III, 155, 373, 381.

does not have the attribute [having length]. The only remaining option is that God contains the attribute [having length] eminently.

This leaves us with the question of why Descartes affirms that God is not extended. Briefly, the answer is that Descartes maintains that [being independent of parts] is a higher form of [being dependent on parts].⁴⁰ It follows that Descartes must affirm [being dependent on parts] is an imperfection. Descartes also maintains that [being extended] implies [having parts] and [having parts] implies [being dependent on parts]. It follows that Descartes must affirm [having parts] and [being extended] are both imperfections. I believe we should interpret Descartes as defining “God” as a thing that encompasses every perfection.⁴¹ Given this, Descartes must affirm that God does not have any imperfections, and hence must affirm that God is not extended.⁴²

Third case: Descartes says [being inconstant] is an imperfection. We can see that Descartes must affirm this by an argument like the one given two paragraphs above. Descartes says that God contains formally (i.e., literally) or eminently every attribute which implies having some perfection. Assuming our interpretation is correct, [being inconstant] is a perfection and so implies having some perfection. It follows that God has the attribute [being inconstant] or contains this attribute eminently. But Descartes says that God is immutable.⁴³ If something is immutable it is not inconstant. It follows that

⁴⁰ In II, 99, Descartes writes: “The very nature of a body implies many imperfections, such as its divisibility into parts, the fact that each of its parts is different and so on; for it is self-evident that it is a greater perfection to be undivided than to be divided, and so on.” I take this passage to indicate that Descartes thinks that [being dependent on parts] is an imperfection, and that [being independent of parts] is a higher form of [being dependent on parts].

⁴¹ See §14 for a discussion of Descartes’ definition of God.

⁴² Descartes gives roughly the argument I give here in I, 201. He writes: “For example, the nature of body includes divisibility along with extension in space, and since being divisible is an imperfection, it is certain that God is not a body.” Descartes gives another argument for the same conclusion in III, 165.

⁴³ Descartes states that God is immutable in many places. For instance, in II, 31, he writes: “By the word ‘God’ I understand a substance that is infinite, <eternal, immutable,> independent, supremely intelligent,

Descartes must affirm that God does not have the attribute [being inconstant] literally, but instead must contain it eminently. For a thing to contain an attribute eminently, it must have a higher form of that attribute. It follows that Descartes must affirm some attribute is a higher form of the attribute [being inconstant]. It follows Descartes must affirm that the attribute [being inconstant] is an imperfection.

It remains to say why Descartes believes that God is immutable. The answer is this. Descartes maintains that God essentially has or essentially eminently contains every perfection.⁴⁴ Now if God essentially has a perfection, God cannot gain it. And if God essentially eminently contains a perfection, then God essentially has a higher form of it. But higher forms of attributes are incompatible with those attributes. It follows that if God essentially eminently contains a perfection, God cannot gain it. Thus it follows that if God essentially has or essentially eminently contains every perfection, God cannot gain any new perfections. It follows Descartes must affirm that God cannot gain any new perfections. Further, suppose God were to lose a perfection. Prior to the loss, God would not have any higher form of that perfection, since higher forms of attributes are incompatible with those attributes. Thus upon the loss, God would now fail to have the perfection or any higher form of the perfection, unless God were to gain a new perfection. But we have seen that God cannot gain any new perfections. Thus upon the loss of a perfection, God would fail to have the perfection and would fail to have any

supremely powerful, and which created both myself and everything else (if anything else there be) that exists." See also I, 128; II, 28; III, 23, 272, 273, 348.

⁴⁴ Descartes gives an argument akin to the argument I give here in II, 168. He writes: "The words 'he will give himself all the perfections, if indeed he does not yet have them' are merely explanatory. For the same natural light enables us to perceive that it is impossible for such a being to have the power and will to give itself something new; rather, his essence is such that he possesses from eternity everything which we can now suppose he would bestow on himself if he did not yet possess it." For evidence that Descartes believes that the immutability of God is demonstrable, see I, 211, where Descartes says "in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible".

higher form of the perfection. This contradicts the claim that God essentially has or essentially eminently contains every perfection. It follows Descartes must affirm God cannot lose any perfections. Thus Descartes must affirm that God cannot gain or lose any perfections. And every attribute other than [being nothing] is a higher form of [being nothing]. It follows that every attribute other than [being nothing] is a perfection. It thus follows that Descartes must affirm that God cannot gain or lose any attributes other than [being nothing]. But of course God cannot lose the attribute [being nothing], as God does not have it, and God cannot gain the attribute [being nothing] as it is inconsistent with all of God's other attributes. It follows Descartes must affirm that God cannot gain or lose any attributes, and thus is immutable. This was the point to be demonstrated.

I could go on.⁴⁵ For now though, I have said enough. For a sample of the things Descartes gives as examples of perfections, imperfections and cases of eminent containment, I have shown how my interpretation yields the result that Descartes should give those things as examples. I could do this for the remaining examples, though perhaps they are best left as exercises for the reader.

§6.8. Additional notes

⁴⁵ Why does Descartes maintain that God essentially has or essentially eminently contains every perfection? Descartes does not give any arguments for this claim. Nevertheless, it is possible to construct an argument for it from Descartes' premises: "God encompasses every perfection. It follows that God has every perfection that has no higher form. The perfection [having unlimited power] has no higher form. It follows that God has unlimited power. Now anything that has unlimited power essentially has unlimited power. It follows that God essentially has unlimited power. But anything that has unlimited power encompasses every perfection. It follows that God essentially encompasses every perfection." Some of the claims used in this argument are themselves in need of proof. For instance, I have constructed three Cartesian derivations of the claim "anything that has unlimited power has unlimited power essentially", though I will omit the details for now. The claim "anything that has unlimited power encompasses every perfection" will be derived in §14.2.

I have presented my interpretation of Descartes' terms "perfection", "imperfection", "eminent containment" and so on. I have argued that my interpretation fits the texts. All that remains is to tie off a couple of loose ends.

First, Descartes sometimes talks about things being things to greater and lesser extents. For instance, he writes:

A substance is more of a thing than a mode; if there are real qualities or incomplete substances, they are things to a greater extent than modes, but to a lesser extent than complete substances; and, finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance. All this is completely self-evident. (II, 130)

What is it to be more or less of a thing? I interpret "X is more of a thing than Y" to mean "X is independent in all of the ways that Y is and at least one further way".⁴⁶ This fits the examples given in the passage above. According to Descartes, modes depend for their existence on inhering in a substance and on a cause. Finite substances do not depend for their existence on inhering in a substance but do depend on a cause. Infinite substances do not depend for their existence on anything at all. This yields two of the three examples from the passage above. The remaining example is that of incomplete substances.

According to Descartes, an "incomplete substance" is a thing that is both dependent for

⁴⁶ One might consider the possibility of interpreting "levels of being a thing" in terms of Descartes' concept of eminent containment. However, there is a textual reason to not do so. In II, 31, Descartes writes: "As for all the other elements which make up the ideas of corporeal things, namely extension, shape, position and movement, these are not formally contained in me, since I am nothing but a thinking thing; but since they are merely modes of a substance, and I am a substance, it seems possible that they are contained in me eminently." In II, 253, Descartes discusses the passage in II, 31, writing: "In the passage under discussion I simply explained that we never find so much reality in these ideas as to oblige us to conclude (given the premiss that there is nothing in the effect which did not previously exist in the cause, either formally or eminently) that they could not have originated in the mind alone." If Descartes believed that X being more of a thing than Y is the same as X eminently containing Y, then Descartes would not say what he says here. He would instead argue that since a substance is more of a thing than a mode, he contains the modes of body eminently.

its existence on inhering in a substance and not dependent for its existence on inhering in a substance – an obvious impossibility.⁴⁷ If, *per impossibile*, such a thing were to exist, it would depend for its existence on a cause. As a result, if we are forced to rank incomplete substances somewhere on the scale of independence, the most natural thing to do is to rank them as more independent than modes but less independent than finite substances. This yields the third of the three examples from the passage above.

Why would Descartes say that a thing that is more independent than another is “more of a thing” than another? I believe Descartes maintains that every attribute of independence is a higher form of the corresponding attribute of dependence. This means that according to Descartes, the more ways a thing is independent, the more real it is and, identically, the more being it has.⁴⁸ This at least makes it somewhat natural to speak the way Descartes does.

One last question. In many passages, Descartes talks as though he thinks that “reality” and “perfection” come in degrees. There are several such passages cited in the subsections above. My interpretation has higher and lower forms, but does not include a linear scale of perfections, stretching from less perfect to more perfect. Does this indicate that my interpretation is incorrect? I do not believe so. I believe that while Descartes talks as though there is a spectrum of perfection/reality, this is merely a simplified way of expressing his true view, which is that for many pairs of perfections, one perfection is a higher form of the other.

⁴⁷ In II, 156-157, Descartes writes: “I am aware that certain substances are commonly called ‘incomplete’. But if the reason for calling them incomplete is that they are unable to exist on their own, then I confess I find it self-contradictory that they should be substances, that is, things which subsist on their own, and at the same time incomplete, that is, not possessing the power to subsist on their own.”

⁴⁸ In II, 293, Descartes uses the term “real” to indicate independence from inhering in a substance: “Secondly, it is completely contradictory that there should be real accidents, since whatever is real can exist separately from any other subject; yet anything that can exist separately in this way is a substance, not an accident.” See also II, 297.

This proposal might seem *ad hoc*, until one realizes that Descartes does exactly what I am saying with another concept: difficulty. Descartes says:

VIII. Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can also bring about a lesser thing. (II, 117)

In saying this, Descartes seems to indicate that he thinks that difficulty comes in degrees.

In a letter, though, Descartes clarifies:

The axiom ‘whatever can do the greater can do the lesser’ applies only in the same order of operations, or in things which require a single power. For among men, who doubts that a person who could not make a lantern may be able to make a good speech? (III, 180-181)

This shows that Descartes does not believe that there is a single spectrum of difficulty, stretching from less difficult to more difficult. His actual view is simply that for many pairs of tasks (namely, those that fall under the same power), one task is more difficult than the other. My proposal is that Descartes’ manner of expression on the topic of degrees of perfection/reality is perfectly parallel to his manner of expression on the topic of degrees of difficulty.

§7. Implication

Just as many of Descartes' concepts depend on the concept "attribute", many also depend on the concept "implication". Descartes employs the concept "implication" in many places. Here are two:

The idea [of God] is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it... It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God either formally or eminently. (II, 32)

VIII. The substance which we understand to be supremely perfect, and in which we conceive absolutely nothing that implies any defect or limitation, is called *God*. (II, 114)

What does Descartes mean by "implication"? He never explains it or gives a definition. Nevertheless, I believe that we can understand what Descartes means.

Let's begin with our pre-theoretical concept of implication. As we conceive it, implication is a relation. What does it relate? Perhaps we might say that it relates propositions. We might then give a few examples. We might say that "X is a triangle" implies "X has parts", "X is happy" implies "X is a mind" and "X is a Euclidean triangle" implies "X has internal angles that sum to 180°".

Take this pre-theoretical concept and stipulate that it is the concept of a relation that holds only between attributes. (We will discuss Descartes' views on whether the

implication relation relates propositions below.) This transformation is relatively easy to implement. The examples we just gave now become:

- [X being a triangle] implies [X having parts]
- [X being happy] implies [X being a mind]
- [X being a Euclidean triangle] implies [X having internal angles that sum to 180°].

One might note a difference between the first and second examples here on one hand and the third example on the other. In particular, in the first and the second case, one can be aware of the first attribute implying the second without conceiving any intermediate steps by which the second is derived from the first. In the third case, if one is aware merely of the two attributes but not a derivation involving multiple steps, one will not be aware of the first implying the second.

I have just said that we can be aware of one attribute implying another. This may seem peculiar if taken literally. Do I mean it literally? Can we really be aware of a relation such as implication? We will discuss this more below. For now, what matters is that there is discernible difference between the first two examples and the third example above.

Let's say that examples like the first two above are examples of "immediate implication". Leave "immediate implication" undefined. Then define "implication" in terms of "immediate implication", such that if X is linked to Y by means of a chain of immediate implication, then X implies Y. More formally:

- X implying Y =_{def}

- X immediately implying Y or
 X immediately implying Z_1 and Z_1 immediately implying Y, or
 X immediately implying Z_1 , Z_1 immediately implying Z_2 and Z_2
 immediately
 implying Y, or
 X immediately implying Z_1 , Z_1 immediately implying Z_2 , Z_2 immediately
 implying Z_3 and Z_3 immediately implying Y, or
 ..., etc., *ad infinitum*.

I believe that this yields Descartes' concept of implication.⁴⁹

Let's consider some questions. First, we have defined "implication". Can we define "immediate implication"? I believe that Descartes' answer is no.⁵⁰ One might be concerned about an undefined term, but I do not believe such concern is warranted here. Unless we are to have an infinite chain or a circle of definitions, we are forced to bottom out with undefined concepts somewhere. The key is to choose the right concepts to be undefined. The concept "immediate implication" is the concept of a relation that is supposed to be able to be discerned by looking at examples like the examples given above. If we can gain the concept by looking at the examples, then there is no problem leaving it undefined.

⁴⁹ For elegance of expression, in what follows we will not always verbally distinguish between Descartes' concept of implication and our pre-theoretical concept of implication unless the difference is important and context does not make it clear which concept is being employed.

⁵⁰ In I, 21, Descartes writes: "I call 'absolute' whatever has within it the pure and simple nature in question; that is, whatever is viewed as being independent, a cause, simple, universal, single, equal, similar, straight and other qualities of that sort." This seems to indicate that he takes the attribute [X being a cause] to be indefinable. However, in §8 we will see that Descartes affirms that [X being a cause] can be defined. Given this, the best way to read the passage just cited is to take it as indicating that something in the conceptual vicinity of [X being a cause] is indefinable. The best candidate is [X immediately implying something]. Thus I read the passage just cited as supporting the claim that Descartes takes [X immediately implying something] as indefinable.

Second, why define implication in terms of immediate implication? Why not define “X implies Y” as something like “necessarily, it is not the case that X is the case and Y is not the case”? I believe that it is correct to construct Descartes as defining “implication” in terms of “immediate implication” because we do possess the concept of immediate implication and given that, the choice is perfectly natural. I don’t think that Descartes would have any problem with us defining a new concept, “implication₂”, as suggested. However, I think he would then go on to define the concept “necessarily” in terms of “implication”. Consider the following passage:

But even if we conceive of God only in an inadequate or, if you like, ‘utterly inadequate’ way, this does not prevent its being certain that his nature is possible, or not self-contradictory.... All self-contradictoriness or impossibility resides solely in our thought, when we make the mistake of joining together mutually inconsistent ideas; it cannot occur in anything which is outside the intellect. (II, 198)

In this passage, Descartes equates “impossibility” with “self-contradictoriness” and “possibility” with “non-self-contradictoriness”. This suggests that Descartes also equates “necessity” with “contradictoriness of the negation”. If we accept this, we get the following three definitions:

- it is impossible that $X =_{\text{def}}$
 - it is self-contradictory that X
- it is possible that $X =_{\text{def}}$
 - it is not the case that it is self-contradictory that X
- it is necessary that $X =_{\text{def}}$
 - it is self-contradictory that it not the be the case that X

How should we understand “self-contradictory”? We could take it to include only immediate contradictions, i.e., only things of the form “X and it is not the case that X”.

Or we could take it to include anything that implies an immediate contradiction. I believe the more natural way to read the above passage is the latter. If we accept this, we get the following additional definition:

- it is self-contradictory that $X =_{\text{def}}$
 - for some Y, X implies Y and X implies it is not the case that Y

If the foregoing interpretation of Descartes’ modal concepts is correct, then we can see why Descartes would not simply define “implication₂” and be done with it.

“Implication₂” is defined in terms of necessity, which in turn is defined in terms of self-contradictoriness, which in turn is defined in terms of implication, which is then finally defined in terms of immediate implication.

As a third question, one might ask why Descartes has implication be a relation that holds only between attributes. Why doesn’t he take it to be a relation between propositions or ideas?

Regarding ideas, the answer is that Descartes actually *does* take implication to relate ideas. He does this even while maintaining that implication only relates attributes. How is this consistent? Descartes believes that ideas represent things and attributes. As we will see in §12, he also believes that things are just attributes and pluralities of attributes. Thus it follows that Descartes must think that ideas just represent attributes. Now as we will see in §13, Descartes believes that ideas *are* the things they represent, existing in a particular way.⁵¹ It follows that Descartes must maintain that ideas are just

⁵¹ We will introduce the concept of “ways” of existence in §13.1 and §13.3. For discussion of the claim that ideas are the things they represent, existing in a peculiar way, see §13.2 and §13.4.

attributes, existing in a particular way. This means that the fact that he maintains that implication is merely a relation between attributes does not prevent it from also being a relation between ideas.

What about propositions? Descartes maintains that we have ideas and that we affirm or deny those ideas. I do not currently have a position on how Descartes uses the word “proposition”. He might use it to refer to ideas or to refer to affirmations and denials of ideas. Whichever way this turns out, it is easy to see what we should say about implication and “propositions”. Implication can relate ideas. Implication cannot relate affirmed or denied ideas as such, though it can relate the ideas involved in affirmed ideas and denied ideas. So if by “proposition” Descartes means to refer to ideas, we should say that Descartes permits that the relation of implication relate “propositions”. On the other hand, if by “proposition” Descartes means to refer to affirmed and denied ideas, we should say that Descartes does not permit that the relation of implication relate “propositions” as such, though it can relate the ideas involved in those propositions.

Fourth, we have been talking about implication *relations* and immediate implication *relations*. Does Descartes believe that these are existing things? If we say that X exists, Y exists and X implies Y, how many things have we mentioned? Three or just two? I interpret Descartes as not believing in any existing relations. This is because he does not mention them anywhere and, as far as I can tell, does not rely on them anywhere either. He does not even rely on spatial relations to stitch together the different parts of space.⁵² What then are we talking about when we talk about implication relations and

⁵² Instead of having adjacent extended substances related by an adjacence relation, Descartes maintains that adjacent extended substances have a single mode, the border between them, which inheres in both. Thus in II, 292, Descartes writes: “For when two bodies are in mutual contact there is a single boundary common to both which is a part of neither; it is the same mode of each body, and it can remain even though the bodies

immediate implication relations? We're talking about the relata, the attributes. What makes it then that for some pairs of attributes, one attribute implies the other, while for other attributes this is not the case?⁵³ The answer is that whether one attribute implies another is determined by the attributes in question. For some pairs of attributes, the attributes make it such that one implies the other. For other pairs of attributes, this is not the case.

Next, let's return to some questions we deferred earlier. Initially, we gave the following examples:

- [X being a triangle] implies [X having parts]
- [X being happy] implies [X being a mind]
- [X being a Euclidean triangle] implies [X having internal angles that sum to 180°].

We then said that the first two examples here are cases where “one can be aware of the first attribute implying the second”. What precisely does this mean? Can one be aware of relations?

There is one sense in which one cannot, according to Descartes, be aware of relations. If we take the awareness of X to imply the existence of X, then because Descartes denies that there are any existing relations, Descartes will also be forced to deny that we are ever aware of any relations. However, there is another sense in which

are removed, provided only that other bodies of exactly the same size and shape take their places.” This explains adjacency in terms of inherence, rather than in terms of existing spatial relations. Descartes then explains inherence without relying on existing relations; see §12.

⁵³ For ease of expression, I will talk about “pairs of attributes”. I really mean “ordered pairs, such that the first member of each pair is one or more attributes and such that the second member of each pair is a single attribute”.

we can be aware of relations. I believe that according to this sense, Descartes affirms that we can be aware of relations, including relations of immediate implication.

To understand this other sense, consider the case of the awareness of similarity. Take two similar color patches and place them side by side. Now look at them. When one does this, one becomes aware of the color patches' similarity to one another. Does this require us to posit the existence of a similarity relation that relates the color patches to one another? Descartes does not think so. Similarly, I believe that Descartes thinks that when we conceive particular pairs of attributes, we will be aware not only of the attributes, but of relations between them. One of those relations can be similarity. Another can be immediate implication.

Now this raises further questions. How can we be aware of similarity and immediate implication without being aware of an existing relation? How can it be that we are aware of similarity and immediate implication when we are aware of some pairs of things and not others? Why is it that we can be aware of some relations between things (e.g., similarity, immediate implication) but not other relations (e.g., relative age, relative popularity). These questions are excellent. But so long as it is granted that we *can* be aware of similarity and immediate implication without being aware of an existing relation, then these questions must have answers. We do not need to provide them now.

Taking this idea of being aware of relations, I then attribute to Descartes the following view: "Some pairs of attributes are such that the first attribute is related to the second by the relation of immediate implication. The remaining pairs are not. Some pairs of attributes are such that the first attribute is related to the second by the relation of implication. The remaining pairs are not. When one is aware of a pair of attributes that

are related by immediate implication, one is also aware of the one attribute immediately implying the other. From this and the definition of “implication”, one can then infer that the one attribute implies the other. When one is aware of a chain of attributes, each related to the next by a relation of immediate implication, then one is also aware of each attribute in the chain immediately implying the next. From this and the definition of “implication”, one can then infer that the first attribute in the chain implies the last.” (If this is correct, it follows we should not say that we are ever *aware* of implication. Instead, we should say only that we are aware of immediate implication and that it is through our awareness of chains of immediate implication we are able to infer that some attributes imply others.)

§8. Inconceivability Apart

Next let's consider Descartes' concept "inconceivability apart". Descartes employs this concept in a number of passages. Here are two:

First, I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. (II, 54)

For example, if a stone is in motion and is square-shaped, I can understand the square shape without the motion and, conversely, the motion without the square shape; but I can understand neither the motion nor the shape apart from the substance of the stone. (I, 214)

Here and elsewhere, Descartes talks about "being able to understand one thing apart from another" and "not being able to understand one thing apart from another". Let's call the relevant concepts here "conceivability apart" and "inconceivability apart". (We could call them "understandability apart" and "non-understandability apart", but this would be a bit more cumbersome.)

How should we understand "inconceivability apart" and "conceivability apart"? The concept "inconceivability apart" is the concept of a relation between attributes. The concept "conceivability apart" is the concept of the absence of that relation. Descartes never defines these concepts; instead, as far as I can tell, he intends us to understand them through examples. So I will give a few examples and then answer a few questions.

According to Descartes, the following are examples of inconceivability apart:

- [X being square] is inconceivable apart from [X being extended].
- [X being aware of a cat] is inconceivable apart from [X being an awareness].
- [X being the same shape as Y] is inconceivable apart from [X being extended].
- [X being the same shape as Y] is inconceivable apart from [Y being extended].
- [X moving at 20m/s to the south] is inconceivable apart from [X moving at 20m/s].

The following, according to Descartes, are examples of conceivability apart:

- [X being square] is conceivable apart from [X being an awareness].
- [X being square] is conceivable apart from [Y being a square].
- [X being aware of a cat] is conceivable apart from [X being aware of a dog].
- [X being extended] is conceivable apart from [X being the same shape as Y].
- [X moving at 20m/s] is conceivable apart from [X moving at 20m/s to the south].
- [X being a Euclidean triangle] is conceivable apart from [X having internal angles that sum to 180°].
- [X being a square with sides of length 5m] is conceivable apart from [X being a square with an area of 25m^2].

In each of these examples, “X” and “Y” should be taken as names of distinct things.

Now for some questions and answers. First, one might wonder why “inconceivability apart” and “conceivability apart” are explained by examples instead of being defined. Can’t we simply define “X being inconceivable apart from Y” as “X being such that necessarily, if a person conceives X, then that person conceives Y, where $X \neq Y$ ”?

Y”? And can’t we then define “X being conceivable apart from Y” as “X not being inconceivable apart from Y”?

This question can be interpreted in two different ways. One might recognize that there are two distinct phenomena here: (a) the relation we have called the “inconceivability apart” relation, and (b) some attributes being such that necessarily, whenever they are conceived, other particular attributes are also conceived. One might then ask why we have chosen to call one “inconceivability apart” rather than the other. Alternately, one might *not* recognize that there are two distinct phenomena here. One might understand that some attributes might be such that necessarily, whenever they are conceived, other attributes are also conceived. But one might not see that there is anything else here to which the label “inconceivability apart” could be naturally applied.

In response to the first interpretation of the question, we can obviously use terms however we would like. So long as it is recognized that there are two phenomena here, we can call either “inconceivability apart”. We have chosen to use this term for (a), but it would not make much difference if we had decided to use it for (b). If one would like, one could call (a) “the relation of inconceivability apart” and (b) “the modal phenomenon of inconceivability apart”; or one could call (a) “inconceivability apart_(A)” and (b) “inconceivability apart_(B)”. It does not matter.

In response to the second interpretation of the question, Descartes definitely would affirm that X is inconceivable apart from Y if and only if X and Y are distinct attributes and X is such that necessarily, if a person conceives X, then that person also conceives Y. So, for instance, consistent with affirming that [X being square] is inconceivable apart from [X being extended], Descartes would also affirm that [X being

square] and [X being extended] are distinct attributes and that necessarily, when any person conceives [X being square], that person also conceives [X being extended]. (To “conceive X” is simply to be aware of the idea of X.)

This granted, it is important to recognize that there are two distinct phenomena here. If this is not immediately apparent, perhaps the following will help. Consider how one would come to know that for some pair of distinct attributes X and Y, necessarily if a person conceives X, then that person also conceives Y. For instance, consider how one would come to know that necessarily, when any person conceives [X being square], that person also conceives [X being extended]. It cannot be by simple trial and error. One could not try to conceive [X being square] without conceiving [X being extended], fail, and then conclude that necessarily, whenever any person conceives [X being square], that person also must conceive [X being extended]. Yes, one failed this time. But that does not mean that one will fail when one tries again tomorrow. It does not mean that others will fail when they try. A single failure to conceive is insufficient to justify a claim about what it is impossible to conceive. Nor will further trials help. An infinite number of failures to conceive [X being square] without [X being extended] by an infinite number of people does not show that it impossible to conceive [X being square] without conceiving [X being extended].

Instead of trial and error, one might suggest that one could come to know that necessarily, any person that conceives [X being square] also conceives [X being extended] by recognizing that [X being square] and [X not being extended] are inconsistent. However, this will not work either. The attributes [X being a Euclidean triangle] and [X not having internal angles that sum to 180°] are inconsistent, but this

does not imply that anyone who conceives [X being a Euclidean triangle] also conceives [X having internal angles that sum to 180°].

The correct answer, I believe, is that there is a particular relation that [X being square] and [X being extended] stand in. One can tell that they stand in this relation simply by considering them. And it is by recognizing that they stand in this relation that one can infer that necessarily, whenever a person conceives [X being square], that person also conceives [X being extended]. The relation I am referring to is, of course, the relation we have called the relation of “inconceivability apart”, and can be understood by examining the examples given above.

This helps to make it clear that there are two distinct phenomena here. First, there is the relation we have called the relation of “inconceivability apart”. Second, we can conceive that there are attributes such that necessarily, if they are conceived, other specific attributes are conceived as well. It is by being aware of the first of these phenomena, the relation, that we can infer that the second phenomenon obtains.

On to a second question. Some of the examples used to introduce the concept “inconceivability apart” are unobjectionable. But not everyone will agree that all of the examples actually are examples of the relation in question. Consider the second example:

- [X being aware of a cat] is inconceivable apart from [X being an awareness].

Some might maintain that [X being aware of a cat] actually is conceivable apart from [X being an awareness]. How so? Since X is inconceivable apart from Y iff X is such that necessarily, if a person conceives X, the person also conceives Y, it follows that if one can conceive X without conceiving Y, X and Y are conceivable apart. And one might maintain that one can conceive of a thing, X, being aware of a cat, without also

conceiving that that thing, X, is an awareness. For instance, one might propose that a motion sensor can be aware of a cat without itself being an awareness. If so, then when we conceive of a motion sensor being aware of a cat, we can also fail to conceive of the motion sensor as being an awareness. Then we could infer that [X being aware of a cat] is conceivable apart from [X being an awareness].

Descartes, of course, would deny that motion sensors are aware in the relevant sense. Thus Descartes would claim that in the case just described, one was not conceiving [X being aware of a cat] and thus not conceiving [X being aware of a cat] while not conceiving [X being an awareness]. This said, for the purposes of introducing the concepts “inconceivable apart” and “conceivable apart”, it is perfectly acceptable if some of the above examples end up not being examples of the relevant relations. The examples are not meant to define “inconceivability apart” or “conceivability apart” and they are not meant as paradigm cases that cannot be denied without contradiction. They are simply meant to put one’s mind into the right conceptual vicinity. Once one has grasped the concepts of the relevant relations, one can return to the examples, assess them anew and discard any that are found to be problematic.

As a next question, how are immediate implication and inconceivability apart related? The answer is that they are related as genus to species. Immediate implication is the genus; inconceivability apart is the species. This means a few things. First, it means that in any cases where X is inconceivable apart from Y, X immediately implies Y. [X being square] is inconceivable apart from [X being extended]; also, [X being square] immediately implies [X being extended]. [X moving at 20m/s to the south] is inconceivable apart from [X moving at 20m/s]; also, [X moving at 20m/s to the south]

immediately implies [X moving at 20m/s]. Second, it means that it is conceivable that there be cases where X immediately implies Y but X is conceivable apart from Y. In fact, it is easy to see that X immediately implying Y does not imply X being inconceivable apart from Y. If X immediately implying Y implied X being inconceivable apart from Y, then whenever a person conceived of one or more attributes, that person would automatically conceive of all of the attributes implied by those attributes. But people clearly do not automatically conceive of all of the attributes implied by the attributes they conceive of. One can conceive [X being a Euclidean triangle] without conceiving [X having internal angles that sum to 180°], even though [X being a Euclidean triangle] implies [X having internal angles that sum to 180°]. One can conceive [X being a square with sides of length 5m] without conceiving [X being a square with an area of 25m^2], even though [X being a square with sides of length 5m] implies [X being a square with an area of 25m^2].

If inconceivability apart is a species of the genus of immediate implication, what are the other species of immediate implication? We will answer this question in the following section (§9).

As a fourth question, we originally said that “inconceivability apart” is the relation and “conceivability apart” is the absence of that relation. Why isn’t it reversed? Why isn’t “conceivability apart” the relation and “inconceivability apart” the absence of that relation? I believe that Descartes maintains that through an examination of what one is aware of, one will find that one can be aware of the relation of inconceivability apart. One cannot be aware of an absence; it follows that the relation of inconceivability apart is not an absence. But, I believe that Descartes maintains that through an examination of

what one is aware of, one will not find that one can be aware of a relation of conceivability apart. All that one will find is that one is not aware of a relation of inconceivability apart. Thus, I believe that Descartes maintains that inconceivability apart is the relation; conceivability apart is the absence.

To clarify, none of the foregoing, including the proposal that we can be aware of the relation of inconceivability apart, should be taken as positing the actual existence of relations. If X is inconceivable apart from Y, Descartes is not proposing that there are three things: X, Y and the relation of inconceivability apart relating one to the other. Everything presented here should be interpreted in accordance with what I say about Descartes' views on relations in §7.

A point worthy of note. It is very natural to suppose that one identifies the relation of conceivability apart by conceiving of one thing and not another. Thus, for instance, it is very natural to suppose that one would ascertain that [X being square] is conceivable apart from [X being aware of a cat] by conceiving [X being a square], not conceiving [X being aware of a cat] and then noting that this is what one was and was not conceiving. However, this cannot be how it works. To recognize that the judgment <I am conceiving [X being a square] and not conceiving [X being aware of a cat]> is true, one must conceive that judgment. But the judgment <I am conceiving [X being square] and not conceiving [X being aware of a cat]> is inconceivable apart from the attribute [X being aware of a cat]. Thus whenever one judges <I am conceiving [X being square] and not conceiving [X being aware of a cat]>, one is also conceiving [X being aware of a cat]. Thus whenever one judges <I am conceiving [X being square] and not conceiving [X being aware of a cat]>, one judges falsely. It follows that recognizing that [X being

square] is conceivable apart from [X being aware of cat] must work in some other way. How does it work? Perhaps one judges <I am conceiving [X being square] and [X not being aware of a cat]> while conceiving [X being square] and [X not being aware of a cat]. That might do the trick.

Finally, a little bit of terminology to facilitate expression later. Let us say that X and Y are *mutually inconceivable apart* if and only if X is inconceivable apart from Y and Y is inconceivable apart from X. Let us say that X and Y are *mutually conceivable apart* if and only if X is conceivable apart from Y and Y is conceivable apart from X. And let us say that X is *one-way inconceivable apart* from Y if and only if X is inconceivable apart from Y but Y is conceivable apart from X.

- X and Y being mutually inconceivable apart =_{def}
 - X being inconceivable apart from Y and Y being inconceivable apart from X
- X and Y being mutually conceivable apart =_{def}
 - X being conceivable apart from Y and Y being conceivable apart from X
- X being one-way inconceivable apart from Y =_{def}
 - X being inconceivable apart from Y and Y being conceivable apart from X

§9. Causation

With the concepts of implication and inconceivability apart in place, we can now consider Descartes' concept of causation. Descartes employs his concept of causation in several of his crucial claims, including the Perfection Causal Principle (PCP) and the Representative Perfection Causal Principle (RPCP). Thus it is an extremely important concept to clarify.

What is causation, according to Descartes? In some places, he seems to indicate that causation is or involves giving. For instance, Descartes writes:

Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much <reality> in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? (II, 28)

The same natural light that enables me to perceive that I would have given myself all the perfections of which I have an idea, if I had given myself existence, also enables me to perceive that nothing can give itself existence in the restricted sense usually implied by the proper meaning of the term 'efficient cause'. For in this sense, what gives itself existence would have to be different from itself in so far as it receives existence; yet to be both the same thing and not the same thing – that is, something different – is a contradiction. (II, 167-168)

He also talks about a "transfer":

For although this cause does not transfer any of its actual or formal reality to my idea, it should not on that account be supposed that it must be less real. (I, 28)

Does Descartes thinking that causation is literally giving or transferring? Or is this an analogy? If causation is only analogous to giving, then how can we understand causation without an analogy?

To shed some light on this, let's consider a few peculiar passages from the Fourth Replies. Discussing his claim that God derives its existence from itself,⁵⁴ Descartes writes:

Now some people are accustomed to judge that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself, and they carefully distinguish an efficient cause from a formal cause. Hence, when they see the question raised as to whether anything derives its existence from itself, it can easily happen that they think only of an efficient cause in the strict sense, and thus they suppose that the phrase 'from itself' must be taken not as meaning 'from a cause', but only in the negative sense, as meaning 'without a cause' (that is, as implying something such that we must not inquire why it exists). If we accept this interpretation of the phrase 'from itself', then it will not be possible to produce any argument for the existence of God based on his effects, as was correctly shown by the author of the First Set of Objections; and hence this interpretation must be totally rejected.

To give a proper reply to this, I think it is necessary to show that, in between 'efficient cause' in the strict sense and 'no cause at all', there is a third possibility, namely 'the positive essence of a thing', to which the concept of an efficient cause can be extended... (II, 167)

⁵⁴ In II, 34, Descartes writes: "In respect of this cause one may again inquire whether it derives its existence from itself or from another cause. If from itself, then it is clear from what has been said that it is itself God, since if it has the power of existing through its own might, then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea – that is, all of the perfections which I conceive to be in God."

So Descartes maintains that there are two types of causes. The first he calls an “efficient cause”. The second he calls a “formal cause”:

And just as no one criticizes [Archimedes’] proofs, although they involve regarding a sphere as similar to a polyhedron, so it seems to me that I am not open to criticism in this context for using the analogy of an efficient cause to explain features which in fact belong to a formal cause, that is, to the very essence of God.

How do formal causes work? Descartes writes:

This is because we perceive by the natural light that a being whose essence is so immense that he does not need an efficient cause in order to exist, equally does not need an efficient cause in order to possess all the perfections of which he is aware: his own essence is the eminent source which bestows on him whatever we can think of as being capable of being bestowed on anything by an efficient cause. (II, 168)

Descartes also distinguishes formal and efficient causes by noting that efficient causes are all such that the effect of an efficient cause is a distinct thing from that cause:

I said that in this context the meaning of ‘efficient cause’ must not be restricted to causes which are prior in time to their effects or different from them... The fact that the second restriction cannot also be deleted implies merely that a cause which is not distinct from its effects is not an efficient cause in the strict sense, and this I admit. It does not, however, follow that such a cause is in no sense a positive cause that can be regarded as analogous to an efficient cause; and this is all that my argument requires. (II, 167)

There is no possible risk of error involved in using this analogy, since the one feature peculiar to an efficient cause, and not transferable to a formal cause, involves an evident contradiction which could not be accepted by anyone, namely that something could be different from itself, or the same thing and not the same thing at one time.

(II, 168)

I propose the following interpretation. According to Descartes, causation has two types, immediate causation and mediate causation. Causation itself is defined in terms of these types; to say “X causes Y” is to say “X mediately causes Y or X immediately causes Y”. Mediate causation is defined in terms of chains of immediate causation. Thus X mediately causes Y iff X immediately causes something which immediately causes Y or X immediately causes something which immediately causes something which immediately causes Y, and so on. This leaves immediate causation. I propose that immediate causation, according to Descartes, is a species of immediate implication. It can be defined as any case of immediate implication where the antecedent is conceivable apart from the consequent. Thus together inconceivability apart and causation are mutually incompatible and jointly exhaustive species of the genus of implication: if X implies Y, then X causes Y or X is inconceivable apart from Y and it is not the case that X both causes Y and is inconceivable apart from Y.

As for efficient and formal causation, these are two mutually incompatible and jointly exhaustive species of the genus of causation. Efficient causation is causation where the cause is a different thing than the effect. Formal causation is causation where the cause and the effect are the same thing. In the language of distinctions, which we will introduce in §12, efficient causation is causation where the cause is really or modally

distinct from the effect. Formal causation is causation where the cause and the effect are merely conceptually distinct.

The preceding permits the following definitions:

- X causing Y =_{def}
 - X mediately causes Y or X immediately causing Y
- X mediately causing Y =_{def}

X immediately causing Z₁ and Z₁ immediately causing Y, or

X immediately causing Z₁, Z₁ immediately causing Z₂ and Z₂ immediately causing Y, or

X immediately causing Z₁, Z₁ immediately causing Z₂, Z₂ immediately causing Z₃

and Z₃ immediately causing Y, or

..., etc., *ad infinitum*.
- X immediately causing Y =_{def}
 - X implying Y and X being conceivable apart from Y
- X efficiently causing Y =_{def}
 - X causing Y and X being a different thing from Y

i.e., X causing Y and X being really distinct from Y or X being modally distinct from Y
- X formally causing Y =_{def}
 - X causing Y and X being the same thing as Y

i.e., X implying Y and X being only conceptually distinct from Y

This interpretation has several merits. First, it makes the concept of causation very clear. The concepts of implication and conceivability apart are already clear. It follows that if the concept of causation is defined solely in terms of those concepts, the concept of causation must be clear as well. Second, it makes good sense of Descartes' distinction between efficient and formal causation.

Third, it helps to make sense of a very puzzling aspect of Descartes' philosophy. When Descartes presents his second argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation, he writes:

In respect of this cause one may again inquire whether it derives its existence from itself or from another cause. If from itself, then it is clear from what has been said that it is itself God, since if it has the power of existing through its own might [Lat. *per se*, i.e., through itself], then undoubtedly it also has the power of actually possessing all the perfections of which it has an idea – that is, all the perfections which I conceive to be in God. If, on the other hand, it derives its existence from another cause, then the same question may be repeated concerning this further cause, namely whether it derives its existence from itself or from another cause, until eventually the ultimate cause is reached, and this will be God. (II, 34)

In this passage, Descartes talks about a thing “deriving its existence from itself” and “having the power of existing through its own might”, which is to say, “having the power of existing *per se*, i.e. , through itself”. Does Descartes think that God is literally the cause of God? Caterus asks about this in the First Set of Objections. In the First Set of Replies, Descartes clarifies:

Similarly, when we say that God derives his existence ‘from himself’, we can understand the phrase in the negative sense, in which case the meaning will simply be that he has no cause. But if we have previously inquired into the cause of God’s existing or continuing to exist, and we attend to the immense and incomprehensible power that is contained within the idea of God, then we will have recognized that this power is so exceedingly great that it is plainly the cause of his continuing existence, and nothing but this can be the cause. And if we say as a result that God derives his existence from himself, we will not be using the phrase in its negative sense but in an absolutely positive sense. There is no need to say that God is the efficient cause of himself, for this might give rise to a verbal dispute. But the fact that God derives his existence from himself, or has no cause apart from himself, depends not on nothing but on the real immensity of his power; hence, when we perceive this, we are quite entitled to think that in a sense he stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect, and hence that he derives his existence from himself in the positive sense. (II, 79-80)

So the answer is yes, Descartes does believe that God is the cause of God. Many have found this absurd. Thus Arnauld writes in the Fourth Set of Objections:

To refute this argument, M. Descartes maintains that the phrase ‘deriving one’s existence from oneself’ should be taken not negatively but positively, even when it refers to God, so that God ‘in a sense stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect’. This seems to me to be a hard saying, and indeed to be false.

Thus I partly agree with M. Descartes and partly disagree with him. I agree that I could only derive my existence from myself if I did so in the positive sense, but I do not agree that the same should be said of God. On the contrary, I think it is a manifest contradiction that anything should derive its existence positively and as it were causally from itself...

Since every effect depends on a cause and receives its existence from a cause, surely it is clear that one and the same thing cannot depend on itself or receive its existence from itself.

Again, every cause is the cause of an effect, and every effect is the effect of a cause. Hence there is a mutual relation between cause and effect. But a relation must involve two terms. (II, 146)

The interpretation of causation we have proposed above helps us to understand Descartes' position and why it might not fall to some of Arnauld's objections. Causation is implication with conceivability apart. This, combined with the claim that existence is itself an attribute, allows us to interpret Descartes' claim that God is his own cause as the claim that some attribute of God's implies that God has the attribute of existence and is also conceivable apart from the attribute of existence. From what Descartes writes, it seems the relevant attribute is God's power; thus we can take Descartes' claim that God is his own cause to be the claim that God's attribute [having unlimited power] both implies that God has the attribute of existence and is also conceivable apart from God having the attribute of existence. This makes Descartes' position at least intelligible. Does it allow Descartes to defend his position against all objections? This is not the place for a full treatment of the matter. But we can see, for instance, how on this interpretation

Descartes could respond to Arnauld's last objection quoted above by maintaining that there are really two (conceptually distinct) terms present here, God's unlimited power and God's existence.

We have given three reasons to accept the interpretation of causation we presented above. In addition, there is some direct textual support worth noting. In addition to talking about causation as being like "giving" or "transferring", Descartes also talks about effects being "derived" from their causes. He does this for efficient causation:

The nature of an idea is such that of itself it requires no formal reality except what it derives from my thought, of which it is a mode. But in order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely *derive* it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea.

(II, 28-29, my italics)

He also does this for formal causation:

Now some people are accustomed to judge that nothing can be the efficient cause of itself, and they carefully distinguish an efficient cause from a formal cause. Hence, when they see the question raised as to whether anything *derives* its existence from itself, it can easily happen that they think only of an efficient cause in the strict sense... (II, 167, my italics)

But "X is derived from Y" can be read as synonymous with "X is implied by Y". Thus these passages directly support interpreting Descartes as believing that causation is a species of implication.

In §7, we interpreted Descartes' concept of implication as being the concept of a relation that holds only between attributes. If the interpretation given in this section is

correct, it follows that Descartes' concept of causation is the concept of a relation that holds only between attributes as well.

§10. Clarity and Obscurity

Consider the following passage from the beginning of the Third Meditation:

Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and very distinctly is true. (II, 24)

In this passage, Descartes employs the concept “clarity” and the concept “distinctness”. These are concepts that Descartes employs frequently. Understanding them is necessary if one is to understand his philosophy.

Let’s start with “clarity” and the associated concept “obscurity”. We will discuss “distinctness” and the associated concept “confusion” in the next section (§11).

Descartes offers one definition of “clarity” in Part One of the *Principles*. He writes:

I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive 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. (I, 207)

One straightforward way to interpret this passage is to take it as saying that a perception is clear when we are aware of it. Unfortunately, this interpretation cannot be correct.

Descartes maintains elsewhere that we are aware of everything that is present in the mind. He writes:

As to the fact that there can be nothing in the mind, in so far as it is a thinking thing, of which it is not aware, this seems to me to be self-evident. (II, 171)

Next, in inquiring about what caused me, I was asking about myself, not in so far as I consist of mind and body, but only and precisely in so far as I am a thinking thing.

This point is, I think, of considerable relevance. For such a procedure made it much easier for me to free myself from my preconceived opinions, to attend to the light of nature, to ask myself questions, and to affirm with certainty that there can be nothing within me of which I am not in some way aware. (II, 77)

What I say later, ‘nothing can be in me, that is to say, in my mind, of which I am not aware’, is something which I proved in my *Meditations*, and it follows from the fact that the soul is distinct from the body and that its essence is to think. (III, 166)⁵⁵

If clarity is simply a matter of being an object of awareness, it follows that everything in the mind should be classified as clear. Descartes, however, does not think that every idea is clear. Then what is clarity?

Descartes explains a bit more in his conversation with Burman:

It must be stressed at this point that we are talking of clear perception, not of imagination. Even though we can with the utmost clarity imagine the head of a lion joined to the body of a goat, or some such thing, it does not therefore follow that they

⁵⁵ In II, 172, Descartes seems to qualify his claim that there can be nothing in the mind of which it is not aware. He writes: “But it must be noted that, although we are always actually aware of the acts or operations of our minds, we are not always aware of the mind’s faculties or powers, except potentially.” How can we reconcile Descartes’ unqualified claims with this seeming qualification? Descartes maintains elsewhere that faculties are potentialities (see I, 305) and that potentialities are, strictly speaking, nothing (II, 32). It follows that failing to be aware of the mind’s faculties and powers isn’t failing to be aware of anything at all. I thus take Descartes’ seeming qualification to leave his unqualified claim entirely intact.

exist, since we do not clearly perceive the link, so to speak, which joins the parts together. (III, 343-344)

This passage seems to indicate that clarity has something to do with “perceiving the link” that joins the constituents of perceptions together. How precisely would this work?

Let’s put Descartes aside for the moment and consider the matter ourselves. We can conceive solitary things. We can also conceive multiple such things at once. When we do so, we can keep them separate or we can put them together. If we put them together, we can do this in a number of ways. We can conceive them juxtaposed spatially. We can conceive them in a temporal sequence. We can conceive that one is causing the other. We can conceive that one implies or immediately implies the other.

For now, let’s focus just on immediate implication (§7). In some cases when we conceive two things, we do not conceive any relation of immediate implication holding between them. For instance, we might conceive the attribute [X being aware of a cat] and the attribute [Y being a cube] without conceiving of any relation of immediate implication holding between them. In other cases when we conceive two things, we are aware of a relation of immediate implication relating one of the things to the other. For instance, we might conceive the attribute [X being a triangle] and [X having parts]. In doing this, we might be aware of a relation of immediate implication relating [X being a triangle] to [X having parts].

We have just described two types of cases. In the first type of case, we conceive two things without conceiving any relation of immediate implication between them. In the second, we conceive two things, conceive an immediate implication relation relating one to the other and are aware of that relation of immediate implication. It is very natural

to want to add to these a third type of case. In this third type of case, we would conceive two things, conceive an immediate implication relation relating one to the other, but then fail to be aware of that immediate implication relation. For example, we might conceive the attribute [X being a sphere] and the attribute [X being God's favorite shape]. We might add to the concept that the attribute [X being a sphere] immediately implies the attribute [X being God's favorite shape]. Then it seems we would be conceiving both attributes and conceiving that one immediately implies the other. But we would not be aware of one immediately implying the other.

Descartes, however, cannot admit this third type of case. As we will later see (§13), Descartes maintains that the idea of something is the thing itself, existing in a peculiar manner. Thus the idea of two attributes is really those attributes themselves, existing in the same peculiar manner. Now when we conceive an idea, we are aware of it. It then follows that according to Descartes, when we conceive of two attributes, we are actually aware of those attributes, existing in the relevant manner. Further, from the claim that the idea of something is the thing itself, existing in a particular manner, it follows that the idea of immediate implication is immediate implication itself, existing in that manner. It then also follows that to conceive of one attribute immediately implying another is to be aware of one attribute immediately implying another. This means that Descartes must deny that it is possible to conceive two attributes, conceive that they are related via immediate implication and also fail to be aware that they are related via immediate implication.

Looking at the example given just above, suppose that we conceive of the attributes [X being a sphere] and [X being God's favorite shape]. Descartes will maintain

that we are now aware of those attributes existing in a particular way. Now suppose that we attempt to add into our conception an immediate implication relation, such that we would then be conceiving the attribute [X being a sphere] immediately implying the attribute [X being God's favorite shape]. Descartes will maintain that if we succeed, we would be aware of [X being a sphere] immediately implying [X being God's favorite shape]. It is not the case, however, that when we do this we end up being aware of [X being a sphere] immediately implying [X being God's favorite shape]. One cannot be aware of one thing immediately implying another unless one thing really does immediately imply the other, and [X being a sphere] does not immediately imply [X being God's favorite shape]. (This is true whether God's favorite shape is a sphere or not.) Thus Descartes will say that when we attempt to add the immediate implication relation into our conception, we will not succeed.

If Descartes is right about this, then what happens when we attempt to conceive one attribute immediately implying another in the case where we fail? There is clearly a difference in our minds between first, simply conceiving the attributes [X being a sphere] and [X being God's favorite shape], and second, trying to conceive the attribute [X being a sphere] immediately implying [X being God's favorite shape] but failing. I interpret Descartes as thinking that instead of the relation of immediate implication, there is another relation that gets substituted in its place. What is this relation? I think Descartes would not offer a definition, but instead recommend that we look at examples and get the idea from those examples. Conceive [X being a sphere]. Conceive also [X being God's favorite shape]. Now conceive one immediately implying the other. Don't just add words in one's verbal imagination or tiny motions in one's visual imagination. Crunch those

attributes together. Make one immediately imply the other. Of course, Descartes will say, this will fail. But one will end up with some sort of connection between the attributes. Let's call the connection here an "obscure" relation.

We can now explain Descartes' concepts of clarity and obscurity. Quite simply, anything that contains or represents an obscure relation is obscure. Everything else that one is aware of is clear.

- X being obscure =_{def}
 - X being a plurality of one or more things or attributes and two or more of the elements in X being related by an obscure relation, or X representing a plurality of one or more things or attributes and two or more of the elements represented by X being represented as being related by an obscure relation
- X being clear =_{def}
 - a mind being aware of X, and X not being obscure

We will give examples in the next section (§11).

It should be clear how this interpretation accounts for Descartes' idea that clarity and obscurity are a matter of "perceiving the link, so to speak, which joins the parts together".⁵⁶ When it comes to immediate implication, for instance, if one attempts to conceive multiple things, some of which are joined to others by immediate implication relations, one will succeed or fail. If one succeeds, one will be aware of the relations of immediate implication, and so one will be aware of the "link... which joins the parts together". In that case, one's idea is clear. On the other hand, if one fails, one will not be aware of the relations of immediate implication. One will instead only be aware of one or

⁵⁶ III, 343-344. Quoted in full above.

more obscure relations and so will not be aware of the supposed link. In that case one's idea is obscure.

Let's consider some questions regarding the above. First, one might wonder whether the above account needs to be generalized. We have said what happens when one attempts to conceive of one thing immediately implying another when the first does not actually immediately imply the second. What happens if one attempts a similar operation with one of the other relations that we can conceive? For instance, what happens if one attempts to mentally juxtapose things spatially when the things really cannot be spatially related to one another? I believe that Descartes will answer that every instance of mental forcing is the same and adds the same content into the conception. Take spatial relations. One may be used to conceiving of them as their own type of relation. Descartes does not. According to Descartes, things are spatially related by means of chains of adjacency. To say that X is spatially related to Y is to say that X is adjacent to something, which is adjacent to something, ..., which is adjacent to Y.⁵⁷ Adjacency in turn is accomplished by means of inherence. To say that X is adjacent to Y is to say that X and Y share a border, which is to say that there exists a third thing, a border or limit, that inheres in both X and Y. Inherence, as we will see (§12), is nothing other than a particular pattern of inconceivability apart; to say that X inheres in Y is to say only that X is inconceivable apart from Y but Y is conceivable apart from X. Inconceivability, finally, is a species of immediate implication. Thus Descartes accounts for spatial relations using only the relation of immediate implication. So what happens if we try to spatially relate in our mind things that cannot be spatially related? According to

⁵⁷ This is not meant to imply that Descartes believes that space is finitely divisible. He does not. The relations here are extended spaces.

Descartes, this will involve an attempt to force immediate implication relations into our conception. The result will be an obscure relation, as we explained above.

This shows why Descartes would not recognize the need to expand our conception of obscurity to cover cases involving spatial relations. I believe that Descartes would give the same style of response in other cases as well. If this sort of response works in every case, then there is no need to expand our conception of obscurity at all. Of course, not everyone will agree that every case of mental forcing involves immediate implication relations. If it turns out that there are cases of mental forcing that involve other types of relations, it should be easy enough to expand the conception of obscurity we have presented to accommodate them.

Next, one might wonder how to identify obscure relations and clear relations. According to the interpretation I have presented, Descartes will maintain that this is a straightforward matter. In particular, Descartes will maintain that both types can be identified by direct inspection. Obscure relations are relations of a particular recognizable type. Anything that is not an obscure relation can be recognized to not be an obscure relation and thus can be recognized to be clear. Might there be a sorites series between a clear conception and an obscure one? Descartes will say no. If you are paying attention and have the requisite ideas, you will be able to identify every case. If you are paying attention and think you have a borderline case between clarity and obscurity, then Descartes will say that you have confused the concept of obscurity with some other concept.

One last question. We accounted for the passage where Descartes indicates that clarity involves being aware of a “link”. What about the passage we quoted above from the *Principles*?

I call a perception ‘clear’ when it is present and accessible to the attentive 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. (I, 207)

We argued above that Descartes cannot mean to say that clarity is simply a matter of being an object of awareness. Given that, how should we understand this passage? To answer this question, we will need to consider something Descartes believes about the obscure relation.

According to Descartes, the attribute [X containing obscure relation R] is both a perfection and an imperfection. Why a perfection? Compare the idea <the attribute [Y being a sphere] and the attribute [Y having volume $5\pi r^3/3$]> and the idea <the attribute [Y being a sphere] obscurely relating to the attribute [Y having volume $5\pi r^3/3$]>. The second idea here represents an obscure relation. The first does not. If we call the second idea “X” and the obscure relation “R”, this means that the second idea has the attribute [X containing obscure relation R]. The first idea, though, does not have any attribute pertaining to obscurity. This is the only substantive difference between the two ideas. But the second idea involves more than the first; in going from the first to the second, one adds material and does not subtract. This implies that the attribute [X containing obscure relation R] is a higher form of [being nothing] and hence is a perfection.

This explains why Descartes thinks that the attribute [X containing obscure relation R] is a perfection. Why does he think that it is an imperfection as well? Take the

attributes [Y being a sphere] and [Y having volume $5\pi r^3/3$]. Mash them together; try to have one immediately imply the other. The result, according to Descartes, will be the representation <the attribute [Y being a sphere] obscurely relating to the attribute [Y having volume $5\pi r^3/3$]>.⁵⁸ Now consider this obscure relation carefully. What does it involve? What is this obscure relation like? One might be tempted to say that as a relation it is incomplete, or that it is a placeholder, or that it should be called the “related somehow” relation, or that unlike other relations, there is something missing from it. I believe that Descartes would say that this is correct, that there *is* something missing, and that to speak more precisely, what we are seeing is that the attribute [X containing obscure relation R] is a lower form of attributes such as the attribute [X containing immediate implication relation R]. Of course, if [X containing obscure relation R] is a lower form of any attribute, then it follows that it is an imperfection.

This gives us what we need to explain the passage above. I believe that Descartes characterizes clarity in terms of being “present and accessible to the attentive mind” because there is a way in which obscure ideas are not present or accessible. We are aware of such ideas, according to Descartes, just as we are aware of everything in the mind. But the ideas themselves have something missing and so for that reason are in a way not fully accessible to us.

⁵⁸ Since the volume of a sphere is actually $4\pi r^3/3$, there is no way to dispel the obscurity here by adding additional ideas.

§11. Distinctness and Confusion

Descartes' concepts of distinctness and confusion are closely related to his concepts of clarity and obscurity. In the *Principles*, Descartes defines "distinctness" as follows:

I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (I, 207-208)

Confusion is a lack of distinctness. Thus we can say that something is *confused* iff it is obscure or one is aware of it being connected to an obscure relation by a chain of zero or more immediate implication relations. And we can say that something is *distinct* iff a mind is aware of it and it is not confused. Alternatively, we can say that something is distinct iff it is clear and not confused.

- X being confused =_{def}
 - X being obscure, or
 - a mind being aware of: X being related to something by an obscure relation, or
 - a mind being aware of: X being related to something by an immediate implication
 - relation and that thing being related to something by an obscure relation, or
 - a mind being aware of: X being related to something by an immediate implication
 - relation, that thing being related to something by an immediate implication relation and that further thing being related to something by an obscure relation, or

..., etc.

- X being distinct =_{def}
 - a mind being aware of X, and X not being confused

From the definitions of “clear”, “distinct”, “obscure” and “confused”, one can see that no idea can be both distinct and confused, both distinct and obscure or both clear and obscure. One can also see that any distinct idea must also be clear and that any obscure idea must also be confused. Assuming that every idea is such that some mind is aware of it, it also follows that every idea is either clear or obscure and is either distinct or confused. This leaves us with three options. Each idea is either: (i) clear and distinct, (ii) clear and confused, or (iii) obscure and confused.⁵⁹

How can one assess an idea for clarity/obscurity and distinctness/confusion? Start with the idea itself. The idea represents some number of attributes related in one or another way. Look among those attributes. Are any related to one another by an obscure relation? If so, the idea is obscure and confused. If not, the idea is clear. Next, if the idea is clear, trace out the relations of immediate implication that one is aware of that start from the attributes the idea represents. Trace to every attribute one is aware of being immediately implied, and then to every attribute one is aware of being immediately implied by those, and then to every attribute one is aware of being immediately implied by those, and so on until the chains are exhausted. Now consider every attribute reached.

⁵⁹ Descartes clearly admits the possibility of clear and distinct ideas and obscure and confused ideas. He describes the possibility of clear and confused ideas in I, 208: “46. *The example of pain shows that a perception can be clear without being distinct, but cannot be distinct without being clear.* For example, when someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly.” (Descartes’ italics)

Are any of them related to any attribute by an obscure relation? If so, then the original idea is clear and confused. If not, then the original idea is clear and distinct.

For example, let's consider the idea <pain X occurring in body Y>. This idea represents a number of interrelated attributes. First, it represents the attribute [X being a pain]. Second, it represents the attribute [X being a pain] *occurring*. As we will discuss in §13, Descartes believes there are various ways that things can exist. The relevant type of existence here is inherent existence. So, according to Descartes, the idea <pain X occurring in body Y> represents the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] for some Z. According to Descartes, these attributes are inconceivable apart from one another. Now, according to Descartes, pain cannot be conceived to exist apart from a thing that is aware of that pain. This means that the Z in the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] must be something that is aware. Further, according to Descartes, every thing that is aware of something is itself an awareness and cannot be conceived apart from being such. Thus, according to Descartes, the attributes [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] and [X being a pain] are both inconceivable apart from the attribute [Z being an awareness]. If an idea represents one attribute and that attribute is inconceivable apart from another attribute, then the idea represents that other attribute as well. Thus the original idea, <pain X occurring in body Y>, represents at least three attributes: [X being a pain], [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] and [Z being an awareness].

Of course, the idea <pain X occurring in body Y> also represents a further attribute, [Y being extended], as well as some sort of relation between the attribute [X being a pain] and [Y being extended]. What sort of relation? The idea <pain X occurring

in body Y> is the idea that one has when one attempts to represent pain X as being a mode of body Y. We will discuss modes in the following section (§12); for now, all one needs to know is that this requires that pain X be inconceivable apart from body Y. Now if pain X is inconceivable apart from body Y, then the attribute [X being a pain] immediately implies [Y being extended]. According to Descartes, however, two attributes can only be represented as being related by a relation of immediate implication if one of those attributes actually immediately implies the other. Unfortunately in this case, according to Descartes, neither [X being a pain] nor [Y being extended] immediately implies the other. Thus according to Descartes, it is impossible to represent the attribute [X being a pain] as immediately implying [Y being extended]. What follows? According to Descartes, when one tries to represent immediate implication and fails, one ends up with attributes related by an obscure relation. Thus, according to Descartes, the idea <pain X occurring in body Y> represents:

- the attribute [X being a pain]
- the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a pain] to the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [X being a pain]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- the attribute [Z being an awareness]

- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a pain] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- the attribute [Y being extended]
- an obscure relation relating the attribute [X being a pain] to the attribute [Y being extended].

Since one of the relations represented is an obscure relation, the idea <pain X occurring in body Y> is obscure. Because it is obscure, it automatically counts as confused. Thus the idea is both obscure and confused.

Now let's consider just the idea <pain X> in the mind of the person who has the idea <pain X occurring in body Y>. This idea represents the attribute [X being a pain] but does not represent the attribute [Y being extended] and does not represent the two as related in any way. From the reasoning in the paragraph above, it follows that according to Descartes, the idea <pain X> represents:

- the attribute [X being a pain]
- the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a pain] to the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z]; this is also an immediate implication relation

- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [X being a pain]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- the attribute [Z being an awareness]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a pain] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a pain] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]; this is also an immediate implication relation.

None of these elements is an obscure relation. As a result, the idea <pain X> is clear. Is it distinct? The answer is no. Above we stipulated that the idea was occurring in the mind of a person who has the idea <pain X occurring in body Y>. This means that the person is aware of the attribute [X being a pain] being related to the attribute [Y being extended] by an obscure relation. This implies that in this case, the idea <pain X> is confused.

We have seen an example of an idea Descartes would say is obscure and confused and an example of an idea Descartes would say is clear and confused. Now let's consider an idea he would judge to be clear and distinct.

Let's consider the idea <square X>. According to Descartes, the idea <square X> represents the attribute [X being square]. According to Descartes, a shape cannot be conceived apart from an extended thing that has that shape. Thus Descartes maintains that the attribute [X being square] is inconceivable apart from the attribute [Y being extended], for some Y. Further, according to Descartes, the idea <square X> represents squareness *existing*, and hence represents the attribute [[X being square] existing

inherently in Y]. According to Descartes, the attributes [X being square] and [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] are inconceivable apart from one another. (Again, we will discuss the various forms of existence in §13.) From the fact that if an idea represents one attribute and that attribute is inconceivable apart from another attribute, the idea represents that other attribute as well, it follows that according to Descartes, the idea <square X> also represents the attribute [Y being extended]. Altogether, the idea <square X> represents:

- the attribute [X being square]
- the attribute [[X being square] existing inherently in Y]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being square] to the attribute [[X being square] existing inherently in Y]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] to the attribute [X being square]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- the attribute [Y being extended]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being square] to the attribute [Y being extended]; this is also an immediate implication relation
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] to the attribute [Y being extended]; this is also an immediate implication relation.

Let's suppose that we are dealing with a person who does not represent anything about square X other than what is listed above. Is the idea <square X> clear? None of the

elements mentioned is an obscure relation. So the idea <square X> is clear. Is it distinct? To check distinctness, we first follow the relations of immediate implication that the person is aware of out from the attributes [X being square], [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] and [Y being extended] to other existing attributes. We then check to see whether any of those attributes are related to any attributes by any obscure relations. In this case, though, we stipulated that the person in question does not represent anything about square X other than the things listed above. This means that the person does not represent the attributes [X being square], [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] or [Y being extended] as immediately implying any other attributes. That means that the only attributes we need to check for obscure relations are the attributes [X being square], [[X being square] existing inherently in Y] and [Y being extended]. But since we stipulated that the person does not represent anything about square X other than the facts above, it follows that none of these attributes are related to any attributes by any obscure relations. It follows that the idea <square X> is distinct in the person's mind, and hence, clear and distinct.

We have now given examples of ideas Descartes would consider to be obscure and confused, clear and confused, and clear and distinct. Our goal here has not been to give paradigm cases of the concepts that cannot be denied without contradiction. Instead, our goal has simply been to illustrate how the concepts might be employed in practice. One might perfectly well accept and utilize Descartes' concepts of clarity, obscurity, distinctness and confusion while also denying the accuracy of some or all of the examples above.

One might be surprised at the complexity of the above examples. The first idea we examined, <pain occurring in body Y>, involved nine different attributes or relations between attributes. This may seem much more complicated than one might have expected, especially if one is used to thinking of “clarity” and “distinctness” as emphasis terms.⁶⁰ But I do believe it is what Descartes has in mind. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes indicates that we should study attributes and their interrelations so closely that we should be able to count the number of relations of immediate implication between them. He writes:

We should, as I said, attend carefully to the simple natures which can be intuited in this way, for these are the ones which in each series we term simple in the highest degree. As for all the other natures, we can apprehend them only by deducing them from those which are simple in the highest degree, either immediately and directly, or by means of two or three or more separate inferences. In the latter case we should also note the number of these inferences so that we may know whether the separation between the conclusion and the primary and supremely simple proposition is by way of a greater or fewer number of steps. (I, 22)

(Recall that simple and composite natures are attributes.) This statement and the idea that assessing concepts for clarity and distinctness involves dissecting them and carefully examining the attributes they represent and the relations between those attributes fit together perfectly.

In fact, rather than being too complicated, some of the examples given above may not be complicated enough. In the third example, we considered the idea <square X> and stipulated that the attributes involved, [X being square], [[X being square] existing

⁶⁰ More on interpreting “clarity” and “distinctness” as emphasis terms below.

inherently in Y] and [Y being extended], were conceptually isolated from all other concepts. But if we are to be precise, Descartes would deny that this is possible.

According to Descartes, when we conceive of squares we are conceiving of the two-dimensional border or limit of a three-dimensional extended substance. The borders or limits of an extended thing, according to Descartes, inhere in that thing and hence are inconceivable apart from it. But the borders or limits of an extended thing, according to Descartes, also inhere in whatever extended thing it is adjacent to. Thus [X being square] would be inconceivable apart from not only the attribute [Y being extended], but also the attribute [Z being extended], for some Z distinct from Y. There are further connections as well: according to Descartes, every extended thing is inconceivable apart from its parts.

When we speak of a body in general, we mean a determinate part of matter, a part of the quantity of which the universe is composed. In this sense, if the smallest amount of that quantity were removed, we would judge without more ado that the body was smaller and no longer complete; and if any particle of the matter were changed, we would at once think that the body was no longer quite the same, no longer numerically the same. (III, 242-243)

Ultimately, the distinct concept [X being square] involves a very large number of attributes and relations between attributes, far more than we considered initially.⁶¹

From the conception of clarity and distinctness I have presented, it is possible to derive a recipe for rendering ideas clear and distinct. Start with an idea. Note all of the attributes it represents. Take each of these attributes and trace out all of the relations of

⁶¹ Indeed, it may be that Descartes has a problem here. Descartes believes that humans can have a clear and distinct understanding of extended substances. But he also believes that extended substances are infinitely divisible and that humans cannot have a clear understanding of an infinite number of attributes simultaneously. If a clear and distinct understanding of an infinitely divisible substance requires a clear understanding of its parts, then at least one of Descartes' beliefs here must be false.

immediate implication that one is aware of. Take all of the attributes reached in this way and see whether any is related to any attribute by an obscure relation. If none are related to any attribute by an obscure relation, then the idea is distinct. If some are related to attribute by obscure relations, then there are two possible remedies. First, for a given obscure relation, one could detach the attributes related by that obscure relation.

Attributes related by an obscure relation are conceivable on their own, at least in principle; detach them from one another and either just represent one of the attributes or represent the pair but without the obscure relation. Second, one could add in the steps of a derivation. Suppose that one has an idea that contains attribute X, attribute Y and has the two related by an obscure relation. Suppose also that while attribute X does not immediately imply attribute Y, attribute X does immediately imply attribute Z, which in turn immediately implies Y. Then one could take the original idea and add attribute Z so that now one is aware of attribute X immediately implying attribute Z and attribute Z immediately implying attribute Y. This also will eliminate the obscure relation.

We have now given two ways to eliminate individual obscure relations. Go through the attributes connected to the idea by immediate implication relations and eliminate all of the obscure relations. The result will be an idea that is clear and distinct.

For example, consider the ideas <sweet-smelling cube> and <triangle with internal angles that sum to two right angles>. Suppose that the latter idea does not include a derivation of the triangle's having angles that sum to two right angles. According to Descartes, both of these ideas are obscure and confused. How so? According to Descartes, the idea <sweet-smelling cube> represents the attribute [X being a sweet smell] as inhering in, hence being inconceivable apart from, hence immediately implying

the attribute [Y being extended] for some Y. But, according to Descartes, [X being a sweet smell] does not immediately imply [Y being extended] for any Y. Thus there must be an obscure relation here. The case with <triangle with internal angles that sum to two right angles> is more challenging; we will discuss it in a footnote.⁶²

To remove the obscurity from the idea <sweet-smelling cube>, we can employ the first method described above. The idea <sweet-smelling cube> breaks down into attributes and relations as follows:

- Attributes pertaining to being sweet-smelling:
 - the attribute [X being a sweet smell]
 - the attribute [[X being a sweet smell] existing inherently in Z]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a sweet smell] to the attribute [[X being a sweet smell] existing inherently in Z]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a sweet smell] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [X being a sweet smell]
 - the attribute [Z being an awareness]

⁶² As far as I can tell, the idea <triangle with internal angles that sum to two right angles> conceived in a Cartesian framework, contains a great many attributes. The attributes [point A being inconceivable apart from line D], [point A being inconceivable apart from line E], [point B being inconceivable apart from line E], [point B being inconceivable apart from line F], [point C being inconceivable apart from line F], [point C being inconceivable apart from line D], [line D being inconceivable apart from X], [line E being inconceivable apart from X], and [line F being inconceivable apart from X] give us a triangle. [Angle G being inconceivable apart from line D], [angle G being inconceivable apart from line E], [angle H being inconceivable apart from line E], [angle H being inconceivable apart from line F], [angle I being inconceivable apart from line F] and [angle I being inconceivable apart from line D] give us three angles. We also will need two right angles J and K; these will involve points and lines just as with angles G, H and I. Now, how we perform a summation depends on whether we intend to use analytic geometry or whether we prefer the ancient method. Either way, it will be necessary to have the attribute [the sum of angles G, H and I being equal to the sum of angles J and K]. The problem is that while it will be easy to conceive an attribute of the form [the sum of angles P₁, P₂ and P₃ being equal to the sum of angles P₄ and P₅], it will be difficult to ensure that in the place of P₁, P₂ and P₃, one conceives angles G, H and I, and that in the place of P₄ and P₅, one conceives angles J and K. Absent a derivation, one will have to force it, resulting in multiple obscure relations.

- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [X being a sweet smell] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]
- an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[X being a sweet smell] existing inherently in Z] to the attribute [Z being an awareness]
- Attributes pertaining to being a cube:
 - the attribute [Y being cubical]
 - the attribute [[Y being cubical] existing inherently in Y]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [Y being cubical] to the attribute [[Y being cubical] existing inherently in Y]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[Y being cubical] existing inherently in Y] to the attribute [Y being cubical]
 - the attribute [Y being extended]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [Y being cubical] to the attribute [Y being extended]
 - an inconceivability apart relation relating the attribute [[Y being cubical] existing inherently in Y] to the attribute [Y being extended]
- The obscure relation joining them:
 - an obscure relation relating the attribute [X being a sweet smell] to the attribute [Y being extended].

To remove the obscurity, we need just eliminate this final relation. Once we do this, then so long as there are no other obscure relations connected to these attributes, we will be left with two clear and distinct ideas: one of a mind aware of a sweet smell, one of a cubical extended thing.

To remove the obscurity from the idea <triangle with internal angles that sum to two right angles>, we could perform the same operation. However, in this case it is also possible to remove the obscurity by employing the second method described above. Extract the attributes associated with a triangle from the idea <triangle with internal angles that sum to two right angles>. (For details, see footnote 62.) Then, build from those attributes to further attributes using only immediate implication relations. Add all of these further attributes into the idea. Eventually, if one adds in the right attributes, one will end up connecting the initial attributes with the target attribute, an attribute of the form [the sum of angles P_1 , P_2 and P_3 being equal to the sum of angles P_4 and P_5]. This is exactly the same thing as proving that the internal angles of a triangle sum to two right angles and will result in the elimination of the initial obscurity.

We can derive a few corollaries from the conceptions of clarity and distinctness we have presented. First, any idea that does not represent any relations and which the person does not connect to any other ideas by any relations is automatically clear and distinct. Why? To be obscure, it must represent one or more obscure relations. If an idea does not represent any relations, it is automatically clear. To be confused, it must either be obscure or be connected in the person's awareness by a chain of immediate implication to at least one attribute that the person is aware of being related to something by an obscure relation. So if an idea is clear and the person does not connect it by any relations to any other ideas, it is distinct.

Another corollary is this. Start with any single attribute. Add all of the attributes that it is inconceivable apart from. Strip away all obscure relations. The result will always be a distinct idea. Now add attributes that this idea immediately implies. For each new

attribute added, be sure to add all of the attributes each attribute is inconceivable apart from and be sure to strip away all obscure relations. Do this while tracing out chains of immediate implication as far as one would like. The result will always be a distinct idea. Why? For the idea to be confused, the idea must include some obscure relation or the person must be aware of some obscure relation between some attribute in the idea and some attribute. By the method here, however, we start with a single attribute. No single attribute is or includes an obscure relation. So we start with something that does not include any obscure relations. Then when we add, we do not add any obscure relations. So by the method here, no obscure relations end up being included in any idea generated. Furthermore, at every stage we strip away all of the obscure relations that could relate any of the attributes included in the idea. It follows that every idea generated by this method must be distinct.

Now let's consider a potential problem for our account of distinctness. In the Second Meditation, Descartes writes:

The idea [of God] is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God

either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas. (II, 32)

This passage seems to imply that Descartes' conception of clarity and distinctness permit clarity and distinctness to come in degrees. Clarity is no trouble; we can simply define degrees of obscurity in terms of the number of obscure relations an idea includes and then define the degree of clarity in terms of the degree of obscurity. But what about distinctness? On our conception, distinctness does not admit of degrees. Thus one might argue that we have failed to correctly explain Descartes' concept of distinctness.

I believe the problem here arises from an apparent inconsistency in the texts. Consider Descartes' definition of distinctness in the *Principles of Philosophy*, quoted at the beginning of this section:

I call a perception 'distinct' if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (I, 207-208)

Unless we are to admit degrees of "being so sharply separated from", this definition does not really seem to permit distinctness to come in degrees. I believe the solution is to interpret "degrees of distinctness" in a less than perfectly straightforward way. In particular, we can say that of two distinct ideas, X and Y, X is "more distinct" than Y iff X represents more attributes than Y represents.

- X being more distinct than Y (for distinct ideas X and Y) =_{def}
 - X represents more attributes than Y represents

Under this interpretation, start with a distinct idea. Consider the attributes that idea represents. Now build out from those attributes by finding new attributes that the original attributes immediately imply. As one does this, the idea becomes "more distinct".

This interpretation explains why Descartes says that his idea <God> is the most distinct idea he has. In saying this, he is simply saying that he has derived more attributes of God than he has of any other thing he has a distinct idea of.

Altogether, our explanations of “degrees of clarity” and “degrees of distinctness” yield the following picture. Start with an idea that has some number of obscure relations. It is neither clear nor distinct. Now divide it up. As one does, one will remove more and more obscure relations. As the obscure relations are removed, the idea will become clearer and clearer. Eventually, all of the obscure relations will be removed; at that moment, the idea will become distinct. Now take the attributes the idea represents, find attributes those attributes immediately imply and add them into the idea. As more and more attributes are added in this way, the idea will become more and more distinct.⁶³

In this and the preceding section, I have provided an explanation of Descartes’ concepts of “clarity” and “distinctness”. This explanation differs significantly from what I take to be the standard interpretation. On the standard interpretation, Descartes’ terms “clear” and “distinct” are merely emphasis terms. On this view, a perception is “clear” or “distinct” if and only if it is *obviously* true or *very* well understood or shows up *very* brightly in the mind, and a perception is both “clear” and “distinct” if and only if it is *very obviously* true or *extremely* well understood or shows up *very, very* brightly in the mind.

⁶³ In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes writes: “That is why, since we are concerned here with things only in so far as they are perceived by the intellect, we term ‘simple’ only those things which we know so clearly and distinctly that they cannot be divided by the mind into others which are more distinctly known.” (I, 44) The “so clearly and distinctly” in this passage might be taken to imply that as an idea is divided, it can gain greater and greater degrees of distinctness. This would be contrary to the proposal that as an idea is divided, it becomes clearer and clearer until it all at once becomes distinct, and then only gains degrees of distinctness as further attributes are added. However, this is very subtle. It is not at all difficult to read the passage as being supposed to be perfectly consistent with the interpretation of “degrees of clarity” and “degrees of consistency” we have given.

The standard interpretation has the advantage of simplicity and ease of use. However, I believe my explanation is far superior. It helps make far better sense of why Descartes judges some ideas to be clear and distinct, others clear and confused and the remaining obscure and confused. It does far better justice to Descartes' focus on precision in thought, and it is far more charitable.

§12. Things, Inherence, Substances and Modes

§12.1. Introduction

In §5, we introduced Descartes' concept "attribute". In §7, we examined his concept "implication". In §8, we presented his concept "inconceivability apart". In this section, we will use these concepts to explain four more of Descartes' concepts: "thing", "inherence", "substance" and "mode".

We will start by presenting our explanation of each of these concepts. We will then look at some texts. Finally, we will answer some objections.

§12.2. Things

Consider attributes and relations of mutual inconceivability apart.

Attributes Mutually Inconceivable Apart

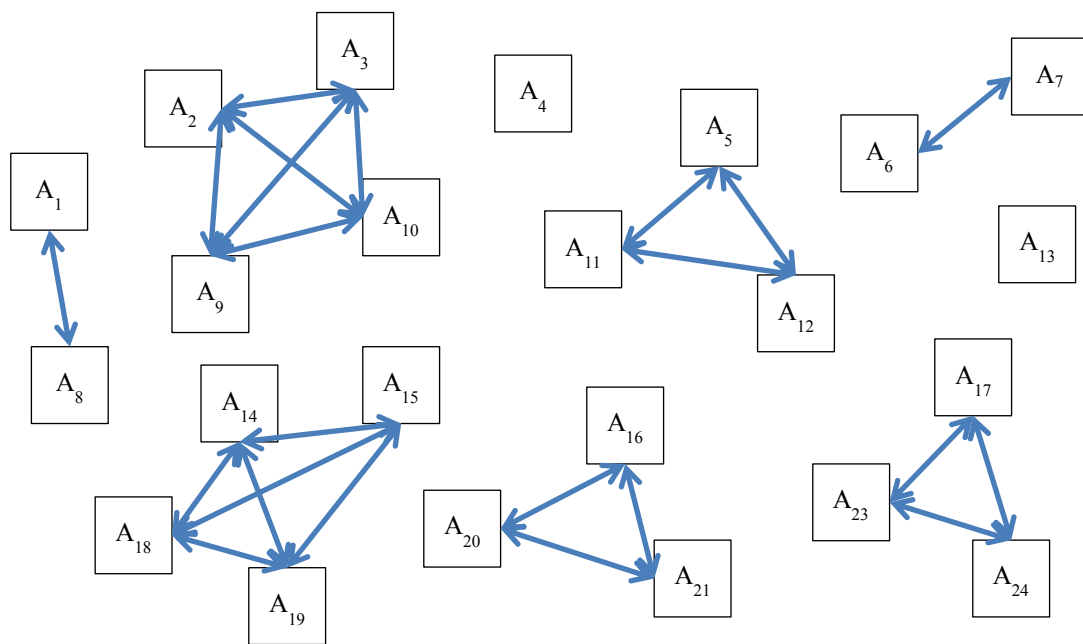


Figure 2. Attributes mutually inconceivable apart.

The relation of inconceivability apart is transitive. That is to say, if X is inconceivable apart from Y and Y is inconceivable apart from Z, it follows that X is inconceivable apart from Z. This fact about inconceivability apart entails that attributes can be exhaustively partitioned into groups, such that every attribute in a group is mutually inconceivable apart from every other attribute in the group and every attribute in a group is not mutually inconceivable apart from any attribute not in the group. Call these groups “attribute groups”.

Groups Of Attributes Mutually Inconceivable Apart

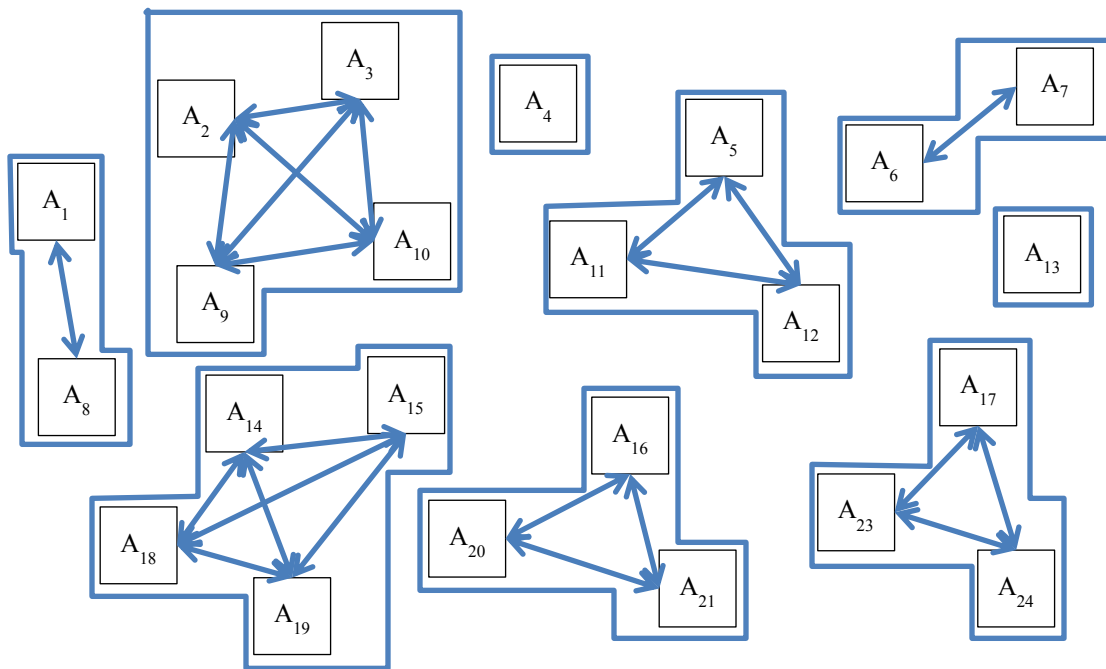


Figure 3. Groups of attributes mutually inconceivable apart.

In this diagram, the blue double-sided arrows indicate relations of mutual inconceivability apart. The blue boxes indicate attribute groups.

Now consider relations of one-way inconceivability. Because inconceivability apart is transitive, if one attribute in an attribute group is one-way inconceivable apart from attribute X, every attribute in that attribute group is one-way inconceivable apart from attribute X. Similarly, because inconceivability apart is transitive, if an attribute X is one-way inconceivable apart from any attribute in some attribute group, then attribute X is one-way inconceivable apart from every attribute in that attribute group. It follows from these facts that if any attribute in attribute group X is one-way inconceivable from any attribute in attribute group Y, then every attribute in attribute group X is one-way inconceivable apart from every attribute in attribute group Y.

Attribute Groups With One-Way Inconceivability

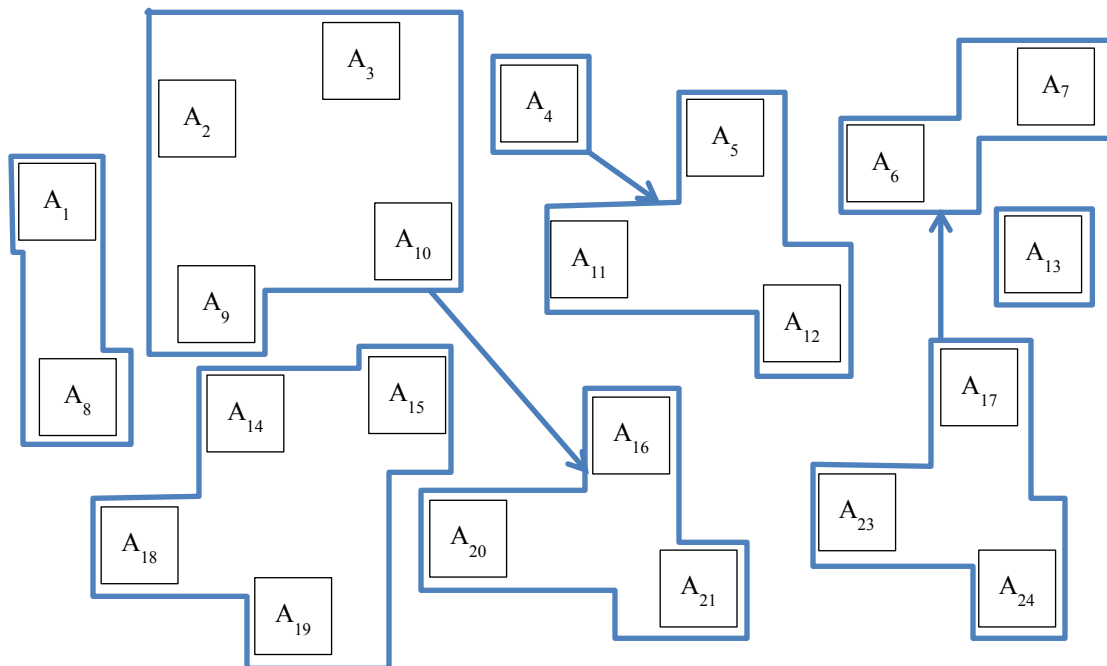


Figure 4. Attribute groups with one-way inconceivability.

In this diagram, the blue single-sided arrows indicate relations of one-way inconceivability apart. The blue boxes indicate attribute groups. The relations of mutual inconceivability apart are not represented for the sake of simplicity. Importantly, the fact that the blue single-sided arrows relate attribute groups to attribute groups is a simplification. Actually, one-way inconceivability apart relations do not relate attribute groups. Each such relation in the diagram indicates that each attribute in one attribute group stands in a one-way inconceivability apart relation to each attribute in the other attribute group.

Next, let's consider implication relations that are not inconceivability apart relations. As I said in §9, inconceivability apart is just one of the two species of implication. The other species is causation, which itself divides into formal causation and efficient causation.

Suppose that X causes Y and Y is mutually inconceivable apart from Z. Inconceivability apart and causation are, according to Descartes, species of implication. It follows that X implies Y and Y implies Z. Implication, though, like inconceivability apart, is transitive. It follows that X implies Z. Now if X was inconceivable apart from Z, then by the transitivity of inconceivability apart, X would be inconceivable apart from Y. Causation and inconceivability apart, however, are two mutually exclusive species of implication. It follows that since X causes Y, X cannot be inconceivable apart from Y. It follows that X is not inconceivable apart from Z. But X implies Z, and the only other species of implication is causation. It follows that X causes Z. Conditionalizing on the

premises, we get the conclusion that if X causes Y and Y is mutually inconceivable apart from Z, X causes Z as well. In other words, if one attribute causes any attribute in an attribute group, it causes all of the attributes in that attribute group.

Suppose now that X is mutually inconceivable apart from Y and Y causes Z. It follows that X implies Y and Y implies Z. By the transitivity of implication, it follows that X implies Z. Now if X was inconceivable apart from Z, then by the transitivity of inconceivability apart, it would follow that Y was inconceivable apart from Z. But Y causes Z and causation and inconceivability apart are mutually exclusive. It follows that Y is not inconceivable apart from Z. It follows that X is not inconceivable apart from Z either. But since X implies Z, and since the only remaining species of implication is causation, it follows that X causes Z as well. Conditionalizing on the premises, we get the conclusion that if X is mutually inconceivable apart from Y and Y causes Z, then X causes Z also. Put differently, if one attribute in an attribute group cause some attribute Z, then every attribute in that attribute group cause attribute Z.

from A_i or causes A_i . And furthermore, no attribute A_i in the plurality is such that it relates similarly to any attribute not in the plurality.

- X being a thing $=_{\text{def}}$
 - X being a plurality of attributes A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots , such that for every A_i and A_j :
 - A_i is mutually inconceivable apart from A_j , or
 - A_i is one-way inconceivable apart from A_j and A_j causes A_i , or
 - A_i causes A_j and A_j is one-way inconceivable apart from A_i , or
 - A_i causes A_j and A_j causes A_i ,

and for every A_i and attribute B, such that B is not one of A_1, A_2, A_3, \dots ,

it is not the case that:

- A_i is mutually inconceivable apart from B, or
- A_i is one-way inconceivable apart from B and B causes A_i , or
- A_i causes B and B is one-way inconceivable apart from A_i , or
- A_i causes B and B causes A_i .

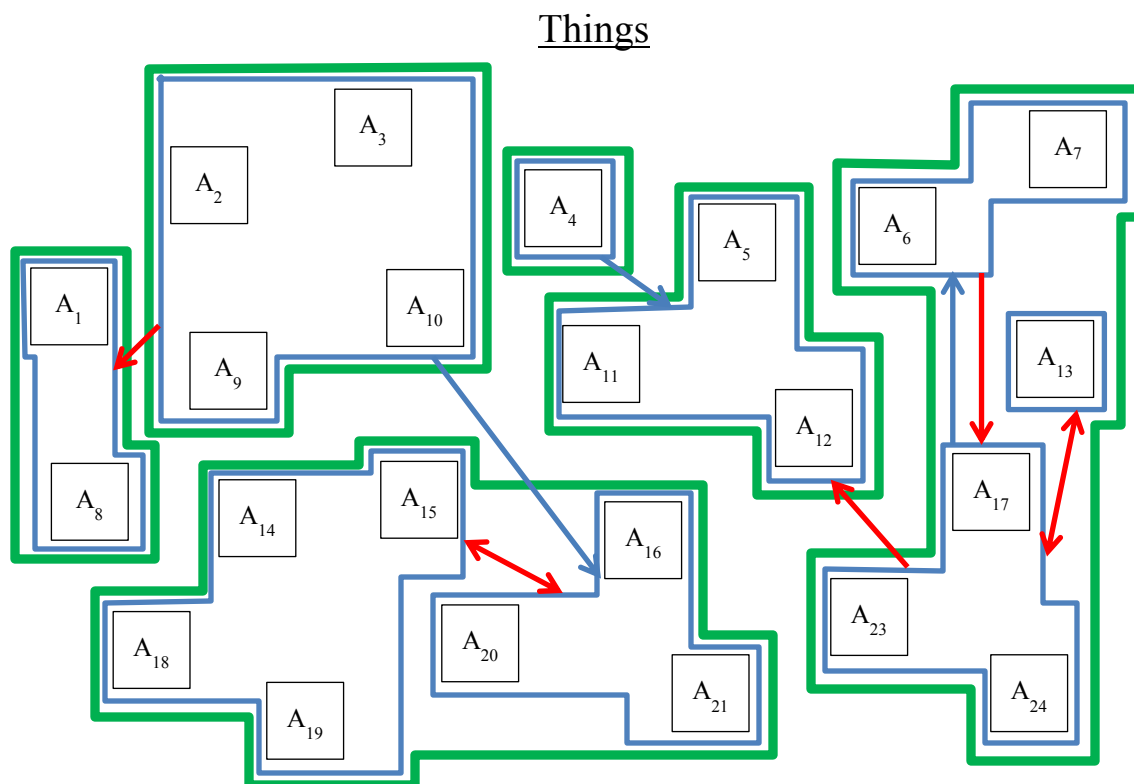


Figure 6. Things.

In this diagram, the green boxes indicate things.

One might raise two concerns about the preceding explanation. The first is textual. Descartes never defines “thing” anywhere. Why should we attribute this explanation of “thing” to him? The second concern is philosophical. It may seem problematic to define “thing” in the first place. It may seem that the concept “thing” is somehow presupposed, for instance, in the use of the variables, or in the quantificational terms “every” or “any”, or in the concept “attribute”, all of which show up in the proposed definition. These are both important issues; we will discuss them below.

§12.3. Substances, modes and inherence

With the definition of “thing” in hand, I can now define the remaining concepts. Let’s call something a “mode of X” if and only if it is a thing, X is a thing, it is not identical to X and it is inconceivable apart from X.⁶⁴ Let’s call something a “mode” if and only if it is a mode of some thing. Let’s call something a “substance” if and only if it is a thing and is not a mode of anything. And let’s say that X “inheres in” Y if and only if X is a mode of Y.

- X being a mode of Y =_{def}
 - X being a thing, Y being a thing, X not being identical to Y and X being inconceivable apart from Y
- X being a mode =_{def}
 - X being a mode of some thing
- X being a substance =_{def}
 - X being a thing and X not being a mode
- X inhering in Y =_{def}
 - X being a mode of Y

⁶⁴ The condition that X and Y are not identical implies that if X is inconceivable apart from Y, Y is conceivable apart from X. If Y were inconceivable apart from X also, then X and Y would be mutually inconceivable apart, and so would be the same thing, i.e., identical.

Substances, Modes and Inherence

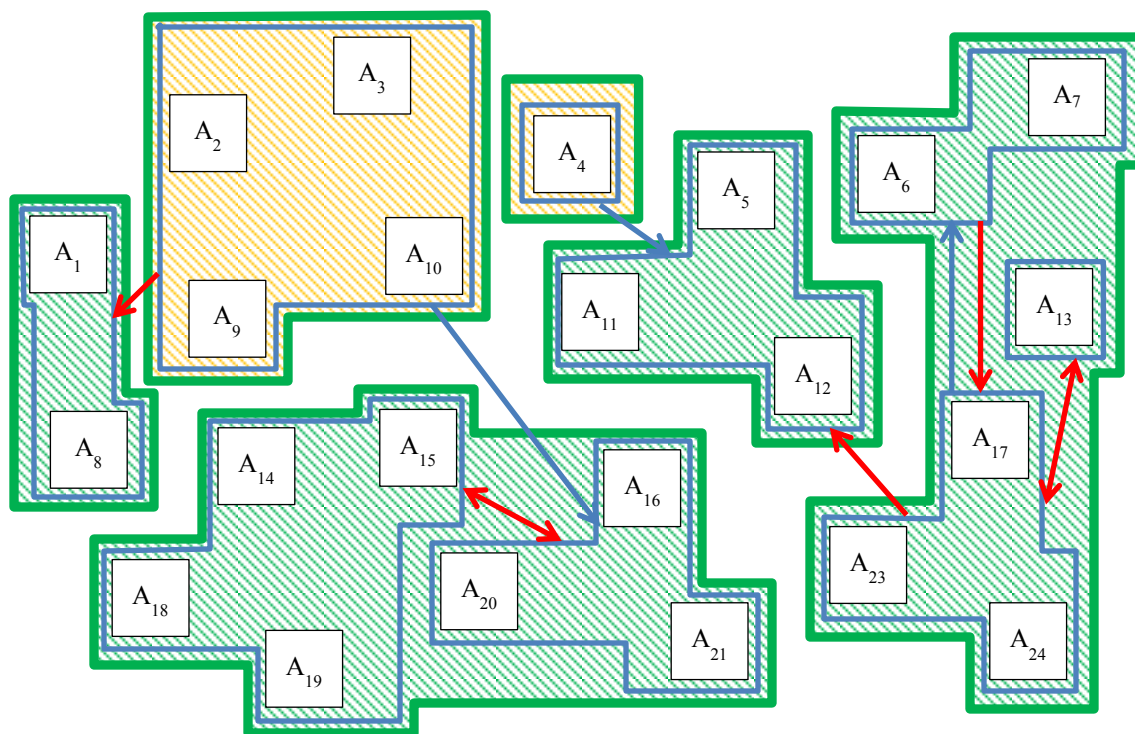


Figure 7. Substances, modes and inherence.

In this diagram, the green shading indicates substances. The orange shading indicates modes. The single-sided blue arrows are one-way inconceivability apart relations and also inherence relations.⁶⁵

To be clear, a “substance” here is just the substance, not any of its modes. That is to say, we have defined “substance” and not “enmoded substance”. An “enmoded

⁶⁵ For the sake of clarity, it is worth noting that Descartes would claim that the above diagram represents an impossible situation. The diagram represents a mode as causing a substance. However, according to Descartes, modes cannot cause substances. Modes depend for their existence on inhering in something; substances do not. But being dependent for one’s existence on inhering in something is a lower form of being independent in this regard. By the Perfection Causal Principle, then, it follows that no mode can cause a substance.

substance” is a substance and all of that substance’s modes, in the case where that substance has at least one mode.

- X being an enmoded substance $=_{\text{def}}$
 - X being the plurality of a substance and all of that substance’s modes, and
 - X having at least one mode

§12.4. Fit with the texts: thing

Why do I attribute the preceding conceptions of “thing”, “substance”, “mode” and “inherence” to Descartes? Let’s start with “thing”.

First, Descartes does not use the term “thing” consistently. In some cases, he uses it to refer only to substances:

First of all, though a triangle can perhaps be taken concretely as a substance having a triangular shape, it is certain that the property of having the square on the hypotenuse equal to the squares on the other sides is not a substance. So neither the triangle nor the property can be understood as a complete thing in the way in which the mind and body can be so understood; nor can either item be called a ‘thing’ in the sense in which I said ‘it is enough that I can understand one thing (that is, a complete thing) apart from another’ etc. This is clear from the passage which comes next: ‘Besides I find in myself faculties’ etc. I did not say that these faculties were *things*, but carefully distinguished them from things or substances. (II, 158)

Usually, though, he uses the term “thing” to refer to modes as well, as in the following passage:

<In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order

to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter ‘substances’ and the former ‘qualities’ or ‘attributes’ of those substances.> (I, 210)

We can take his first use as synonymous with “substance”. What then of his typical use? How should we understand Descartes’ term “thing”? Unfortunately, Descartes does not explicitly define “thing” anywhere. Thus we must look for guidance elsewhere.

One place to look is in his discussion of things that are merely conceptually distinct. According to Descartes, when two things are conceptually distinct, they are not actually “two things”. Instead, “they” are a merely a single thing. Descartes affirms this, for instance, in the case of God and God’s attributes:

[Descartes] Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself. (III, 348, Conversation with Burman)

This means that it may be possible to define “thing” in terms of attributes that are merely conceptually distinct. After all, there won’t be anything further to a thing beyond all of its conceptually distinct attributes.

What does it mean for attributes to be “conceptually distinct”? In the *Principles*, Part I, Descartes writes:

62. *What is meant by a ‘conceptual distinction’*

Finally, a *conceptual distinction* is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we

exclude from it the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from the other. (I, 214)

Here, Descartes proposes a test for conceptual distinctness. I take the test to be this: attributes X and Y are conceptually distinct if and only if there is no distinct idea that includes attribute X and the negation of attribute Y, and also no distinct idea that includes attribute Y and the negation of attribute X. Equivalently, attributes X and Y are other than conceptually distinct if and only if there is a distinct idea that includes attribute X and the negation of attribute Y or a distinct idea that includes attribute Y and the negation of attribute X. (According to Descartes, the negation of an attribute is itself an attribute.⁶⁶ For instance, the negation of the attribute [X being immutable] is the attribute [X being mutable].)

Under what conditions will there not be a distinct idea that includes one attribute and the negation of another? That is to say, under what conditions will all ideas that include one attribute and the negation of another be confused? Suppose that attribute X implies attribute Y. Then there is some chain of attributes X, Z₁, Z₂, Z₃, ..., Z_n, Y, such that X immediately implies Z₁, Z₁ immediately implies Z₂, etc., and such that Z_n immediately implies Y. Now consider an arbitrary distinct idea that includes attribute X. Add in the attributes Z₁, Z₂, Z₃, ..., Z_n and Y one at a time. Each time an attribute is added, the attribute that is added is immediately implied by one of the attributes already in the idea. It follows that each time an attribute is added, the idea remains distinct. There is no need to forcibly add an obscure relation; immediate implication relations are added

⁶⁶ In *Rules For the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes writes: "Moreover, it is as well to count among the simple natures the corresponding privations and negations, in so far as we understand these. For when I intuit what nothing is, or an instant, or rest, my apprehension is as much genuine knowledge as my understanding what existence is, or duration, or motion." (I, 45)

automatically. The result of this process is an idea that includes both attribute X and attribute Y and is also distinct. Now Descartes maintains that no distinct ideas contain any immediate contradictions.⁶⁷ But if the idea that we started with contained the negation of attribute Y, then the idea that we ended with would contain an immediate contradiction. It follows that the idea we started with did not contain the negation of attribute Y. This works for an arbitrary distinct idea that includes attribute X. It follows that no distinct idea that includes attribute X also includes the negation of attribute Y.

We have just seen that when attribute X implies attribute Y, there are no distinct ideas that include X and the negation of Y. This entails that when two attributes imply one another, there are no distinct ideas that include one of those attributes and the negation of the other. This, I believe, is the condition that Descartes has in mind with his test for conceptual distinctness. If this is correct, then according to Descartes, two attributes are merely conceptually distinct when they both imply one another.

Now while I think this is what Descartes has in mind with his test for conceptual distinctness, there is a small problem. Causation is a species of implication. It follows that when God causes the existence of a creature, God implies the existence of the creature. But as we know from Descartes' first and second argument for the existence of God, Descartes believes that the existence of creatures implies the existence of God. Thus according to Descartes, if God causes a creature, then there is a relation of mutual implication between God and the creature. If the criterion for a conceptual distinction is mutual implication, then we should conclude that God and the creature are merely conceptually distinct.

⁶⁷ Descartes says that inconsistency is not possible with distinct ideas: "Self-contradictoriness in our concepts arises merely from their obscurity and confusion: there can be none in the case of clear and distinct concepts." (II, 108)

Another passage will help us here. In the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes writes:

But this is no objection to my argument. For it is equally true that when I examine the nature of the body, I find nothing at all in it which savours of thought. And we can have no better evidence of a distinction between two things than the fact that if we examine either of them, whatever we find in one is different from what we find in the other. (II, 160)

We might take from this passage the suggestion that two things are different if they have different attributes. Unfortunately, this presupposes that we have the ability to distinguish which attributes belong to which things, and hence that we have the ability to distinguish things from one another. Still, a variation on this will work. Let us add to the criterion of conceptual distinctness that two attributes are not merely conceptually distinct if the two would be contradictory were they to be attributes of the same thing. For instance, consider [X having unlimited power] and [Y being cubical], and for the sake of this example, let it not be stipulated that $X \neq Y$. According to Descartes, if something has unlimited power and something is cubical, then the thing with unlimited power causes the thing that is cubical. According to Descartes, if there exists something that is cubical, we can infer from the existence of that thing that there exists a thing with unlimited power. Thus according to Descartes, the attributes [X having unlimited power] and [Y being cubical], imply one another. However, also according to Descartes, it is contradictory for a single thing to have unlimited power while also being cubical. Anything with unlimited power, Descartes believes, has no imperfections. But anything that is cubical, Descartes believes, has parts, and thus depends for its existence on its parts, and thus has an imperfection. It follows that according to Descartes, the attributes [X having unlimited

power] and [Y being cubical] imply one another but also would yield a contradiction were they to be attributes of the same thing. According to the amended criterion I have proposed, these attributes would not be conceptually distinct. This fixes the problem.

We now have an account of Descartes' conceptual distinction. Two attributes are conceptually distinct if and only if each implies the other and the attributes would not yield a contradiction if they were attributes of the same thing. More generally, a set of attributes are conceptually distinct if and only if each implies the other and the attributes would not yield a contradiction if they were all attributes of the same thing. This account enables us to partition attributes into groups such that every attribute in the group is conceptually distinct from every other attribute in the group and no attribute in the group is conceptually distinct from any other attributes. These groups of attributes, of course, are things.

All that remains is to show how this yields the conception of "thing" I presented earlier. According to the definition I gave earlier, attributes X and Y are attributes of the same thing if and only if (a) X and Y are mutually inconceivable apart, (b) X causes Y and Y causes X, (c) X is one-way inconceivable apart from Y and Y causes X, or (d) X causes Y and Y is one-way inconceivable apart from X. To show that Descartes' account of the conceptual distinction yields this definition of thing, I need to show three things. First, I must show that in all of these cases, attributes X and Y imply each other. Second, I must show that in none of these cases would there be a contradiction if X and Y were attributes of the same thing. Third, I have to show that in every case of mutual implication other than these, there would be a contradiction if X and Y were attributes of

the same thing. Or at least, I need to show that Descartes is committed to each of these things.

The demonstration of the first point is easy. According to Descartes, inconceivability apart and causation are species of implication. It follows that in each of the above cases, (a) through (d), attributes X and Y imply each other.

Now to the second point. Suppose that X and Y are attributes that fulfill at least one of (a) through (d) above, and yet are attributes of different things. If X causes Y, then Y depends for its existence on X. If X is inconceivable apart from Y, then Y depends for its existence on X. It follows that if two attributes fulfill any of (a) through (d) above, then those attributes depend on each other for their existence. It follows that attributes X and Y depend on each other for their existence. This is a fact about the attributes X and Y. What about the things of which X and Y are attributes? Let's call the things that X and Y are attributes of A and B, respectively. All of the attributes in A imply one another. Likewise with the attributes in B. But mutual implication is transitive. And any attributes that fulfill any of (a) through (d) above imply one another. It follows that every attribute in A implies every attribute in B, and vice versa. It follows that every attribute in A depends for its existence on every attribute in B and vice versa. It follows that A and B themselves depend on each other for their existence, despite being different things. As far as I can tell, though, Descartes does not permit there to be such loops of dependence. It follows that according to Descartes, any attributes that fulfill any of (a) through (d) must be attributes of the same thing. This was the second point to be demonstrated.

Finally, the third point. According to Descartes, if X implies Y, then either X causes Y, Y causes X or X is inconceivable apart from Y. This yields five cases of

mutual implication: cases (a) through (d) above, and the case where (e) X causes Y, Y implies X, Y does not cause X and Y is not inconceivable apart from X. To show that Descartes is committed to affirming the conception of “thing” I presented earlier, all that now needs to be shown is that in all cases of (e), Descartes is committed to affirming that there would be a contradiction if X and Y were attributes of the same thing.

I do not know how to show that Descartes is committed to the principle “if X causes Y, Y implies X, Y does not cause X and Y is not inconceivable apart from X, then there would be a contradiction if X and Y were attributes of the same thing”.⁶⁸ As far as I can tell, however, the only cases of (e) Descartes recognizes are cases where God causes minds, bodies, the modes of minds and the modes of bodies. In each of these cases, though, the attributes that cause are incompatible with the attributes that are caused. It follows that Descartes is committed to the conception of “thing” I presented earlier, at least for every case he recognizes.

Why do I affirm that in all cases where God causes minds, bodies, the modes of minds and the modes of bodies, the attributes that cause are incompatible with the attributes that are caused? Let’s go case by case. First, bodies. According to Descartes, all bodies have the attribute of extension. According to Descartes, God causes by means of God’s unlimited power. So the case in question is the case where the attribute [God having unlimited power] causes the attribute [Y being extended]. Now the attribute [Y being extended] is mutually inconceivable apart from the attribute [Y having parts], which Descartes believes is mutually inconceivable apart from the attribute [Y depending for its existence on its parts]. Granting that these attributes are mutually inconceivable

⁶⁸ I have developed a few lines of argument here. I leave the challenge of completing this as a task for the reader.

apart, it follows that they are all attributes of the same thing, and hence to attribute one to God is to attribute all of them to God. Descartes believes, however, that God has the attribute of being independent of parts for its existence. It follows that the case where God causes a body is a case where the causing attribute is incompatible with the attribute that is caused.

A similar line of reasoning works for modes of bodies and modes of minds. According to Descartes, all modes have the attribute [Y depending for its existence on inhering in substance Z] for some Z. God, according to Descartes, has the attribute of being independent of inhering in anything for its existence. It follows that these cases are also cases where the causing attribute is incompatible with the attributes that are caused.

Finally, let's consider created minds. Here, the derivation is challenging. We can bypass the derivation, though, since all we need here is evidence that Descartes believes that when God causes a mind, God causes attributes that are incompatible with God. In the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes writes:

In the case of the mind, by contrast, not only do we understand it to exist without the body, but, what is more, all the attributes which belong to a body can be denied of it. For it is of the nature of substances that they should mutually exclude one another.

(II, 159)

God is an infinite substance; created minds are finite. It follows that Descartes must affirm that they mutually exclude one another and hence that when God causes a mind, God causes attributes that cannot exist in God without contradiction.

§12.5. Fit with the texts: substance, mode, inherence

I have now explained why I attribute to Descartes the conception of “thing” I proposed earlier. Next, let’s consider “substance”, “mode” and “inherence”.

Let’s begin with “mode”. Descartes explains what modes are in a number of different ways. In one place, he explains modes in terms of what “affects” or “modifies” a thing:

56. *What modes, qualities and attributes are.*

By *mode*, as used above, we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by an *attribute* or *quality*. But we employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified... (I, 211)

In another place, he explains modes in terms of the attributes in a thing that can change:

But I did not say that these attributes are present in the substances as in subjects distinct from them. We must take care here not to understand the word ‘attribute’ to mean simply ‘mode’, for we term an ‘attribute’ whatever we recognize as being naturally ascribable to something, whether it be a mode which is susceptible of change, or the absolutely immutable essence of the thing in question. Thus God has many attributes, but no modes. Again, one of the attributes of any substance is its subsisting on its own. (I, 297)

In a third place, he explains modes in terms of dependence and independence:

<In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter ‘substances’ and the former ‘qualities’ or ‘attributes’ of those substances.> (I, 210)

In yet another place, Descartes explains modes in terms of what is inconceivable apart from what:

As I explained above, the nature of a mode is such that it cannot be understood at all unless the concept of the thing of which it is a mode is implied in its own concept. (I, 301)

This last explanation fits with how I defined “X being a mode of Y” above: “X being a thing, Y being a thing and X being inconceivable apart from Y”. The last explanation and my explanation both also fit with how Descartes explains the modal distinction:

61. What is meant by a ‘modal distinction’.

A modal distinction can be taken in two ways: firstly, as a distinction between a mode, properly so called, and the substance of which it is a mode; and secondly, as a distinction between two modes of the same substance. The first kind of modal distinction can be recognized from the fact that we can clearly perceive a substance apart from the mode which we say differs from it, whereas we cannot, conversely, understand the mode apart from the substance. (I, 213-214)

Why did I choose to define “mode” in terms of inconceivability apart? Since this is a matter of definition, any choice would be acceptable philosophically. I chose to define “mode” the way I did because the relation of inconceivability apart is the most epistemologically fundamental relation here. It is because thing X is inconceivable apart from thing Y that X depends for its existence on Y. It is because X is inconceivable apart from Y that Y can persist while X is replaced with another attribute. And it is because X is inconceivable apart from Y that X can be thought of as “affecting” or “modifying” Y.

(Though this is somewhat misleading, as “affecting” and “modifying” may seem to import a causal element which need not be present.)

Next, let's consider the term “substance”. Descartes explains this term in a few different ways. First, Descartes explains “substance” in terms of independence. In Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*, he writes:

51. *What is meant by ‘substance’ – a term which does not apply univocally to God and his creatures.*

In the case of those items which we regard as things or modes of things, it is worthwhile examining each of them separately. By *substance* we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence. And there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence. Hence the term ‘substance’ does not apply *univocally*, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures...

52. *The term ‘substance’ applies univocally to mind and to body. How a substance itself is known.*

But as for corporeal substance and mind (or created thinking substance), these can be understood to fall under this common concept: things that need only the concurrence of God in order to exist. (I, 210)⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Descartes presents a similar definition elsewhere. He writes: “The answer is that the notion of a *substance* is just this – that it can exist by itself, that is without the aid of any other substance.” (II, 159) This particular formulation is circular.

Unfortunately, this passage cannot be taken at face value. Let's put aside the specialized meaning of "substance" Descartes reserves for God in the first passage above and consider the term as it applies to bodies and finite minds. On the strength of this passage, we might think to define "substance" as "a thing that does not depend on any other thing for its existence other than God". This definition of "substance" is peculiar, though. Under it, if we were to discover that bodies and finite minds were caused by a body or a finite mind, we would have to declare them non-substances. I think Descartes would reject this. As a result, I believe that Descartes is speaking imprecisely in this passage.

A better proposal, suggested by the passage, is that we define "substance" as "a thing that does not depend on any other thing for its existence other than a cause". Unfortunately, this will not work either. Bodies, according to Descartes, are substances. But bodies depend for their existence on their parts,⁷⁰ and the parts of bodies are bodies themselves and hence substances as well. Should we then define "substance" as "a thing that does not depend on any other thing for its existence other than a cause and other than its parts"?

Descartes explains the term "substance" differently in his geometrical presentation in the *Second Set of Replies*. There, he explains "substance" in terms of "existing in":

V. *Substance*. This term applies to every thing in which whatever we perceive immediately resides, as in a subject, or to every thing by means of which whatever we

⁷⁰ Descartes implies this in the *Discourse on the Method*: "But since I had already recognized very clearly from my own case that the intellectual nature is distinct from the corporeal, and as I observed that all composition is evidence of dependence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of these two natures, and consequently that he was not composed of them." (I, 128-129)

perceive exists. By ‘whatever we perceive’ is meant any property, quality or attribute of which we have real idea. The only idea we have of a substance itself, in the strict sense is that it is the thing in which whatever we perceive (or whatever has objective being in one of our ideas) exists, either formally or eminently. For we know by the natural light that a real attribute cannot belong to nothing. (II, 114)

This passage also cannot be taken at face value. Read most straightforwardly, this passage would have us understand a “substance” as being that which an attribute is an attribute of. However, this is imprecise. According to Descartes, the direction of a motion is an attribute of the motion, which is itself an attribute of a body. If a substance is that which an attribute is an attribute of, then we would have to conclude that motion was a substance. Descartes would not wish to use his terms in this way.

The obvious solution is to define “substance” as the counterpart term to “mode”. This is what I have done above, defining “substance” as “thing that is not a mode”. This is elegant terminologically. It avoids the problem with the explanation Descartes gives in the second passage. It also helps us make sense of the explanation Descartes gives in the first passage. A thing that is not a mode is not inconceivable apart from any other particular thing. As a result, according to Descartes, it does not depend on any other thing for its existence in the way that something that is inconceivable apart from another thing does. That is to say, it does not depend on any other thing for its existence in the characteristic way a mode depends on something for its existence.

Finally, let’s consider “inherence”. Descartes employs the term “inherence” in a number of places. In the *Fourth Set of Replies*, he writes:

We do not have immediate knowledge of substances, as I have noted elsewhere. We know them only by perceiving certain forms or attributes which must inhere in something if they are to exist; and we call the thing in which they inhere a ‘substance’. (II, 156)

In Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes writes:

The second kind of modal distinction is recognized from the fact that we are able to arrive at knowledge of one mode apart from another, and *vice versa*, whereas we cannot know either mode apart from the substance in which they both inhere. (I, 214)

And in the *Third Set of Objections With Replies*, he writes:

Now there are certain acts that we call ‘corporeal’, such as size, shape, motion and all others that cannot be thought of apart from local extension; and we use the term ‘body’ to refer to the substance in which they inhere... There are other acts which we call ‘acts of thought’, such as understanding, willing, imagining, having sensory perceptions, and so on: these all fall under the common concept of thought or perception or consciousness, and we call the substance in which they inhere a ‘thinking thing’ or a ‘mind’. (II, 124)

What is it for one thing to “inhere” in another? Descartes never explicitly defines or explains inherence anywhere. Context suggests, though, that Descartes uses the term “inherence” to refer to the relation between a mode and a substance. Consider the last passage quoted above. Size, shape and motion are all modes of extended substance, and Descartes says they “inhere” in extended substance. Understanding, willing, imagining and having sensory perceptions are all modes of thinking substance, and Descartes says

they “inhere” in thinking substance. It is very natural to interpret “inherence” as I have suggested.

§12.6. Objections and replies

I have presented a conception of things, substances, modes and inherence and I have argued that we should attribute these conceptions to Descartes. Now let’s consider some philosophical objections. These objections pertain to Descartes’ conception of “thing”. Raising and answering these objections will help us to understand Descartes’ conception more clearly.

The first objection is as follows. “According to Descartes, a thing is plurality of attributes. What is the relation between these attributes? According to Descartes, the relation is one of conceptual distinctness, which is to say, the attributes in a thing are merely conceptually distinct from one another. (We are considering only the thing itself here, not any of its modes.) This picture, however, contains a contradiction. On one hand, the things in question are *pluralities* of attributes. This means that there are several attributes per thing. On the other hand, to be conceptually distinct is to not truly be distinct at all. If X is conceptually distinct from Y, then X is identical to Y. This means that on the contrary, there is just one attribute per thing. One attribute is not several; things cannot both have just one attribute and several attributes. It follows that Descartes’ conception of a “thing” is contradictory.”

There are several possible responses to this. First, one might maintain that attributes in things are sometimes conceptually distinct from one another, but deny that conceptually distinct attributes are actually identical. This option is not available to

Descartes. As quoted earlier, Descartes maintains that God's attributes are identical to God:

[Descartes] Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself. (III, 348, Conversation with Burman)

He also maintains that God's attributes are merely conceptually distinct. This is evident from the fact that Descartes denies that God has modes. Descartes also states it explicitly in the case of God's decrees:

Then again, although we may conceive that the decrees could have been separated from God, this is merely a token procedure of our own reasoning: the distinction thus introduced between God himself and his decrees is a mental, not a real one. In reality the decrees could not have been separated from God: he is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could he have existed without them. (III, 348)

(If God is merely conceptually distinct from God's decrees, then God's decrees will also be merely conceptually distinct from one another.) So Descartes cannot avoid the problem by saying that conceptually distinct attributes are other than identical.

Another way to respond to the objection would be to grant that conceptually distinct attributes are impossible and to deny that any attributes are conceptually distinct. This option is also not available to Descartes. In addition to the case just mentioned, Descartes claims in a large number of cases that existing things have conceptually distinct attributes. For instance, he writes:

But existence, duration, size, number and all universals are not, it seems to me, modes in the strict sense; nor in this sense are justice, mercy, and so on modes in God. They are referred to by a broader term and called attributes, or modes of thinking, because

we do indeed understand the essence of a thing in one way when we consider it in abstraction from whether it exists or not, and in a different way when we consider it as existing; but the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence, or without its duration or size, and so on. Accordingly I say that shape and other similar modes are strictly speaking modally distinct from the substances whose modes they are; but there is a lesser distinction between the other attributes. This latter can be called modal – as I did at the end of my Replies to the First Objections – but only in a broad sense of the term, and it is perhaps better called formal. But to avoid confusion, in article 60 of Part One of my *Principles of Philosophy* where I discuss it explicitly, I call it a conceptual distinction... (III, 280)

A third response might be to reject Descartes' conception of "thing". One could reject the notion that a thing is a plurality of conceptually distinct attributes, and instead propose that what we have been calling "conceptually distinct attributes" are really just different concepts that refer to the same thing. Thus, for instance, we could say that God's omnipotence and God's eternity are really just the concepts <God being omnipotent> and <God being eternal>, both of which refer to God. This would reconcile the multiplicity of "conceptually distinct attributes" with the unity of the thing.

I do not believe Descartes would want to give this response either. As we will see later (§13), Descartes maintains that the idea of a thing is the thing itself, existing in a peculiar manner. It follows from this that Descartes affirms that the idea of conceptually distinct attributes actually is the plurality of those attributes, existing in a peculiar manner. But then we can raise the same problem for those attributes: are they identical or

distinct? If identical, why do we say there are more than one? If distinct, why do we say that they are merely conceptually distinct?

Instead, I believe that Descartes would give a different response. To understand this response, we will need to consider things, complexity and description. Some things are complex because they have parts. Other things are complex because they have modes. Now we can conceive of things that are complex even apart from any consideration of their modes or parts. Take such a thing. Mentally put aside its modes and parts and consider what remains. What remains will be a thing, considered apart from its connection to any other things. It will, as per stipulation, still be complex. Now we would of course like to describe this entity and its complexity. The usual way to describe a complex thing is to divide it into multiple things and then talk about those things and their relations to one another. In this case, though, we are considering a thing apart from its connection to any other things. So it will be impossible to divide it into things. How then can we describe it? One answer is that we will need to divide it, not into things, but in a way that cuts beneath the level of “things”.

Let us suppose that we can in fact divide the thing in this way. The result will be multiple – we cannot call them “things” – somethings. Those somethings will be not be parts or modes of the original thing. They will not be things. We might call them “attributes” and call the relation between them the relation of “conceptual distinctness”.

I believe that Descartes would affirm all of the preceding. I believe he would grant that there are things whose complexity goes beyond what is accounted for by their modes and parts. I believe he would say we should describe such complexity by cutting beneath the level of “things”. And I believe he calls the results “attributes” and the

relation between them, when had in a single thing, considered apart from modes and parts, “conceptual distinctness”.

How would Descartes respond to the objection raised above? Descartes would agree that there are several attributes per thing. He would agree that things’ attributes are conceptually distinct from one another. And he would agree that each of the attributes in a thing are identical to each other and to that thing. (Again, we are considering only the thing itself here, not any of its modes or parts.) But Descartes would deny that this implies a contradiction. In particular, he would deny that X being identical to Y implies that X is not distinct from Y. The opponent says: “One attribute is not several”; Descartes will respond that one attribute *is* identical to several, and also conceptually distinct from each.

Now this is a strange proposal. Attributes that are not things? Attributes being simultaneously identical to and distinct from other attributes? It may be tempting to believe that all that is being presented here is a change in nomenclature. For instance, one may propose that by “attribute”, Descartes really means “thing”; by “thing”, Descartes really means “composite”, and that by “conceptual distinctness” and “identity”, Descartes really means to refer to the disjunction of the co-part, part-whole and whole-part relations. If this were true, then to “cut beneath the level of things” would simply be to cut beneath the level of composites – a fairly straightforward task, barring infinite sequences of composition.

Unfortunately, while it would be nice to read Descartes as simply using some alternative nomenclature, this is not a viable option. Among other things, this would force us to read Descartes as believing that God was actually a composite entity, hence

dependent, hence imperfect, something he denies. Of course, one might try to maintain that dependency on attributes is not actual dependency, even if those attributes are distinct things. Or one might try to maintain that dependency on attributes, while an actual dependency, is not an actual imperfection. These and similar moves will not work. It is not the logic of Descartes' statements that lead him to posit the existence of a simple, perfect God, but rather the logic of his arguments. Changing the terminology will simply lead him to conclude that it is some *attribute* that is simple and perfect, rather than some *thing*, and will also lead him to conclude that that attribute contains something further, which he might call a "sub-attribute", etc.

Assuming now that my proposed interpretation of Descartes is correct and that Descartes is not simply proposing a new terminology, various objections may arise. First, one may argue against the idea of 'cutting beneath the level of things' as follows. "The concept "thing" is the most general possible concept. As such, it is not possible to make distinctions below the level of things. Divide a thing into *anything* – parts, modes, attributes, "somethings" – and you divide it into things. Descartes' view, however, maintains that things can be mentally divided into attributes, and that attributes are not things. It follows that Descartes' view is incorrect."

Against this, I believe Descartes would respond that the concept "thing" was not the most general possible concept, and that it did not apply to anything whatsoever. This is something that must be maintained by anyone who believes in complex, simple entities. To verify it, I believe Descartes would recommend that we examine our ideas and see whether we find that we have the idea of any complex simple entities. Do we have the idea of any thing that (a) does not have parts or modes, (b) does not consist of

further things, and (c) is such that multiple distinct non-relational concepts apply to it? Descartes would say yes. He would offer many examples, including “mind” (not considering the modes), “body” (not considering the parts or modes), “the idea ‘cat’”, “God”, and so on.

Alternatively, one might object in a different way. “According to the view proposed, an attribute X can be simultaneously identical to and distinct from some attribute Y. This, however, is a patent contradiction. Identity and distinctness are mutually exclusive. If X is identical to Y, then X is not distinct from Y in any way; if X is distinct from Y in any way, then X is not identical to Y.”

How would Descartes respond? I think that Descartes would deny that we have the idea of an identity relation that involves no distinctness. He writes:

Accordingly I say that shape and other similar modes are strictly speaking modally distinct from the substance whose modes they are; but there is a lesser distinction between the other attributes. This latter can be called modal – as I did at the end of my Replies to the First Objections – but only in a broad sense of the term, and it is perhaps better called formal. But to avoid confusion, in article 60 of Part One of my *Principles of Philosophy* where I discuss it explicitly, I call it a conceptual distinction – that is, a distinct made by the reason *ratiocinatae*. I do not recognize any distinction made by reason *ratiocinantis* – that is, one which has no foundation in reality – because we cannot have any thought without a foundation; and consequently in that article, I did not add the term *ratiocinatae*. (III, 280)

Here, Descartes discusses two types of distinction: a distinction of reason *ratiocinatae* and a distinction of reason *ratiocinantis*. The distinction of reason *ratiocinatae*, he says,

is a distinction that has a “foundation in reality”, while the distinction of reason *ratiocinantis* is a distinction that has no “foundation in reality”. He then denies that we have the idea of a distinction of reason *ratiocinantis*.

What should we make of this? A “distinction of reason” is just a conceptual distinction. And having a “foundation in reality”, I believe, simply means that in fact there is some sort of distinction between the things (or attributes) in question. Thus the distinction of reason *ratiocinatae* is a conceptual distinction where the attributes that are conceptually distinct are in fact distinct, while the distinction of reason *ratiocinantis* is a conceptual distinction where the attributes that are conceptually distinct are not in fact distinct. It is this latter relation that the objection above claims holds between attributes, and is incompatible with any distinctness. And it is this relation that Descartes denies we have any idea of.

Adjudication here, as in many places, involves examining our ideas. Do we have the idea of a relation of identity, a relation that involves no distinctness? Or are we simply repeating a single object twice and saying that we have thought a relation? Descartes will maintain the latter.

One final note about precision in expression. It is very natural to call anything and everything a *thing*. It is natural to say “attributes are a particular type of *thing*”, “there are *things* beneath the level of things” and “there are several types of *things*, namely substances, modes and attributes”. On the interpretation I have given above, however, Descartes would consider such formulations inaccurate. To speak more precisely, we should use a word attached to an idea that refers more generally than the idea “thing”. For this purpose, I will use the word “something”. Hence, when speaking precisely, I will not

say “attributes are a particular type of *thing*”. Rather, I will say “attributes are a particular type of *something*”. I will not say “there are several types of *things*, namely substances, modes and attributes”. Instead, I will say “there are several types of *some things*, namely substances, modes and attributes”. I admit that this phrasing is somewhat peculiar, but it is currently the best I have.

§13. Ways of Existing

§13.1. Introduction

In §§5-12, we introduced and elucidated a number of Cartesian concepts. Some were more familiar. Some were less so. We will now conclude Part I by introducing and explaining the Cartesian idea of there being various *ways of existing*.

§13.2. Descartes on representative existence

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes mentions multiple “modes of being”: an “objective mode of being” and the “formal mode of being”. He writes:

For if we suppose that an idea contains something which was not in its cause, it must have got this from nothing; yet the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively <or representatively> in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing. (II, 29)

For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas – or at least the first and most important ones – by *their* very nature. (II, 29; Descartes’ italics)

What are these “modes of being”? On the face of it, it seems that Descartes is saying that there are two different ways that things exist. Some things exist “formally”. Others exist “objectively” or “representatively”.

Many readers will balk at this straightforward reading. The idea of there being different ways of being is peculiar and hard to understand. Many will prefer instead to read Descartes as believing that there are things, there are representations of things, the

representations of things are themselves things, and that the representations of things are (typically) not identical to the things they represent. They will then prefer to interpret Descartes' claim that something "has the formal mode of being" as saying simply that it exists, and to interpret Descartes' claim that something "has the objective/representative mode of being" as saying that a representation of it exists. Under this interpretation, for instance, to say that a cat "has the formal mode of being" is to say that the cat exists, and to say that the cat "has the objective mode of being" or "has the representative mode of being" is to say that a representation of the cat exists. The representation of the cat, of course, would not literally be the cat.

There are some texts that fit this tamer reading. In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes writes:

Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term 'idea' is strictly appropriate – for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. (II, 25)

So it is clear to me, by the natural light, that the ideas in me are like <pictures, or> images which can easily fall short of the perfection of the thing from which they are taken, but which cannot contain anything greater or more perfect. (II, 29)

And again, in Part One of the *Principles of Philosophy*:

All the intricacy which is contained in the idea merely objectively – as in a picture – must be contained in its cause, whatever kind of cause it turns out to be; and it must be contained not merely objectively or representatively, but in actual reality, either formally or eminently, at least in the case of the first and principal cause. (I, 198-199)

In these passages, Descartes likens ideas to images. If Descartes believed that ideas were images, in the same way that the photograph of a person is an image of a person, then it would be better to read Descartes' talk of the "formal mode of being" and the "objective/representative mode of being" as merely an odd way of talking about the existence of things and the existence of the images of things. There would be no natural place for multiple ways of existing to come in.

However nice this interpretation would be, there is a passage which makes it clear that Descartes actually is talking about a special type of existence. In the *First Replies*, he writes:

Now I wrote that an idea is the thing which is thought of in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. But to give me an opportunity of explaining these words more clearly the objector pretends to understand them in quite a different way from that in which I used them. 'Objective being in the intellect', he says, 'is simply the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object, and this is merely an extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself.' Notice here that he is referring to the thing itself as if it were located outside the intellect, and in this sense 'objective being' simply means being in the intellect in the way in which objects are normally there. For example, if anyone asks what happens to the sun through its being objectively in my intellect, the best answer is that nothing happens to it beyond the application of an extraneous label which does indeed 'determine an act of the intellect by means of an object'. But if the question is about what the *idea* of the sun is, and we answer that it is the thing which is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect, no one will take this to be the sun itself with this extraneous label

applied to it. ‘Objective being in the intellect’ will not here mean ‘the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object’, but will signify the object’s being in the intellect in the way in which its objects are normally there. **By this I mean that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect.** Now this mode of being is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing. (II, 74-75; boldface mine)⁷¹

This passage makes it clear that Descartes does not believe that ideas are images. Ideas are the things themselves, existing in a peculiar manner. Let’s call that manner “representative existence”, and say that things that exist in that manner “exist representatively”.

The image of a cat is not a cat existing in a peculiar manner. Given this, one might wonder why Descartes likens ideas to images, as he does in the previously quoted passages. I believe the answer is that in those passages, Descartes is simplifying his views in order to explain them better to his audience. This is not unusual, especially for Descartes. Descartes often simplifies his views and/or tailors them to different audiences. It is no surprise that he gives us a simplification in the *Meditations* and a more complete and accurate story in the *Objections and Replies*.

⁷¹ Another passage occurs in the geometrical presentation in the *Second Replies*. Descartes writes: “III. *Objective reality of an idea*. By this I mean the being of the thing which is represented by an idea, in so far as this exists in the idea. In the same way we can talk of ‘objective perfection’, ‘objective intricacy’ and so on. For whatever we perceive as being in the objects of our ideas exists objectively in the ideas themselves.” (II, 113-114)

§13.3. Types of existence clarified

I have argued that Descartes believes in a “way of existing” (alternatively, a “type of existence”) which we have called “existing representatively”. This means that Descartes believes in ways of existence. What are those? How should they be understood?

Unfortunately, Descartes never explicitly explains what ways of existence are or how we should understand them. Thus we are on our own here. Absent specific guidance from the texts, my goal will be to provide an interpretation that is as charitable as possible and also coheres with Descartes’ philosophy.

First, we should understand the ways of existence as being fundamental, and “existence” itself as being the disjunction of all of the different ways of existence. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is parsimony. Once we have all of the different ways of existing, adding a non-disjunctive “existence” adds nothing. I will discuss the second reason in §13.8.

Next, we should understand ways of existing as being attributes. In the *Fifth Replies*, speaking of existence, Descartes writes:

2. Here I do not see what sort of thing you want existence to be, nor why it cannot be said to be a property just like omnipotence – provided, of course, that we take the word ‘property’ to stand for any attribute, or for whatever can be predicated of a thing; and this is exactly how it should be taken in this context. (II, 262-263)

Omnipotence is a paradigmatic example of an attribute. Taking “existence” to be the disjunction of all of the ways of existing, the most natural way to read this passage is as saying that each of the different ways of existing is an attribute.

Finally, we should understand ways of existing as being attributes that modify all other attributes. In particular, if X exists in way W and has another attribute A , then X has A in way W . For instance, if a cat exists representatively and is fluffy, then the cat is fluffy representatively.

Beyond that, I think the best way to understand ways of existence is to understand the different specific ways of existence. We will look at several different ways of existence over the next several sub-sections, starting with representative existence.

§13.4 Representative existence clarified

What is “representative existence”? As I have argued, Descartes believes that there is such a type of existence. How should we understand it?

I believe the best way to try to wrap our minds around this idea involves two steps.⁷² The first step is to identify the relation of representation and the relation of identity. Several problems arise from this identification; we will need to solve these problems. The second step involves examining our ideas and seeing what we see.

First, let’s identify the relation of representation and the relation of identity. Think of some actually existing thing. Call it “ X ”. Now think of the idea of X (i.e., $\langle X \rangle$). This idea stands in a particular relation to X . Call this relation the “relation of representation”.

⁷² As it turns out, I do not currently believe that “ways of existence” can be fully understood. Rather, I believe that in every conception of a “way of existence” there is some error, some confusion, some additional representational content that can be separated out. This means that in this and some of the following sections, I am attempting to convey an understanding that I believe would be dismantled by achieving even greater clarity. It is an interesting question how, given this belief, I can attempt to convey the ideas of different “ways of existence”. Briefly, my answer is that I believe that three factors are needed for an interpreter to give readers an idea used by an author. The author must have an idea that can be understood. The interpreter must put people into the conceptual vicinity of that idea. And the reader must be diligent and try to understand. In these sections, I am trying to do my part. Readers, no doubt, will do theirs. What remains is up to Descartes.

Now suppose that this relation of representation is nothing other than the relation of identity.

What follows from this? First, whenever the idea $\langle X \rangle$ exists, it represents X . If representation is nothing other than the relation of identity, then whenever the idea $\langle X \rangle$ exists, it is identical to X . This implies that whenever the idea $\langle X \rangle$ exists, X exists as well. This seems problematic. It seems quite possible for the idea of a thing to exist without the thing itself existing. For example, consider the idea of a cat. It seems quite possible for that idea to exist without any cats existing.

Second, if the relation of representation is the relation of identity, then whenever a thing is identical to some thing, it also represents that thing. But every existing thing is identical to itself. It follows that every thing represents itself. The only things that can represent things, however, are ideas. It follows that every thing is an idea. This also seems problematic. It seems that there are many existing things that are not ideas, including minds, regions of space, and so on.

Third, it seems that actually existing things typically have features that the corresponding ideas lack. For instance, consider some fluffy cat C . The idea of cat C (i.e., $\langle \text{cat } C \rangle$), is not, one would think, fluffy. The idea $\langle \text{cat } C \rangle$, though, represents cat C . If the relation of representation is the relation of identity, it follows that cat C is the idea $\langle \text{cat } C \rangle$. But then there would be an entity that was both fluffy and non-fluffy, an immediate contradiction.

These are some problems that result if we posit that the relation of representation and the relation of identity are the same. Now, let's solve these problems. There may be many different solutions; one is to introduce ways of existence. Suppose that there are at

least two ways of existence: “actual” existence and “representative” existence.⁷³ Suppose that every existing thing exists in one or more ways. Suppose that for every attribute that a thing has, that thing exists in some way W and that that way W modifies that attribute. Finally, suppose that X representing Y is nothing other than X being identical to Y while X (a.k.a. Y) exists representatively. This last supposition maintains the identification of the representation relation and the identity relation, while making the term “idea” extrinsically denominate things, and “representation relation” extrinsically denominate identity relations.

This solves all of the above problems. The first problem raised above was this: “If the relation of representation is the relation of identity, then whenever thing X exists, the idea of it (i.e., <X>) exists as well, and vice versa. But it seems possible for X to exist without idea <X> existing, and vice versa.” The response is this: When talking about X and the idea <X>, there is actually just a single thing under consideration. That thing is X. Now, X can exist actually, or it can exist representatively, or both. In all cases, it is identical to itself. If we refer to it using one term T₁ and another term T₂, then it is correct to say that T₁ and T₂ are identical. When thing X exists actually, we simply call it “thing X” and we say that it is identical to X. When thing X exists representatively, we call it “the idea <X>” and we say that it “represents” X, and when thing X does not exist representatively, we do not call X “the idea <X>”, we say that it is not an idea, and we say that it does not represent anything. This allows us to maintain that there is a single thing under consideration, which we call “X” and sometimes “the idea <X>”. It allows us to maintain that there is a single relation under consideration, the relation of identity,

⁷³ Later in §13.8, we will argue that Descartes does not actually believe in actual existence. For now though, it simplifies things to suppose that he does.

which we also sometimes call the relation of “representation”. It allows us to say that thing X can exist actually without existing representatively, and hence, without being called an “idea”. And it allows us to say that thing X can exist representatively without existing actually, and hence that the idea <X> can exist while X does not exist actually. This, I believe, is what Descartes would say, and I believe he would maintain that this captures every thing true about the thought behind the proposals that a thing X can exist without the idea <X> existing, and that the idea <X> can exist without thing X existing.

The second problem raised above was this: “If the relation of representation is the relation of identity, then because everything is identical to itself, it follows that everything represents itself. But only ideas represent things. It follows that everything is an idea – which is not true.” The response is this: In accordance with what we have said above, we only call a thing an “idea” and say that it “represents” a thing when it exists representatively. As a result, we only call thing X an idea when X exists representatively. Likewise, we only say that thing X represents a thing when thing X exists representatively. Every time we call a relation a “representation relation”, that relation is in fact just an identity relation. But it is not the case that every time there is an identity relation, we call it a “representation relation”. Thus it is incorrect to say “every thing is an idea” or to say “every identity relation is a representation relation”, even though idea <X> is always identical to thing X and every representation relation is identical to (and not merely a species of) an identity relation.

The last problem raised above was as follows: “Ideas represent things. If the representation relation is just the identity relation, then the idea of a thing is identical to

that thing. But things typically have features that the ideas of those things lack. For instance, a thing might be fluffy, but the idea of that thing will not be fluffy. Or a thing might be heavy. But the idea of that thing will not be heavy. In all such cases, the idea of the thing being identical to the thing results in a contradiction. It follows that the representation relation cannot be the identity relation.” The answer is this: Things exist in various ways. A thing X can exist actually, or exist representatively, or both. The case in question is a case where the thing exists both actually and representatively, and the claim is that the thing both has and lacks a feature. For instance, we might consider some cat C that exists both actually and representatively. Because cat C exists representatively, we also call it “the idea <cat C>”, and of course cat C and the idea <cat C> are identical. We might also consider some attribute that cat C is supposed to have and lack, such as fluffiness. The proposal is that cat C is fluffy, the idea <cat C> is not fluffy, and that because they are identical, a single thing both is fluffy and is not fluffy. However, this contradiction does not arise. Cat C is fluffy. Cat C also exists in some way, and as such, according to this way of thinking, also is fluffy in some way. In particular, cat C *actually* exists and is *actually* fluffy. Cat C is also identical to the idea <cat C>. The idea <cat C>, being identical to cat C, is also *actually* fluffy. Furthermore, idea <cat C> represents a thing as being fluffy, and thus is *representatively* fluffy as well. Cat C then, being identical to idea <cat C>, is also *representatively* fluffy. Altogether, there is a single thing, cat C, which *actually* exists, is *actually* fluffy, *representatively* exists and is *representatively* fluffy. The idea <cat C> itself is *actually* fluffy. But this does not mean that there is an idea in someone’s mind with little tufts of fluff sticking out. If when one says “ideas are not themselves fluffy” one means to rule out tufts of fluff sticking out the

mind, one should say that the mode of fluffiness that inheres in the *actually* existing cat and the *representatively* existing idea does not also inhere in the *actually* existing mind that has the idea of the fluffy cat. Descartes clearly would accept this.

Having proposed an identification of the relation of representation with the relation of identity, it is now possible to try to wrap our minds around the idea of existing representatively. Consider any thing and the idea of that thing. For instance, consider some book B and the idea of that book (i.e., <book B>). If the identification I have attributed to Descartes is correct, the idea of book B is actually book B existing representatively. It is then possible to acquaint oneself with the representative mode of existence by examining the idea <book B> on its own terms, and also by comparing it to book B in its actual mode of existence. This is the best way I know of to better understand what Descartes means when he talked about things existing objectively or representatively in the intellect.

One might wonder why one should identify the representation relation with the identity relation. Put differently, one might wonder why one should think that ideas that represent things are actually the things themselves. Descartes himself does not comment on this, so we cannot rely on the texts here. As far as what we might think ourselves, it is worth mentioning that the representation relation itself is a very puzzling phenomenon. The relation of representation seems to be an internal relation, i.e., whether it holds or not supervenes on the representation, its attributes, the thing represented and that thing's attributes. Most of the internal relations we are familiar with are similarity relations: being similar to, being taller than, etc. The relation of representation, though, does not seem to be a similarity relation. Contra Hume and Berkeley, for instance, ideas are not

faint versions of the things they represent. One internal relation that is not a similarity relation is the relation of identity; apart from that, there is the possibility of some further basic unanalyzable relation, or perhaps some other non-similarity-based internal relation. If one does not want to posit a basic unanalyzable relation of representation and one cannot find another suitable non-similarity-based internal relation, it might be that the best way to understand the representation relation is as an identity relation. That is precisely what I am arguing Descartes does.

Two notes before moving on to a discussion of a different way of existing. First, I should note that all representative existence is representative existence *in* a thing. A cat that exists representatively does not representatively exist *simpliciter*. It representatively exists in some mind or other, whichever mind has the idea.

Second, I should explain how this account of the relation of representation treats contradictory ideas. Merely false ideas are not problematic: the false idea <X> simply involves X existing representatively and not actually. Contradictory ideas are more difficult. If the idea <X> is X itself, existing representatively, then a contradictory idea is a contradictory thing, existing representatively. But contradictions cannot exist, actually or representatively.

The answer is that in contradictory ideas, contradictory attributes are not actually predicated of the same object. Rather, all contradictory ideas are obscure. In those ideas, some attributes are predicated of some things, some attributes are predicated of other things, and everything is bound together with one or more obscure relations. This makes it possible for all of the attributes represented to exist representatively without there being a contradiction. For instance, consider the idea <spherical cube>. This idea represents

attributes pertaining to being a sphere, attributes pertaining to being a cube, and one or more obscure relations joining these attributes. The attributes pertaining to being a sphere exist representatively; the attributes pertaining to being a cube exist representatively. But there is no contradiction in reality because those attributes are not, actually or representatively, attributes of the same thing. Try to think a contradictory idea, Descartes would say, and you will see that you have thought the contradictory attributes and introduced some obscure relations, but have not managed to predicate the contradictory attributes of the same object.

§13.5. Descartes on moral existence

Descartes admits at least two types of existence: the regular sort of existence and a special sort, had by things when they exist in the mind. Does Descartes admit any other types of existence? I believe the answer is yes.

In his 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes discusses his claim that God created the eternal truths. Descartes writes:

You ask me by what kind of causality God established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause. For it is certain that he is the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. I do not conceive them as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author...

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal – just as free as he was not to create the world. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word created for the existence of things, then he established them and made them. (III, 25)

Let us ignore the usual questions regarding the coherence of this position and instead ask a different question: What exactly are these eternal truths that God creates? Are they bodies? Are they minds? Are they parts or modes or attributes of God?

Many answers can be ruled out immediately. The eternal truths, according to Descartes, are determined by God to be necessary. As a result, they cannot be anything contingent. All bodies and finite minds are contingent. It follows that the eternal truths cannot be bodies or finite minds. Similarly, everything that depends on anything contingent is itself contingent. It follows that all of the modes and attributes of bodies and finite minds are contingent. It follows that the eternal truths cannot be modes or attributes of finite minds. This includes all ideas in any finite mind.

If the eternal truths cannot be bodies, finite minds or things dependent on them, what could they be? Descartes believes that every actually existing thing is a substance or mode. Every mode is a mode of a substance. Descartes discusses only three types of substance: bodies, finite minds and God. We have ruled out bodies, finite minds and their modes. A natural suggestion might then be that the eternal truths are parts or modes or attributes of God.

Unfortunately, the eternal truths cannot be parts or modes or attributes of God. Regarding parts, Descartes asserts that God has no parts.⁷⁴ Regarding modes, Descartes asserts that God has no modes.⁷⁵ And we have already seen Descartes indicate that he does not think the eternal truths are attributes of God. In the passage quoted just above, Descartes says:

And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. (III, 25)

Since God does not have modes, it follows that Descartes must affirm that all of God's attributes are necessarily attached to God's essence. It follows that Descartes must not think that the eternal truths are attributes of God.

What options remain? The eternal truths are not identical to God, finite minds, bodies or any of their modes or attributes. Perhaps, one might think, the eternal truths are some new kind of substance, similar to bodies and finite minds, but immutable once created. There are several problems with this. First, Descartes explicitly states that he only recognizes two classes of things, namely, minds and bodies:

But I recognize only two ultimate classes of things: first, intellectual or thinking things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or thinking substance; and secondly, material things, i.e. those which pertain to extended substance or body. (I, 208)

⁷⁴ In his 5 February 1649 letter to More, Descartes writes: "Nothing of this kind can be said about God or about our mind; they cannot be apprehended by the imagination, but only by the intellect; nor can they be distinguished into parts, and certainly not into parts which have determinate sizes and shapes." (III, 361). See also I, 201, where Descartes says that God is not divisible.

⁷⁵ In Part One of the *Principles*, Descartes writes: "Hence we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible." (I, 211) Also, in his *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes writes: "We must take care not to understand the word 'attribute' to mean simply 'mode', for we term an 'attribute' whatever we recognize as being naturally ascribable to something, whether it be a mode which is susceptible of change, or the absolutely immutable essence of the thing in question. Thus God has many attributes, but no modes." (I, 297) Elsewhere, Descartes says that whatever is within God is identical to God (III, 348). This rules out modes.

Eternal truths are not minds or bodies. Thus if Descartes thought that eternal truths were a further kind of substance, Descartes would say that he recognizes three classes of things: minds, bodies and eternal truths. He does not. Hence, Descartes does not believe that eternal truths are substances.

Second, in the passage on the eternal truths quoted above, Descartes says:

You ask what God did in order to produce [the eternal truths]. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. Or, if you reserve the word created for the existence of things, then he established them and made them. (III, 25)

This passage indicates that Descartes does not believe the eternal truths are actually existing things. But any created substance is an actually existing thing. It follows that Descartes does not believe that the eternal truths are substances.⁷⁶

The eternal truths, according to Descartes, are not substances or modes. They are not bodies, finite minds or God. Perhaps, one might think, the eternal truths are not really anything at all, but instead are nothing. Unfortunately, Descartes rules this out as well:

I do not conceive [the eternal truths] as emanating from God like rays from the sun; but I know that God is the author of everything and that these truths are something and consequently that he is their author... (III, 25)

What then are the eternal truths? I believe only one possible answer remains: eternal truths are attributes existing in a peculiar fashion. Why? Eternal truths are not

⁷⁶ There is a further reason to question the idea that Descartes believes that the eternal truths are substances. In Part One of the *Principles*, Descartes writes: "53. *To each substance there belongs one principal attribute; in the case of mind, this is thought, and in the case of body it is extension.* A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred." (I, 210) From this, it follows that if the eternal truths are substances, then they must each have a principal attribute. But it is unclear what that principal attribute might be. The principal attribute of mind is thought; the principal attribute of body is extension. What is the principal attribute of the eternal truth " $2 + 2 = 4$ "?

nothing, but are also not things. The only remaining possibility is that eternal truths are attributes. It follows that eternal truths are attributes. Now, every attribute that is not nothing is either an actually existing attribute or an attribute that exists in some peculiar fashion. Every actually existing attribute, however, is an attribute of a necessarily existing thing or a contingently existing thing. The only necessarily existing thing, according to Descartes, is God. But we have seen that the eternal truths are not attributes of God. And we have also seen that the eternal truths are not attributes of contingently existing things, lest they themselves be contingent. It follows that the eternal truths are attributes but are not actually existing attributes. It follows that the eternal truths are attributes that exist in some peculiar manner.

Above, I argued that we should interpret Descartes as believing that things could exist in a peculiar way we called “existing representatively”. To exist representatively, a thing must exist in a mind. According to Descartes, however, the eternal truths can exist while no finite minds exist. And, according to Descartes, the eternal truths do not exist in the mind of God. To exist in the mind of God, the eternal truths would need to be attributes of God, but this has already been ruled out. It follows that according to Descartes, the eternal truths can exist in whatever peculiar manner they exist while not existing representatively. It follows from this that we should assign to Descartes the view that there is a further way things can exist beyond existing actually or existing representatively.

What should we call this new form of existence? In the *Sixth Replies*, speaking of the creation of the eternal truths, Descartes writes:

There is no need to ask what category of causality is applicable to the dependence of this goodness upon God, or to the dependence on him of other truths, both mathematical and metaphysical. For since the various kinds of cause were enumerated by thinkers who did not, perhaps, attend to this type of causality, it is hardly surprising that they gave no name to it. But in fact they did give it a name, for it can be called efficient causality, in the sense that a king may be called the efficient cause of a law, although the law itself is not a thing which has physical existence, but is merely what they call a ‘moral entity’. (II, 294)

Here, Descartes says that the eternal truths are “moral entities”. But as we have seen, the eternal truths are not a new type of entity. Rather, they are an old type – attributes – existing in a new manner. Let’s call this form of existence “moral existence” and say that anything that exists in this manner “exists morally”.

Before moving on, there are two concerns worth addressing. The first concern arises from a particular text. In Part One of the *Principles*, Descartes writes:

48. *All the objects of our perception may be regarded either as things or affections of things, or as eternal truths. The former are listed here.*

All the objects of our perception we regard either as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside our thought. (I, 208)

One might read this text as asserting that according to Descartes, the eternal truths do not have any existence outside of our thought. One might then conclude that the eternal truths exist only in our thought, and do not exist otherwise, either morally or actually.

However, I think that this is not the right way to read the text. In the passage just quoted, Descartes uses the phrase “the objects of our perception”, both in his heading and

in the body of the text. This means that Descartes is saying that all of the things that we are aware of are existing things, existing modes or things that exist representatively. This is perfectly consistent with the proposal that Descartes admits the moral existence of things that we are not aware of.

The second concern is more complex. The interpretation I gave above touches on the status of the eternal truths, a topic closely connected to Descartes' doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths (DCET), i.e., the view that God created the eternal truths, could have created them otherwise, and more generally could have made contradictories true together.⁷⁷ My interpretation also draws heavily on passages where Descartes discusses that doctrine. One might worry that DCET is incoherent, that as such all closely related topics in Descartes' philosophy cannot be reliably interpreted, and that all of the relevant passages are not to be trusted.

This is an understandable concern. I do believe that correctly interpreting DCET is challenging and that nearby doctrines and the relevant passages are harder to interpret as a result. However, I do not think that an incoherence in a doctrine is enough to prevent it from being interpreted well, and I think the damage from an incoherent doctrine can often be contained. In the case of DCET, there are two obvious sources of incoherence. The first source is that the claim that God creates the eternal truths appears to be universal, and thus to apply to all attributes. If that is correct, then we would have to

⁷⁷ In his 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes writes: "I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories could not be true together. It is easy to dispel this difficulty by considering that the power of God cannot have any limits, and that our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. The first consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. The second consideration assures us that even if this be true, we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so." (III, 235)

conclude that God, via God's being all-powerful, caused God's being all-powerful. This is circular. The second source is the claim that God could have created different and/or contradictory eternal truths. This implies that God could have caused there to be true contradictions, which is impossible. Neither of these sources of incoherence substantially impact my argument for the claim that Descartes believes in a way of existing we have called "existing morally".

Regarding the first source of incoherence, we can simply restrict our consideration to eternal truths that do not involve God's attributes. Now, the problematic circularity does not arise, and I can simply make the same argument I made above. God created some eternal truths that do not involve God's attributes. What are these eternal truths? They are not nothing, but yet are not things; they are not attributes of God or of contingent things, therefore, etc.

Regarding the second source of incoherence, things are a little trickier. If God could have made contradictories true together, God could also have created eternal truths that are not nothing and yet do not exist in any sense. This is a contradiction, clearly, but according to DCET, God could do it.⁷⁸ Of course, Descartes assures us that God has created our minds to be able to tell what is possible and impossible.⁷⁹ Unfortunately,

⁷⁸ In his 1648 letter to Pollot, Descartes writes: "But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. I think the same should be said of a space which is wholly empty, or of an extended piece of nothing, or of a limited universe; because no limit to the world can be imagined without its being understood that there is extension beyond it; and no barrel can be conceived to be so empty as to have inside it no extension, and therefore no body; for wherever extension is, there, of necessity, is body also." (III, 358-359) The extended piece of nothing sounds very similar to non-existent eternal truths.

⁷⁹ Again from the passage in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, quoted in footnote 77: "...our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible." (III, 235)

according to DCET, God could both create our minds in a way that lets us infallibly determine what is possible and impossible *and* make it so we wrongly judge that it is impossible for there to be eternal truths that are not nothing and yet do not exist in any sense.

DCET permits this unpleasant scenario. Fortunately, we should prefer simpler, more elegant interpretations consistent with the texts over more complex ones. And it is simpler to interpret Descartes as affirming DCET while also affirming that God did not create any true contradictions. Interpreting Descartes as holding that God did not in fact create any true contradictions, the option of God creating eternal truths that do not exist in any sense is ruled out. This leaves us with the interpretation I have given above, and permits me to argue that Descartes thinks that there is a special manner of existing apart from existing actually or existing representatively.

§13.6. Moral existence clarified

I have argued that Descartes admits a special type of existence I have called “moral existence”. How should we understand this? Descartes gives us virtually no guidance. Thus we are left to figuring it out on our own.

Some things exist, such as bodies and minds. Other things fail to exist, such as round squares and chimeras. According to our normal way of thinking, there is no middle ground here, no category between full existence and complete non-existence. That said, there are a few things that, when we try to understand them, it is quite natural to place into a middle category between existence and non-existence. I will give two examples.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ As I noted in footnote 72, I do not actually believe that ways of existence can be clearly understood. That applies here as well. While I think that there are some things that naturally seem to fall between existence

First, it is easy to think of the world as being governed by structural rules. For instance, conceive a world in which time passes and things change. Why does time pass at all? Pre-theoretically, it is easy to think: “Because that is a fact about how the world works. It’s a rule that time will continue to pass.” Or, conceive a world in which there must be a cause for everything. Why must there be a cause for everything? Pre-theoretically, it is easy to think: “Because that is a fact about how the world works. It’s a rule that there must be a cause for everything.”

Let’s grant that it is possible to think of time passing in a world because it is a rule that time must pass, and that it is possible to think that there must be a cause for everything in a world because it is a rule that there must be a cause for everything. Now let’s examine this more closely. What exactly are these rules? Are they physical rules written on a sheet of paper somewhere? Clearly not. Are they propositions in a finite mind? No, they would hold even if all finite minds ceased to exist. It is easy to conceive of this sort of rule as being a proposition in the mind of God, and being causally efficacious because of God’s unlimited power. But let’s rule that out for now. Could rules like “time passes” and “everything must have a cause” be abstract propositions? It seems not. Propositions are made true by what they describe, they do not make things true by describing them.⁸¹ What then are these rules? We do not want to say that they exist, since then we might wonder about what causes them or whether they could cease to exist and hence cease to operate. But we also do not want to say that they do not exist, since then they would be nothing and would not govern the world.

and non-existence, in fact there is no middle ground, and that the things that seems to fall into a middle ground must be fully accounted for among the things that exist, if they are to be accounted for at all.

⁸¹ Apart from self-referential cases like <some proposition exists>.

This is one example where it may be natural to postulate an intermediate form of existence, a form of existence that pertains to things that shape the domain, as it were, in which things exist. By having rules like “time passes” and “everything must have a cause” exist in this peculiar way, we might exempt them from questions about what caused them, or whether they can change, or how they are causally efficacious. We might render them eternal and bake them into the fabric of the universe, without having them actually have to be substances or modes. I believe that this is what Descartes is thinking of when he speaks of “moral entities”, and hence, things existing morally.

A second example pertains to merely possible things. Had God not created finite minds, finite minds would still be possible. Had God not created bodies, bodies would still be possible. What should we think of these merely possible entities? We do not want to say that they exist, lest they be actual, rather than merely possible. We do not want to say that they are nothing, since then we could not distinguish them from one another or refer to them. This is another case where one might want to speak of an intermediate form of existence, a form of existence that shapes the domain in which things exist.

I have given two examples of things – structural rules and merely possible things – where one might not want to say that they exist while also not wanting to say that they do not exist. I believe Descartes considers these things (or more precisely, these attributes, these somethings) to exist in a peculiar sense. It is this sense that I have dubbed “existing morally”.

What follows from postulating this way of existing? The primary consequence is that by having this way of existing, Descartes has somewhere to place eternal truths and possible entities. “Time passes” is an eternal truth, which exists morally even if it does

not exist representatively in any mind. Likewise for “ $2+2 = 4$ ”. Bodies and finite minds exist morally, until they are caused to exist in some other way by an efficient cause.

Now, it is common among contemporary philosophers to admit the existence of eternal truths and merely possible entities, but to call these things “abstract” rather than giving them a special form of existence. One might wonder, why should we consider eternal truths and merely possible entities to exist in a special way, rather than postulating that they all have a special attribute that does not pertain to existence (i.e., “abstractness”)?

I believe that Descartes, if I have constructed his views properly, would give the following answer. Every actually existing mind must be aware of something. Thus, if we consider merely possible minds to actually exist but be “abstract”, then we must also consider those merely possible minds to be aware of something. But it is part of being merely possible that a merely possible mind is not aware of anything. It follows that we cannot consider merely possible minds to actually exist and be “abstract”; the actual existence rules out the important part of being merely possible, and the “abstractness” is irrelevant. More generally, I believe that Descartes thinks that there are eternal, universal truths about actually existing things, and that these eternal, universal truths do not always need to apply to all eternal truths and merely possible entities. As such, those eternal truths and merely possible entities must be capable of a form of existence that does not involve existing actually.

§13.7. Descartes on possible and necessary existence

Descartes sometimes talks about positive existence and necessary existence. For instance, in the *First Set of Replies*, he writes:

But to remove the first part of the difficulty we must distinguish between possible and necessary existence. It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary existence so contained, except in the idea of God. (II, 83)

And in the *Second Set of Replies*, he writes:

Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing. Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being. (II, 117)

Should we add possible existence and necessary existence as ways of existing, alongside representative existence and moral existence?

I believe the answer is no. Possible existence is straightforward enough: we can simply say that possible existence is the same as moral existence. No difference between the two need be posited.

Regarding necessary existence, we can say that X has necessary existence exactly when one or more of X's attributes (not the attributes of X's modes) imply the attribute [X exists in way W], where way W is a way of existence other than moral existence. This is enough to make it so the mere moral existence of the thing's attributes entail that the thing exists more than just morally. In line with this, Descartes writes:

It must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand; but in no case is necessary

existence so contained, except in the case of the idea of God. Those who carefully attend to this difference between the idea of God and every other idea will undoubtedly perceive that even though our understanding of other things always involves understanding them as if they were existing things, it does not follow that they do exist, but merely that they are capable of existing. For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists. (II, 83)

§13.8. Descartes vs. actual existence

I have argued that Descartes believes in two special types of existence: “representative existence” (§13.2) and “moral existence” (§13.5). Of course, these cannot be the only types of existence Descartes recognizes. Descartes believes that bodies, finite minds and God exist, and that none of these things exist merely representatively and/or morally.

The natural candidate for a further type of existence is “actual existence”.

Descartes explicitly discusses “actual existence” in the passage quoted just above, from his *First Replies*:

For our understanding does not show us that it is necessary for actual existence to be conjoined with their other properties. But, from the fact that we understand that actual existence is necessarily and always conjoined with the other attributes of God, it certainly does follow that God exists. (II, 83)

However, as I will now argue, I think that Descartes is committed to denying that “actual existence” is a type of existence.

In several places, Descartes maintains that anything that has sufficient power to cause an external substance (i.e., a substance not identical to itself) also has sufficient power to keep itself existing. In the *First Replies*, Descartes writes:

Indeed, I will now add something which I have not put down in writing before, namely that the cause we arrive at cannot merely be a secondary cause; for a cause which possesses such great power that it can preserve something situated outside itself must, *a fortiori*, preserve itself by its own power, and hence derive its existence from itself. (II, 80)

Also, in Part One of the *Principles*, Descartes writes:

We also understand that he who has so great a power that he can keep us in existence, although we are distinct from him, must be all the more able to keep himself in existence; or rather, he requires no other being to keep him in existence, and hence, in short, is God. (I, 200)⁸²

Now, why does Descartes think that anything with enough power to cause an external substance also has enough power to keep itself existing? Descartes does not explicitly tell us.⁸³ Nevertheless, I believe we can piece together the answer.

First, consider the following axiom, which Descartes presents in the *Second*

Replies:

⁸² In this and the preceding passage, context indicates that Descartes is talking about the power to cause an external *substance*, not an external mode.

⁸³ Descartes *does* take the time to note that he has an explanation and that the explanation is complex. In his 31 December 1640 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes: “You find obscure the sentence where I say that whatever has the power to create or preserve something separate from itself has *a fortiori* the power to preserve itself. But I do not see how to make it clearer without adding many words, which would be inelegant since I only mention the matter briefly by the way.” (III, 166) Descartes never clarifies this anywhere.

VIII. Whatever can bring about a greater or more difficult thing can also bring about a lesser thing. (II, 117)

This indicates that Descartes believes that acts can be at least partially ordered in terms of difficulty. Now every time Descartes says that anything that has enough power to cause an external substance also has enough power to keep itself in existence, he uses some locution like “*a fortiori*” or “all the more”. This indicates that Descartes believes that the reason that anything that has enough power to cause an external substance also has enough power to keep itself in existence is that causing an external substance is more difficult than keeping oneself in existence.

Why would Descartes think that causing an external substance is more difficult than keeping oneself existing? For X to cause an external substance Y to exist, X must cause Y to have some attribute that is a type of existence. In addition, since every substance with an external cause has modes, for X to cause an external substance Y to exist, X must also cause Y to have one or more modes. This is true whether X causes the mode directly, or whether X causes external substance Y, which simultaneously causes itself to have mode Z.⁸⁴ For X to cause itself to exist, X need only cause itself to have a type of existence. Thus, for X to cause an external substance Y to exist, it must do everything it needs to do to keep itself existing and more.

Now consider the following. According to Descartes, anything that can cause something external to exist in some way can also cause itself to exist in that way.

Descartes applies this to substances causing external substances, but it applies equally well to substances causing their own modes. This implies that if an enmoded mind has

⁸⁴ According to Descartes, causation is transitive (§6). It follows that if X causes external substance Y and Y simultaneously causes itself to have mode Z, X causes external substance Y and X causes Y to have mode Z.

the power to cause itself to have a mode, i.e., to cause that mode to actually exist, and actual existence is an attribute, then that enmoded mind has the power to cause itself to actually exist. But enmoded minds *do* have the power to cause modes in themselves⁸⁵ and do *not* have the power to cause themselves to actually exist. It follows that Descartes is committed to denying that actual existence is an attribute.

For the same reason, it is best to not interpret Descartes as believing in an attribute [existence], which would have all of the ways of existence under it as species. If there were such a thing as existence, then an enmoded mind would have the power to give existence to some of its possible modes, and hence would have the power to give existence to itself.

§13.9. Descartes on subsistent existence and inherent existence

I have just argued that Descartes is committed to denying that actual existence is an attribute. What does he mean, then, when he speaks of “actual existence”? Descartes also talks about *inherence* and *subsistence*. I believe the best route is to take those to be two further types of existence, and to read “actual existence” as the disjunction “either inherent existence or subsistent existence”.

First, some passages. In §12.5, we saw several passages pertaining to inherence.

In the *Fourth Replies*, Descartes talks about “subsisting things”. He writes:

⁸⁵ For instance, in Descartes’ letter to [Mesland] of 2 May 1644, Descartes writes: “Just as it is not an activity but a passivity in the wax to take various shapes, so, it seems to me, it is a passivity in the soul to receive one or other idea, and only its volitions are activities. It receives its ideas partly from impressions in the brain, and partly from prior dispositions in the soul and from movements of the will.” (III, 232) This indicates that Descartes believes that a mind and its will can cause itself to have ideas, which in turn indicates that Descartes believes that an enmoded mind can cause itself to have a mode.

Hence, had I not been looking for greater than ordinary certainty, I should have been content to have shown in the Second Meditation that the mind can be understood to be a subsisting thing despite the fact that nothing belonging to the body is attributed to it, and that, conversely, the body can be understood as a subsisting thing despite the fact that nothing belonging to the mind is attributed to it. (II, 159)

In the *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, Descartes writes:

Again, one of the attributes of any substance is its subsisting on its own. (I, 297)

Now, what are inherence and subsistence? It is clear enough when a thing inheres, and when a thing subsists. A thing subsists when it is a substance and actually exists. A thing inheres in something when it is a mode of something and actually exists. But what are the attributes here? Are subsistence and inherence conjunctions of attributes or attributes in their own right? If the subsistence of X were a conjunction of attributes, it would be the conjunction of [X actually existing] and [X being a substance]. If the inherence of X in Y were a conjunction of attributes, it would be the conjunction of [X actually existing] and [X inhering in Y]. On the other hand, if subsistence and inherence are non-conjunctive attributes, then the relevant attributes are [X existing subsistently] and [X existing inherently in Y].

As I argued above, Descartes is committed to denying that there is an attribute [X actually existing]. Hence I think we should interpret him as admitting subsistent existence and inherent existence, and corresponding attributes such as [X existing subsistently] and [X existing inherently in Y].

§13.10. Subsistent existence and inherent existence clarified

In the preceding section, I proposed that Descartes admits two further ways of existing: existing subsistently and existing inherently. What are these? I have only a few words to say about each.

First, existing subsistently. This way of existence is the easiest to understand. It is the way of existing that is had by all substances, and it is the way of existing people typically think of when they think of existence. If *per impossibile* there were only one way of existing, it would be existing subsistently.

Next, existing inherently. This is the way of existence that is had by all modes. The best way to understand it is to think about examples of modes and try to understand their dependence on what they inhere in as being a function of the way in which they exist. They don't just exist – they *exist in*.

One additional note. Inherent existence is always inherent existence *in* something. Similarly, representative existence is always representative existence *in* something. And in fact, representative existence is a species of inherent existence.

§13.11. Summary of ways of existing

In this section we have seen a proliferation of ways of existing, and I have attributed all of them to Descartes. Why? Descartes explicitly talks about representative existence. Moral existence must be posited to make sense of merely possible entities and eternal truths. Actual existence must be included in some way, but if it is included as such, then enmoded minds that have the power to cause themselves to have modes would *a fortiori* have the power to cause themselves to actually exist. So actual existence cannot be included as such. Instead, inherence and subsistence must be distinguished as types of

existence, and “actual existence” must be taken as the disjunction “subsistent existence or inherent existence”.

These ways of existing relate to one another in a number of ways. Anything that exists subsistently, inherently or representatively also exists morally. Anything that exists representatively in a thing also exists inherently in that thing. And the very same thing can exist in all four ways simultaneously. For instance, a tetrahedron might exist morally, subsistently, representatively in mind M, and hence also inherently in mind M as part of existing representatively in mind M.

§14. God

§14.1. A definition of God

The last idea we will clarify in Part I is Descartes' idea of God.

Descartes indicates that the definition of the idea <God> should include various things, including “perfect”,⁸⁶ “thing”⁸⁷ and “being”.⁸⁸ Thus I take Descartes' definition of God to be “a perfect thing”, or, in the terminology we introduced in §6, “a thing that encompasses every perfection”.

- X being a God =_{def}
 - X encompassing every perfection,
i.e., for every perfection Y, X having Y or X having a higher form of Y.

Here, “every” quantifies over every attribute that exists at least morally, which is to say, over every consistent attribute. This fits with Descartes' statement in the Third Meditation:

It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God either formally or eminently. (II, 32)

One might think that the definition of God should include various perfections, such as omnipotence or omniscience.⁸⁹ But Descartes indicates that this is not the case, when he tells us that we do not need to think of these when we think of God:

⁸⁶ Descartes indicates that the definition of “God” should include “perfect” in I, 211; II, 46-47, 99, 273; III, 186. In addition, Descartes says that God is perfect in many places: I, 197, 200; II, 35, 76; III, 265, 377.

⁸⁷ Descartes indicates that the definition of “God” should include “thing” in II, 273.

⁸⁸ See I, 211; II, 99; III, 186 for passages where Descartes indicates that the definition of God should include “being”.

⁸⁹ For instance, see I, 197.

Now admittedly, it is not necessary that I ever light upon any thought of God; but whenever I do choose to think of the first and supreme being, and bring forth the idea of God from the treasure house of my mind as it were, it is necessary that I attribute all perfections to him, even if I do not at that time enumerate them or attend to them individually. (II, 46-47)

Descartes also occasionally indicates that the definition of God should include “substance”.⁹⁰ But we do not need to include “substance” in the definition of God, since the fact that X is a substance can be demonstrated from the fact that X is a thing that encompasses all perfections.

§14.2. A clear and distinct understanding of God

We have defined Descartes’ idea <God>. Do we now have a clear and distinct understanding of this idea? Descartes speaks frequently about the importance of having clear and distinct ideas, and says that the idea <God> is the clearest and most distinct idea we have:

The idea [of God] is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it. It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite, and that I judge that all the attributes which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection – and perhaps countless others of which I am ignorant – are present in God

⁹⁰ See I, 211; II, 114.

either formally or eminently. This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas. (II, 32)

There are, generally speaking, two ways to understand the idea <God>. The first is by rounding up a bunch of divine attributes and then mashing them together into a single concept, without seeing how any of them imply any of the others. This can be done while thinking the attributes specifically; in this case, one might understand the idea <God> as the idea <thing with unlimited power and omniscience that created all existing things and that exists necessarily and is not a deceiver>. Or, this can be done while thinking of the attributes more generally; in this case, one might understand the idea <God> as the idea <thing with divine attribute #1 and divine attribute #2 and all of the other divine attributes, whatever they may be>. This way of understanding the idea <God> involves combining attributes without being aware of the relations of immediate implication between them, and hence involves the addition of obscure relations. The result is an idea of God that is obscure and confused.

The other way to understand the idea <God> is to start with a single divine attribute that is understandable apart from all of the others, and then to infer from that divine attribute to the thing with that attribute encompassing every perfection. By following this procedure, the resultant idea is guaranteed to be clear and distinct (see §11), and is also guaranteed to fit the definition of God we gave above.

This way of understanding God is better philosophically, as it handles concerns about the consistency of the divine attributes, and is undoubtedly far more Cartesian. Here is how to generate this idea. Start with the attribute [having unlimited power]. Any thing that has unlimited power has sufficient power to cause any consistent thing other

than itself. Now, if a thing has sufficient power to cause X, then it is possible for it, as it currently is, to cause X. But if it is possible for a thing, as it currently is, to cause X, then by the Perfection causal principle (PCP), it also encompasses all of the perfections of X. It follows that if a thing has sufficient power to cause X, it encompasses all of the perfections of X. It follows that any thing that has unlimited power encompasses all of the perfections of every consistent thing other than itself. But every thing encompasses its own perfections, as every thing has its own perfections and every thing by definition encompasses all of the perfections it has. It follows that any thing that has unlimited power encompasses all of the perfections of every consistent thing... and hence is a God.

This, I believe, is how Descartes understands the idea <God>. This way of understanding the idea <God> has a few virtues. First, it is, according to Descartes' way of thinking, clear and distinct. Second, it is useful in formulating Descartes' first argument for the existence of God, as we shall soon see (§16). Third, it sheds light on some other obscure areas in Descartes' philosophy. For instance, when discussing God in the Fourth Set of Replies, Descartes writes:

The further proposition that if there is such a being he will give himself all the perfections of which he possesses an idea, if indeed he does not yet have them, means that this being cannot but possess in actuality all the perfections of which he is aware. This is because we perceive by the natural light that a being whose essence is so immense that he does not need an efficient cause in order to exist, equally does not need an efficient cause in order to possess all the perfections of which he is aware: his own essence is the eminent source which bestows on him whatever we can think of as being capable of being bestowed on anything by an efficient cause. (II, 168)

What is the essence of God that is so “immense” that it bestows on God all of the perfections of which God is aware? The answer is: the attribute [having unlimited power]. It is unsurprising Descartes calls such an essence “immense”, and we have seen how it automatically implies that its bearer encompasses every perfection.

Part II: Descartes' First Argument for the Existence of God

§15. Introduction to Part II

At the beginning of this work, I raised an objection to Descartes' philosophy. The objection is that Descartes' epistemology and metaphysics appear to be radically inconsistent. His epistemology includes as a central component extremely strict standards for clarity and justification. But his metaphysics seems to frequently and blatantly violate these. Descartes appears to utilize many concepts that fail his standards for clarity and to accept many propositions that fail his standards for justification.

I believe that while Descartes did not achieve the true philosophy, Descartes' metaphysics does not frequently and blatantly violate his extremely high epistemic standards. Instead, I believe that a more thorough examination of Descartes' concepts will show that many of his concepts are much clearer than others have thought. And I believe that a more thorough examination of Descartes' arguments, conducted after having spent time elucidating Descartes' concepts, will show that those arguments are much, much better than others have believed.

In Part I, I examined and clarified Descartes' concepts. In this Part, I will examine one of Descartes' arguments. In particular, I will look at the first argument Descartes gives for the existence of God in the *Meditations*. This is, after all, where most people first encounter the seeming radical inconsistency of Descartes' metaphysics and epistemology. My goal will be to use our new understanding of Descartes' concepts to shed significant light on this argument. By doing this, I hope to make it more plausible that Descartes' metaphysics does not so obviously violate his extremely high epistemic standards.

§16. Descartes' Representative Perfection Argument for the Existence of God

§16.1. The Representative Perfection Causal Principle (RPCP), explained

Descartes' first argument for the existence of God in the Third Meditation relies on the Representative Perfection Causal Principle (i.e., the RPCP). Let's call that argument the "Representative Perfection" argument for the existence of God, or the "RP argument" for short.

In order to explain the RP argument, we will first need to explain the RPCP.

Descartes gives several different formulations. Here are a few:

But in order for a given idea to contain such and such objective reality, it must surely derive it from some cause which contains at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality in the idea. (II, 28-29)

For just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas – or at least the first and most important ones – by *their* very nature. And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally <and in fact> all the reality <or perfection> which is present only objectively <or representatively> in the idea. (II, 29)

It follows from this that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently. (II, 116)

All the intricacy which is contained in the idea merely objectively – as in a picture – must be contained in its cause, whatever kind of cause it turns out to be; and it must be contained not merely objectively or representatively, but in actual reality, either formally or eminently, at least in the case of the first and principal cause. (I, 198-199)

Furthermore, we cannot have within us the idea or image of anything without there being somewhere, either within us or outside us, an original which contains in reality all the perfections belonging to the idea. (I, 199)

These formulations differ in a number of ways. Some formulations state that the principle refers to the first cause of an idea, and not necessarily the immediate cause. Other formulations omit this. Some formulations state that the principle permits the cause to contain the representative perfections formally or eminently. Other formulations only permit the cause to contain the representative perfections formally. Other formulations differ in other ways.

I believe the best formulation of the RPCP is as follows: “If mind M is aware of idea X, and mind M is only aware of a finite number of ideas, then one or more Ys jointly cause idea X to actually exist, and for every perfection P that idea X represents a thing as having, one or more of those Ys have P or have a higher form of P.”

I have explained causation (§9), perfection (§6), ideas (see §13) and representation (see §13), according to Descartes. So this formulation of the RPCP should be clear. That said, a few words may still be helpful.

We are aware of many ideas: the ideas <wax>, <I>, <God>, etc. What causes these ideas? For each idea the answer is constrained by a causal principle: the

Representative Perfection Causal Principle. Select any thing that is aware of only a finite number of ideas. Select any of the ideas that that thing is aware of. The RPCP states that every such idea is caused to exist mediately or immediately by one or more things that individually or jointly actually have (or have in a higher form) all of the perfections that that idea represents a thing as having.

This is a striking claim. Consider the idea <square>. We are aware of this idea. We are also aware of only a finite number of ideas. “Being extended” is a perfection, and the idea <square> represents a thing as having that perfection. It follows from the RPCP that one or more things exist that first, are the mediate or immediate cause of the idea <square>, and second, are actually extended or have some higher form of the perfection of being extended.

The RPCP is like a copy principle. Construing “original” and “copy” broadly enough, it says “every idea is copied from an original.” But it does not say “an idea of an X must be caused by an X.” First, the causal principle allows ideas to be caused by multiple partial causes working together. This might result in the idea of an X that is caused neither mediately nor immediately by an X. The idea <chimera>, for instance, might be caused jointly by a lion, a goat and a snake. Or it might be caused jointly by the ideas <lion>, <goat> and <snake>, which are in turn each caused by a lion, goat and snake respectively. In neither case would the idea <chimera> be caused by a chimera. Being extended, for instance, is a perfection. God does not have this perfection, but has it in a higher form.⁹¹ So the RPCP permits that God cause the idea <extended thing>, even though God itself is not an extended thing.

⁹¹ See §6.7 for my rendition of Descartes’ argument for the claim that God does not have the perfection of length. Descartes’ argument for the claim that God is not extended is essentially the same.

It remains to explain why I selected the formulation of the RPCP that I did. There are a few elements to explain: (1) Why did I include the clause “and mind M is only aware of a finite number of ideas”? (2) Why did I include joint causation? (3) Why did I say “cause”, rather than “first cause”? (4) Why did I formulate the principle using the relation of representation, in the place of objective/representative perfection? (5) Why did I include eminent possession of perfections, i.e., the clause “or have a higher form of P”?

On (1), as we will see, the clause “and mind M is only aware of finite number of ideas” is essential if we are to prevent an infinite regress of ideas causing ideas. On (2), (3) and (5), this was simply because I wanted to select the most general principle Descartes would affirm. Finally, on (4), this was simply to make the principle easier to understand.

§16.2. The Representative Perfection (RP) argument

With the RPCP in hand, I can now present the RP argument.

Descartes gives the RP argument in several places. In his geometrical presentation in the *Second Set of Replies*, he writes:

The objective reality of any of our ideas requires a cause which contains the very same reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently (Axiom v). But we have an idea of God (Def. II and VIII), and the objective reality of this idea is not contained in us either formally or eminently (Axiom VI); moreover it cannot be contained in any other being except God himself (Def. VIII). Therefore this idea of God, which is in us, must have God as its cause; and hence God exists (Axiom III).
(II, 118)

In *Principles of Philosophy*, Part One, he writes:

Since, then, we have within us the idea of God, or a supreme being, we may rightly inquire into the cause of our possession of this idea. Now we find in the idea such immeasurable greatness that we are quite certain that it could have been placed in us only by something which truly possesses the sum of all perfections, that is, by a God who really exists. For it is very evident by the natural light not only that nothing comes from nothing, but also that what is more perfect cannot be produced by – that is, cannot have as its efficient and total cause – what is less perfect. Furthermore, we cannot have within us the idea or image of anything without there being somewhere, either within us or outside us, an original which contains in reality all the perfections belonging to the idea. And since the supreme perfections of which we have an idea are in no way to be found in us, we rightly conclude that they reside in something distinct from ourselves, namely God... (I, 199)

Descartes presents the RP argument elsewhere as well.⁹²

I construct Descartes' RP argument as follows. Let's begin with the RPCP. It says that if a mind is aware of an idea, and that mind is only aware of a finite number of ideas, then one or more Xs jointly cause that idea to actually exist, and for every perfection that idea represents a thing as having, one or more of the Xs have that perfection or have a higher form of that perfection. Let's assume that this is true; we will justify this assumption later. Now, I myself am a mind. I am aware of the idea <thing with unlimited power>. And I am only aware of a finite number of ideas. It follows that one or more Xs exist that jointly cause the idea <thing with unlimited power>, and that for every perfection represented by the idea <thing with unlimited power>, one or more of the Xs

⁹² For other formulations, see I, 128; II, 31-32, 97. See also III, 147, 192.

have that perfection or have a higher form of that perfection. [Having unlimited power] is an attribute. The idea <thing with unlimited power> represents a thing as having that attribute. And [having unlimited power] is a higher form of [being nothing]; [having unlimited power] involves everything [being nothing] involves and more. It follows that [having unlimited power] is a perfection. It follows that the idea <thing with unlimited power> represents a thing that has the perfection [having unlimited power]. It follows that one or more of the Xs have [having unlimited power] or have a higher form of [having unlimited power]. But, as we shall see, nothing has a higher form of [having unlimited power]. It follows that one or more of the Xs have the perfection [having unlimited power], which is to say, one or more of the Xs have unlimited power. But, as we saw in §14.2, any thing that has unlimited power also encompasses all perfections and is thus a God. It follows that a God exists. This was the point to be demonstrated.

The foregoing argument leaves us with a few propositions to justify. In particular, we must still (a) demonstrate the RPCP. And we must show that (b) nothing has a higher form of the attribute [having unlimited power]. These components will complete Descartes' first argument for the existence of God.

§16.3. No higher form of having unlimited power

It is relatively easy to show that it is impossible for a thing to have a higher form of the attribute [having unlimited power]. The argument is as follows.

Suppose that there is an attribute which is a higher form of [having unlimited power]. Call it Q. Now, "being a higher form of" is transitive. Thus, if X is a higher form of Y and Y is a higher form of Z, then X is a higher form of Z. [Having unlimited power]

is a higher form of [having limited power], and [having limited power] is a higher form of [being powerless]. It follows that Q is a higher form of [having unlimited power], [having limited power] and [being powerless]. Now as stated in §6, higher forms are incompatible with lower forms. Thus, if X is a higher form of Y, then it is not the case that any thing has both X and Y. It follows that it is not the case that any thing has both Q and any of [having unlimited power], [having limited power] and [being powerless]. But every thing has at exactly one of the attributes [having unlimited power], [having limited power] and [being powerless]. It follows that no thing has attribute Q. All of the foregoing is necessary. It follows that necessarily, no thing has attribute Q. It follows that it is impossible for a thing to have a higher form of the attribute [having unlimited power]. This was the point to be shown.

§16.4. The Representation Perfection Causal Principle (RPCP), justified

To complete the RP argument, only one step remains: demonstrating the RPCP. Now on the basis of some of Descartes' statements, one might think that Descartes does not intend for the RPCP to be justified by an argument. In the Second Set of Replies, Descartes writes:

It is also a primary notion that 'all the reality or perfection which is present in an idea merely objectively must be present in its cause either formally or eminently'. (II, 97)

The very manifest conclusion from all this is that God exists. But there may be some whose natural light is so meagre that they do not see that it is a primary notion that

every perfection that is present objectively in an idea must really exist in some cause of the idea. (II, 97-98)

Despite this, Descartes does try to argue for the RPCP. He argues, again in the Second Replies:

V. It follows from this that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently. It should be noted that this axiom is one which we must necessarily accept, since on it depends our knowledge of all things, whether they are perceivable through the senses or not. How do we know, for example, that the sky exists? Because we see it? But this ‘seeing’ does not affect the mind except in so far as it is an idea – I mean an idea which resides in the mind itself, not an image depicted in the corporeal imagination. Now the only reason why we can use this idea as a basis for the judgment that the sky exists is that every idea must have a really existing cause of its objective reality; and in this case we judge that the cause is the sky itself. And we make similar judgments in other cases. (II, 116-117)⁹³

He also gives a few examples, which are meant to make the RPCP plausible. He gives the example of an intricate machine, as well as a beautiful painting:

For example, if someone has within himself the idea of a highly intricate machine, it would be fair to ask what was the cause of his possession of the idea: did he somewhere see such a machine made by someone else; or did he make such a close study of mechanics, or is his own ingenuity so great, that he was able to think it up on his own, although he never saw it anywhere? All the intricacy which is contained in the idea merely objectively – as in a picture – must be contained in its cause,

⁹³ See also II, 97.

whatever kind of cause it turns out to be; and it must be contained not merely objectively or representatively, but in actual reality, either formally or eminently, at least in the case of the first and principal cause. (I, 198-199)⁹⁴

To provide a solution to your objection about the idea of God, we must observe that the point at issue is not the essence of the idea, in respect of which it is only a mode existing in the human mind and therefore no more perfect than a human being, but its objective perfection, which the principles of metaphysics teach must be contained formally or eminently in its cause. Suppose someone said that anyone can paint pictures as well as Apelles, because they consist only of patterns of paint and anyone can make all kinds of patterns with paint. To such a suggestion we should have to reply that when we are talking about Apelles' pictures we are not considering just a pattern of colours, but a pattern skilfully made to produce a representation resembling reality, such as can be produced only by those very practised in this art. (III, 214)

These arguments, however, are weak. In response to Descartes' argument about the sky, we can simply refrain from affirming that we have knowledge of the existence of external physical objects. And the examples, while evocative, are insufficient to prove a general rule.

Despite his claims to not need an argument, and despite his various weak arguments, I do actually think that Descartes has a real argument for the RPCP. In the geometrical presentation of his views in the Second Replies, Descartes writes:

IV. Whatever reality or perfection there is in a thing is present either formally or eminently in its first and adequate cause.

⁹⁴ See also II, 75-76, 97.

V. It follows from this that the objective reality of our ideas needs a cause which contains this reality not merely objectively but formally or eminently. (II, 116)

This shows that Descartes believes that the RPCP follows from the PCP. And in his 22 February letter to [Vatier], Descartes writes:

Such, for instance, is the notion that since our ideas cannot receive their forms or their being except from external objects or from ourselves, they cannot represent any reality or perfection which is not either in those objects or in ourselves. (III, 86)

This indicates that Descartes believes the RPCP follows from the fact that the chain of causes of ideas must be traced back to ourselves or to external objects. Taking this idea together with the PCP, I believe we can give a justification for the RPCP.

Let's start with the attribute [represents a thing as having P]. What are its higher forms? According to Descartes, the attribute [represents a thing as having P] is actually the same as the attribute [having P], existing representatively (§13). Its higher forms will be the higher forms of [having P], the higher forms of representative existence, or both. This means that the higher forms of [represents a thing as having P] are: (a) [represents a thing as having Q], where Q is a higher form of P, (b) [having P], where the existence is inherent or subsistent, and not merely representative, or (c) [having Q], where Q is a higher form of P and where the existence is inherent or subsistent and not merely representative.

Next, let's apply the Perfection Causal Principle. According to the PCP, if one or more Ys jointly cause X to exist, then for every perfection had by X, one or more of the Ys has that perfection or has a higher form of that perfection. Select some perfection P. As a perfection, P is a higher form of [being nothing]. But if P is a higher form of [being

nothing], then [represents a thing as having P] is also a higher form of being nothing. It follows that if P is a perfection, then [represents a thing as having P] is also a perfection. This permits us to apply the PCP. Applying the PCP, we get the result that if X represents a thing as having P, and one or more Ys jointly cause X, then at least one of those Ys either (a) represents a thing as having P, (b) represents a thing as having Q, where Q is a higher form of P, (c) has P, or (d) has Q, where Q is a higher form of P.

Now let's import the claim that if a mind is aware of a finite number of ideas, then each of its ideas are caused, mediately or immediately, by non-ideas. Combining this claim with our previous result, we get the conclusion that if a mind is aware of X, has a finite number of ideas, and X represents a thing as having P, then one or more non-ideas cause X, and at least one of those non-ideas (a) represents a thing as having P, (b) represents a thing as having Q, where Q is a higher form of P, (c) has P, or (d) has Q, where Q is a higher form of P. But – and this is the important point – non-ideas do not represent anything. It follows that if a mind is aware of X, has a finite number of ideas, and X represents a thing as having P, then one or more things cause X, such that at least one of those things has P or has Q, where Q is a higher form of P. And that is the RPCP, which was what we wanted to show.

The argument I just gave leaves us with two more propositions to justify. First, we must justify the PCP. Second, we must justify the claim that if a mind is aware of a finite number of ideas, then each of its ideas are caused, mediately or immediately, by non-ideas.

§16.5. The Perfection Causal Principle (PCP), justified

In the preceding sub-section, I stated the PCP as follows: “If one or more Ys jointly cause X to exist, then for every perfection had by X, one or more of the Ys has that perfection or has a higher form of that perfection.” Descartes states this principle with minor variation in many places.⁹⁵

Why does Descartes affirm the PCP? He seems to give an argument in the Second Replies:

The fact that ‘there is nothing in the effect which was not previously present in the cause, either in a similar or in a higher form’ is a primary notion which is as clear as any that we have; it is just the same as the common notion ‘Nothing comes from nothing.’ For if we admit that there is something in the effect that was not previously present in the cause, we shall also have to admit that this something was produced by nothing. And the reason why nothing cannot be the cause of a thing is simply that such a cause would not contain the same features as are found in the effect. (II, 97)

I think that here, Descartes is assuming that if X causes Y, then every perfection of Y not encompassed by X lacks a cause, and hence is caused by “nothing”. On this assumption, the claim “something cannot arise from nothing” entails the PCP. However, I believe that this argument is subtly circular. Why? The only reason I can see to believe “if X causes Y, then every perfection of Y not encompassed by X lacks a cause” is the PCP itself.

Instead, I believe the PCP may be able to be justified by examination the nature of causation, as Descartes conceives it. As I have interpreted him, Descartes believes that causation is a species of implication that holds between attributes (§9). Now almost every case of implication, where X implies Y, is a case where X contains everything Y

⁹⁵ See II, 28, 97; III, 166, 192. Also, see II, 28, 97; III, 166 for Descartes’ claim that this principle is knowable.

contains, and sometimes more. <X being a square> implies <X being a shape>; also, <X being a square> contains everything <X being a shape> contains and more. <X being red> implies <X being colored>; also, <X being red> contains everything <X being colored> contains and more. <X being a God> implies <X being a God>; also, <X being a God> contains everything that it itself contains. The one exception is disjunctions. <X being a square> implies <X being a square or X being a triangle>, and <X being a square> contains strictly less content than <X being a square or X being a triangle>. But I believe that Descartes would not count disjunctions as attributes. Putting disjunctions aside then, and restricting ourselves to what Descartes would admit as attributes, I believe that every case of implication is a case where X contains everything Y contains, and sometimes contains more. But that is nothing other than the PCP.

§16.6. Ideas caused by non-ideas

The remaining gap is the claim that if a mind is aware of a finite number of ideas, then each of its ideas are caused, mediately or immediately, by non-ideas. If this claim can be justified, the justification of the RPCP is complete, as is Descartes' RP argument for the existence of God.

I believe Descartes would argue as follows. I am aware of only a finite number of ideas. Let us grant that all ideas have causes. It follows that all of my ideas have causes. What are these causes? For each idea, either it is caused by an idea that I am aware of, or an idea that I am not aware of, or a thing that is not an idea. Ideas cannot cause one another in a circle, Descartes would argue, as circles of causation are impossible. Also, because I am aware of only a finite number of ideas, an infinite regress of causes among

the ideas that I am aware of is impossible. I will eventually exhaust the supply of ideas I am aware of, and will be left with one or more things that are the mediate or immediate causes of every idea I am aware of, such that each is either (b) an idea I am not aware of, or (c) something that is not an idea.

Now, ideas that I am not aware of can be divided into two types: ideas that inhere in me and ideas that do not inhere in me. But, Descartes would maintain, there cannot be ideas that inhere in me that I am not aware of. It follows that all of my ideas must eventually be caused by ideas that do not inhere in me or by things that are not ideas. Let's add the additional claim that something distinct from X and X's modes can only cause X to have a mode if it causes X to exist as well. It follows that something distinct from me and my ideas can only cause me to have an idea if it causes me to exist as well. But I am a mind, and hence, a substance. It follows that something distinct from me and my ideas can only cause me to have an idea if it can cause a substance to exist. As we have seen elsewhere (§13.8), though, Descartes maintains that something can only cause a substance to exist if it can cause itself to continue existing, and the only thing that can do that is God. God, however, is not an idea. It follows that ideas that I am not aware of cannot cause me to have ideas that I am aware of, and hence, all of my ideas are caused, mediately or immediately by non-ideas. That was the point to be shown.⁹⁶

This, of course, opens several more lines of inquiry. Why believe that there cannot be circles of causation? Why believe that every mind must be aware of all of its ideas? Why believe that an external thing can only cause a mode in me if it causes me as

⁹⁶ In III, 377, Descartes iterates the main idea behind this argument. He writes: "2. To the second I reply that I think I see very clearly that there cannot be an infinite regress in the ideas I possess, because I feel myself to be finite, and in the place where I wrote that, I am acknowledging in myself nothing except what I know to be there."

well? We can continue to chase the justifications – and there is plenty of material in Descartes' texts to permit the chase to continue.

Perhaps we will continue this chase at a later time. For now, it is enough to note that Descartes' claims, including the PCP and the RPCP, are neither inscrutable nor are made without reason. All of the cases raised in the introduction (§2.2) to display Descartes' unclear terms and unjustified claims – the PCP, perfections, reality, having things eminently, the RPCP, objective existence in the intellect by way of an idea, and the infinite regress of ideas causing ideas – have been clarified and defended. And Descartes' first argument for the existence of God, the Representative Perfection argument, is far more complex and interesting than it might first appear.

Conclusion

§17. Conclusion

In Part I, we clarified many of Descartes' most obscure concepts. In Part II, we employed our new understanding of Descartes' concepts in an interpretation of his first argument for the existence of God. Through this, I hope to have made Descartes' obscure concepts less obscure, and one of his famously problematic arguments less problematic. Through that, I hope to have made it more plausible that Descartes' metaphysics violates his high epistemic standards much less than one might have thought.

As a closing remark, I should note that this work is a fragment of what was originally a much, much larger project. I originally intended to provide a pristine, axiomatic representation of Descartes' entire philosophy. Then I intended to provide an axiomatic representation of Descartes' philosophical views on the existence and attributes of God. Then an axiomatic representation of Descartes' first argument for the existence of God. I settled on a clarification of Descartes' most obscure concepts, and a partial, non-axiomatic rendition of Descartes' first argument for the existence of God. Even with this restricted aim, the final result is clearly imperfect. I have learned a lot about the construction of axiomatic philosophical systems from my attempts, even if I have not yet brought such a system out of texts or a mind and into the light.

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