

God as First Cause
in Aristotle and Descartes

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In *The Metaphysics*, Aristotle states: “All men by nature desire understanding.”¹ Although a broad generalization, this is an insightful statement about the nature of human beings. Everyone desires to know or to understand something, whether it be the universe as a whole or a part of it. To some extent, all humankind is involved in the world of ideas and reflection: Everyone is searching for some rational explanation of something; everyone contemplates the issues that are foremost in their minds; each person, in his/her own right, asks the ultimate questions concerning his/her own existence.² These questions inevitably lead to an inquiry not only into the cause of an individual’s existence, but into the cause of all things, or the universe. Is there some cause that was the first cause of the universe? Is there an Uncaused Cause or Unmoved Mover? If such a thing exists, can it be anything other than God?

Aristotle and René Descartes each explore these questions in their own way: Aristotle is searching for the first cause or causes of the universe and Descartes is searching for something that guarantees truth in the world. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle develops a first science that studies being as being. The goal of this study is to discover the first cause or causes (*Metaphysics* Γ.1). He concludes that there is an Unmoved Mover that is the only being capable of causing eternal motion and thus is the ultimate cause of the universe. Aristotle calls this Mover God (Λ.7). As a result, the first science is theology. Whatever explains substances explains all things, and for Aristotle, God or the divine explains the nature of substance by virtue of being the highest substance. If there were no substance, there would be nothing. Therefore, the science of divine being, theology, is the most universal science, prior to all other sciences, explaining everything by reference to the divine Unmoved Mover.³

Descartes, although through a different methodology, ultimately proves the existence of this Aristotelian God, on the level of ideas, not beings. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he is reacting against the Aristotelian theories he was taught throughout the course of his education. Where Aristotle was an empiricist, abstracting the essence of things from their occurrence in the world, Descartes believed that the ideas and knowledge of things was innate, and that once one grasped such an idea, then one should look for instances of it in the world. In developing this, particularly how to determine the truth of an idea, he offers proofs for the existence of God. He feels that he must prove that God exists in order to be certain that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. These perceptions or ideas can be caused by other ideas, but there must be something more than an idea that is the cause of all ideas. Descartes eventually deduces that this something more is an infinite being and that this infinite being is God. In the end, each philosopher concludes that there exists an uncaused cause or an unmoved mover. There is a first cause to the universe for Aristotle and a first cause of an idea for Descartes that guarantees the existence of the universe: for both, this first cause must necessarily be God.

Aristotle's first science

The Metaphysics is Aristotle's quest to discover the first science and/or its object. This is a result of the belief that all men hold: "that what we call 'wisdom' is concerned with the first causes and principles" (981b27-9). In searching for knowledge of these first causes and principles, Aristotle's first science emerges. The supreme science, which is superior to any subordinate science,

is the one which knows that for the sake of which each thing must be done, and this is the good in each case, and, in general, the highest good in the whole of nature . . . it is evident that the name which is sought applies to the same science; for it is this science which must investigate

the first principles and causes, and the good or final cause is one of the causes (982b5-11).

It is therefore necessary to acquire knowledge of the first causes to attain this first supreme science.

Aristotle is searching for the first causes of things that exist, or beings, but the term “being” is used in many senses. However, Aristotle claims that they are all related to one principle: some are called “being” because they are substances; some because they are in the process of becoming substances; some because they are destructions or privations or qualities of substances; others because they create substances or things related to substances (1003b5-10). In each case, “being” is related to “substance,” which implies that the first science must somehow be a study of substances. Also, it is not only a study of being, but also whatever belongs to being.

In most sciences, each “is concerned mainly with that which is first . . . Accordingly, if this is a substance, it is of substances that the philosopher should possess the principles and the causes” (1003b16-9). Since the principles and highest causes are being sought after, Aristotle says that they must belong to some nature in virtue of itself: “If, then, also those who were seeking the elements of things were seeking these principles, these elements too must be elements of being, not accidentally, but qua being. Accordingly, it is of being qua being that we, too, must find the first causes” (1003a26-32). Therefore, according to Aristotle, “it belongs to one science to investigate being qua being and whatever belongs to it qua being, and that the same science investigates not only substances, but also whatever belongs to substances” (1005a13-8). This first science he develops is motivated by a desire for wisdom. This requires a pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge: to have knowledge of something, one must have knowledge of the first causes, “for we say that we understand each thing when we think

that we know its first causes” (983a25). The first science Aristotle develops studies being as being and its goal is to discover these first causes. The development of this first science leads Aristotle to conclude that there is an Unmoved Mover and that this prime mover is the only being capable of being the first cause of all that is the universe.

Aristotle’s notion of cause

The goal of Aristotle’s first science is to acquire knowledge of the first causes, but what are causes and principles and which ones are first? Aristotle classifies causes into four main types: substance or essence, matter, source of motion, and finality. Substance or essence refers to the form or organization of something. Matter is the underlying subject, or what something is composed of. The source of motion is the agent that brings about the motion. The final cause or purpose is that for the sake of which something is done. It is the good or final cause, which in essence is the first cause. Aristotle says that this final cause is the end of every generation and every motion (983a24-33). In explaining these four types of causes, he feels that it is important to also examine previous opinions about causality, for “. . . there will be some profit in our present inquiry if we go over what they say; for either we shall discover some other genus of cause, or we shall be more convinced of those we just stated” (983b4-6).

He mainly focuses on the opinions of materialists, who claim that the material kinds of principles are the principles of all things. They say that the element and principle of things is that of which things are comprised and the ultimate thing from which things come to be and into which they finally become after destruction. This is the enduring substance of the thing. In this opinion, nothing is generated and nothing perishes, because such a nature of substance is always preserved. Aristotle uses the example of Socrates. When Socrates becomes noble or musical he is not generated in the full sense. Also, if he is no longer noble or musical, he has

not perished in the full sense. This is because Socrates himself as an underlying subject still exists (983b7-17). Thales believed that water was the material cause of the universe. The “ancients,” such as Homer and Hesiod, felt that Ocean and Tethys were the causes of the universe: water again as material cause. Anaximenes and Diogenes held air to be the material cause; for Hippasus and Heraclitus it was fire. Empedocles believed that there were four material principles: water, air, fire and earth. Anaxagoras expanded this even further and claimed that there were an infinite number of material principles (983b19-984a13).

After inquiring further into this materialistic idea of causality, Aristotle raises the question that though every generation and destruction may be the result of some one principle, what is this single principle or cause and why does this happen (984a20-2)? The underlying subject, the matter, does not cause itself to change. For example, wood does not make a bed and bronze does not make a statue. Something else is the cause of this change. To seek this change, then, “is to seek another principle, namely, as we might say, the source which begins motion” (984a25-7). So the materialists cannot be correct in believing that a material cause is the only cause, since clearly something must be the agent that brings about change. There are some thinkers who are not satisfied with this investigation and allege that denying motion is necessary for oneness and unity (984a30-3). There are also thinkers who believe that material causes are not sufficient for explaining the goodness and nobility of things: “For it is perhaps unlikely that *Fire* and *Earth* or any other such should cause things to be or become good or noble. . .” (984b11-2). There seems to be an issue of final causality here. In searching for a first cause, the final cause is being sought, or that for the sake of which things come to be. Aristotle is asserting the importance of the final cause over the material cause in the existence of things. But why is this so? One can look to the *Physics* for an answer: “Both causes must

be stated by the student of nature, but especially the end [the final cause]; for that is the cause of the matter and not vice versa” (200a33-4).⁴

Aristotle then proposes two types of causes: “Those who had such beliefs, then, posited as principles of things both the cause of what is noble and the moving cause” (984b20-2). He is referring back to Anaxagoras and other thinkers who claimed *Intelligence* was the cause of everything in nature. Can these two types of causes, one physical and one purely intellectual, be unified into a single account of causality? In sum, Aristotle states:

The first philosophers post a corporeal principle (for water and fire and such things are bodies), some of them using only one corporeal principle and the others more than one, but both place these principles under one kind, the material principles; other philosophers, however, posit as a cause both the material principle and the source of motion, and the latter cause is regarded as one by some but as two by others (987a5-9).

From investigating his predecessors’ opinions, Aristotle has not discovered any new type of cause, but has strengthened his own opinion that there are four types of causes. He calls the final cause or good the end of every generation and every motion (983a32-3). The so-called “end of generation” is the form of substance, and a form or substance is a final cause (1015a8-12). His inquiry into prior opinions leads him to further develop his notion of substance, eventually leading him to assert the existence of a first uncaused cause.

Aristotle’s notion of substance

It is evident, then, that to comprehend Aristotle’s notion of cause, one must also have some understanding of his notion of substance. In Book Γ, he discusses different senses of being. A being can be a substance, an attribute of a substance, or be on its way to becoming a substance (1003b5-8). It seems that to be in the most fundamental sense, in Aristotle’s mind, is to be a substance. He even says that “the substance of each individual is one not by accident, and similarly it is essentially a being” (1003b33-4). In this investigation of substance, there

appear to be two criteria: unity and identity. A substance must be one, which is why Aristotle rejects parts of animals and material elements as substances. Also, a substance has a determinate identity. “What is it” indicates the substance, not other categories of being.⁵ So substance is being, but is a being essentially a substance? One must look at Aristotle’s other accounts of substance to draw any conclusion about this.

In Book Δ, Aristotle explains a substance to mean the simple bodies, such as earth, fire, water, etc. and in general the bodies and whatever consists of these bodies, such as animals and divine things and their parts. These are considered substances because they are not predicated of a subject, but others are predicated of these. A substance is also that which is the cause of the being of something or the form, for example, a soul is the form of an animate being. Substances are also the parts of bodies that impose limits, such as a plane limits a body and a line limits a plane. A substance is also essence. The term “substance” has two senses. First, by taking substance to be simple bodies and essence, it is “the ultimate subject which is not predicated of something else” and “that which is a *this* and is separable” (1017b23-5). Second, by taking substance to be form and parts of bodies that impose limits, it is the shape or form of each thing (1017b10-26).

Just as there are several senses of substance, there are also several senses of being. One sense is to be an accident, which is being in another and dependent upon another. Examples of this include saying that justice is musical or a man is musical or the musical is a man by accident. Another sense of being is to be essentially. This is signified by the many different ways of predication. For example, there is no difference in saying “a man is walking” or “a man walks.” This sense of being is where substance falls. Yet another sense of being is to be in the sense of the true. For example, “Socrates is musical” means that it is true that Socrates is

musical. In each of these cases, “to be” or “being” in one sense means that the thing exists potentially as stated, and in another sense, that the thing exists actually as stated. For example, to say “it is seeing” could refer to that which can see and that which is actually seeing (1017a7-1017b5).

As with substance, being is also a whatness or a this. In another sense it is “a quality or quantity or one of the others which are predicated in this way” (1028a12-3). The primary sense, Aristotle believes, is whatness, and when used in this sense, being signifies a substance (1028a15). Therefore, being is essentially a substance, since substance is the most primary sense of being. This applies to being in general, so it follows that it applies to an individual being. Thus, a being is the same as its substance.

Potentiality and actuality

Aristotle has concluded that a being is the same as its substance, but in further discussing being, Aristotle makes a distinction between potential and actual being. In this distinction, it is apparent that substance is identified with actual being. A being may have the potential to be something or to do something, but that does not mean this potential will ever be actualized. The substance of a being is what the being is in virtue of itself; it is its essence. A being’s essence cannot be expressed through potentiality, but through actuality. Therefore, substance is actual being and actuality seems to be prior to potentiality. This distinction between potential and actual being raises the question: what causes potentiality to be actualized? In answering this question, Aristotle develops his concept of an Unmoved Mover, or first substance or cause.

Although Aristotle uses potentiality and actuality to explain development and change, in his discussion of substance, potentiality and actuality are used in a different way. They are

used in addressing the question of unity of matter and form in a composite substance: “If, then, there is matter, and form, and the composite of the two, and each of them is a substance, in one sense even matter is called ‘a part’ of a thing, while in another sense this is not so, but the only parts are the elements out of which the formula of the form consists” (1035a1-4). Everything that is created, is created by something and out of something, and it becomes something (1032a:12-4). Things are either generated by nature (natural things) or by art (the form of such things is in the soul). By form, Aristotle means the essence of each thing and the first substance (1032b1-2). It is evident that nothing could be generated if nothing were existing before. This means that the existence of a concrete individual must be preceded by the existence of something else (1032b31-2). When it comes to matter and substance or form, Aristotle alleges that what is called “a form” or “a substance” is not generated, but what is generated is the composite (1033b17-9). The problem is resolved if matter is thought of as potentiality and form as actuality. A teleological relationship is the link between the potentiality of the matter and the actuality of the form.⁶ The form is that for the sake of which something is. Since form is substance, substance is that for the sake of which, or the final cause.

Substance, as previously stated, is the most primary sense of being. It is primary in every sense: in formula, in knowledge, in time (1028a31-3). A substance cannot be composed of two substances that exist in actuality. This is because two objects that exist in actuality can never be one in actuality, but if they exist potentially, then they can be one in actuality: “No substance is composed of substances which exist in actuality; for two objects which exist thus in actuality are never one in actuality, but if they are two potentially, they can be one” (1039a5-7). Aristotle demonstrates this using the example of man: “If then there exists Man Himself,

who in virtue of himself is a *this* and exists separately, then each of the parts of which he is composed, such as Animal and Biped, must indicate a *this* and be separate and a substance” (1039a30-4). Animal and Biped exist potentially, and come together to form one being in actuality. What it means to exist in actuality is obvious: a being exists in reality. Since a being is essentially its substance, it follows that substance is actuality.

With regards to potentiality, there are some thinkers who believe that something has potency only when it is active, but when it is not active, it has no potency for that activity. For example, one who is not building is unable to build. He is capable of building only when he is building (1046b29-32). Aristotle indicates that if something which is deprived of potency is incapable, then something which is currently in the process of generation will be incapable of being generated. However, it is false to say that something which is incapable of generation now exists or that it will exist. Therefore, according to Aristotle, the beliefs of such thinkers eliminate both motion and generation (1047a12-5). Motion and generation cannot be eliminated and without potentiality, there could be no motion or generation. Thus, the statements of these thinkers cannot be true, so potentiality and actuality are distinct. Aristotle also associates actuality with motion: “. . . for actuality is thought be motion most of all” (1047a32).

Aristotle now addresses the teleological relationship between potentiality and actuality and how something existing potentially is actualized: “A definition of that which becomes actually by thought from existing potentially is this, that it becomes actual when thought wishes it and nothing external prevents this. . .” (1049a5-8). This is significant because later Aristotle explains God as being self-realized thought. Although potentialities are brought into existence through a process of actualization, Aristotle holds that actuality is prior to potentiality

(1049b6). It is prior to potentiality in time, in definition, and in being. It is prior in time, meaning that prior to things that exist in actuality, there must have been things such as matter that were potentially this thing, but not yet in actuality. However, even prior in time to these potential things there must have existed in actuality things from which these were generated: “For it is always by a thing in actuality that another thing becomes actualized from what it was potentially” (1049b20-7). He is basically saying that an actual member of a species is prior to a potential member of the same species, but at the same time admits that there is a sense in which potentiality is temporally prior, meaning that a certain individual is potential before it is actual.⁷ The priority of actuality in formula or definition means that which is potential is potential by virtue of actuality. Certain capacities are defined in terms of what they exist for, for example, sight is the capacity of seeing. In order to know what sight is, it is necessary to have knowledge of what seeing is.⁸ Aristotle also asserts that actuality is prior to potentiality in substance or being. Everything which is in the process of being generated is proceeding towards a principle and an end. And this final cause (or that for the sake of which) is a principle, and generation is clearly for the sake of an end. The end is an actuality, and it is that for the sake of which a being moves and acts. Potentiality is for the sake of this end (1050a7-10). This ontological nature of priority can be explained as follows: If A is prior in being to B, then A can exist without B, but B cannot exist without A.⁹ This definition of priority with respect to substance is found in Book Δ. Finally, Aristotle claims that actuality is prior in form. Matter is pure potentiality since it might come to have a form and when it exists actually, it is existing as a form (1050a15-7). Therefore, since form is substance and form is actuality, substance is actuality.

From this argument, it is clear that actuality is prior in substance to potency and that an actuality always precedes another in time, until eventually the actuality of the eternal prime mover is reached (1050b2-7). He also makes the assertion that nothing which is indestructible without qualification exists potentially without qualification. However, nothing prevents such a thing from having some potency, for example, with respect to quality or place. Such indestructible things, then, exist actually. Also, nothing which necessarily exists, exists potentially. Aristotle categorizes these things as primary, for if they did not exist, then nothing in the universe would exist. He also claims that motion does not exist potentially, if it exists eternally. Finally, anything that is in motion eternally is not moved potentially (1050b17-22).

Aristotle calls the actuality of the potential qua potential “motion”: “Motion takes place, then, while this actuality exists, and neither earlier nor later. So motion is the actuality of that which exists potentially when it is in activity not qua itself but qua movable” (1050b17-24). The sun and stars and the whole heaven are always active in motion, so they are eternal things. The prime mover is also an eternal and singular thing and eternal things are prior to destructible things. For potentialities, contradictories are always present, therefore, things that are eternal must be complete actualities, for their contradictories cannot be present (1050b30-5).

There are some who think that everything exists in potentiality. But, Aristotle points out, if all beings were merely potential, then nothing would exist. It is possible for a being to have potentiality, but never actualize it. Also, potential beings cannot actualize other potential beings. But there are beings that have potentiality and actuality, such as humans and plants. So there must be some being or beings that exist purely in actuality that are capable of actualizing potential beings: “There must be a principle of such a kind that its substance is actuality.

Moreover, such substances must be without matter; for they must be eternal, if indeed something else is also eternal. They must exist, then, as actualities” (1071b15-1072a15). Nothing would be moved or changed if no cause existed in actuality (1071b29).

These beings that exist purely in actuality are the first movers and also the first substances, since substance *is* actuality. Aristotle then states:

. . . there is something which is always moved with an unceasing motion, which is circular; and this is clear not only by arguments but also from the facts. So, the first heaven must be eternal; and further, there is also something which this moves. And since that which is moved and is a mover is thus an intermediate, there is something which causes motion without being moved, and this is eternal, a substance, and an actuality (1072a22-7).

This “something” is then necessary for anything to exist, so there must be a first unmoved mover. If this did not exist, then there would only be eternal potentials.

To describe something as unmoved means that nothing causes it to be or causes it to change; it must be self-caused. Earlier, in chapter 6 of Book Z, Aristotle concludes that for something to be a self-caused unity, the subject must be the same as its essence¹⁰:

. . . if unity and the essence of unity were distinct, the process would go on to infinity; for, there would be the essence of unity and also unity, so that according to the same argument there would again be the essence of the essence of unity and also the essence of unity, etc. Of things which are primary and are stated by themselves, then, it is clear that each of them and its essence are one and the same (1032a3-6).

The essence in actuality is not part of the concrete substance, but the substance itself: “. . . the prime case of self-causation is the relation between the subject and what the subject is, that is, its essence. So even if a form is always instantiated in a particular type of subject, this will not suffice for self-causation, in case the subject could be found without the form.”¹¹ Thus, Aristotle is alleging that the ultimate requirement for being a self-caused unity is the identity of the cause with the effect. This further emphasizes why the materialistic view of causality of his

predecessors does not work: it does not allow for such an identity of cause with effect. However, Aristotle's notion of formal cause (substance as cause) does: in this sense of causality, it is possible to understand the notion of a καθ' αυτο¹² entity as an entity in which there is no distinction between the subject and its essence.¹³

The Unmoved Mover

The first unmoved mover, or prime mover, is such a καθ' αυτο entity. In Book Λ, Aristotle argues for the identification of this prime mover with God. Before he begins this investigation, he gives a proof in chapter 6 for the existence of an eternal and immovable kind of substance. A summary follows¹⁴: Since substances are the first beings, if they are perishable, then everything is perishable. However, it cannot be the case that everything is perishable. If this were the case, then there would be no motion. If motion did not exist, then there would be no time. Therefore, to say that everything had perished is the same as saying that there could be a time when there is no time, which is clearly impossible. Thus, there must be continuous motion in the world. Furthermore, the only motion that can be continuous and eternal is circular motion. Aristotle then considers the substance that causes this first motion. It must be a pure actuality. If it were not, then its causal influence on the first motion would come to an end. If this were a possibility, then it must have happened, given an infinity of time. However, the nature of time and its association with motion precludes the ending of the first motion, so this is not possible. So there are some substances that are pure actualities, and these are therefore eternal and without matter.

The Unmoved Mover further emerges in Aristotle's discussion of motion. If something is moved, then it cannot be otherwise than as it is. Even if the primary locomotion exists as an actuality, that which is moved qua being moved can be otherwise, particularly with respect to

place, even if not with respect to substance. Since the existence of some mover which causes motion yet is immovable and is also an actuality has been asserted, this mover cannot be otherwise than as it is. Of all the types of changes, locomotion is primary, and of these locomotions, circular is primary. Since it is primary, locomotion is the motion which the immovable prime mover causes. There, this mover exists necessarily and “nobly,” and is thus a first principle (1072b5-13).

In Book Λ.7 Aristotle first identifies the Unmoved Mover with God. His argument can be interpreted as follows¹⁵: There is a prime mover of the heavens¹⁶ and this prime mover is the highest being. The highest being is God, therefore the Prime Mover, the Unmoved Mover, is God. Aristotle also offers further support of his argument: If the Unmoved Mover is God, then it must be alive, but the Unmoved Mover is purely actual and eternal. The only function of life possible for a purely actual and eternal being is thinking. Therefore, the Unmoved Mover, God, is νοῦς.¹⁷ He uses the notion that the Unmoved Mover is an object of thought (νοητόν) and of desire (ορεκτόν) to first show that it is νοῦς, and second, that it is God.¹⁸

In showing that this Prime Mover is νοῦς, he states:

Now thinking according to itself is of the best according to itself, and thinking in the highest degree is of that which is best in the highest degree. Thus, in partaking of the intelligible, it is of Himself that the Intellect is thinking; for by apprehending and thinking it is He Himself who becomes intelligible, and so the Intellect and its intelligible object are the same. For that which is capable of receiving the intelligible object and the substance is the intellect, and the latter is in actuality by possessing the intelligible object. . . (1072b19-23).

Aristotle is setting up νοῦς, the Intellect, to be God. The word θεός, and thus this identification of the Unmoved Mover with God, occurs right after the Unmoved Mover is defined as actual νοῦς.¹⁹ To justify his belief that the Unmoved Mover is God, Aristotle must

be able to say that it is alive. He infers this from the fact that the Unmoved Mover is $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$: “And life belongs to God, for the actuality of the intellect is life, and He is actuality” (1072b26-7).²⁰ The Unmoved Mover has eternal life, and Aristotle next uses this to further justify its identification as God: “We say that God is a living being which is eternal and the best; so life and continuous duration and eternity belong to God, for this is God” (1072b28-30).

Aristotle establishes God to be eternal and immovable. Since God is the best being, he must be the Unmoved Mover: there is nothing higher than God that is pure actuality, eternal and immovable. Since everything that is moved must be moved by something, the first mover can best be characterized as immovable in virtue of itself, and it is necessary that an eternal motion be caused by an eternal being and one motion by one being, and since there are other locomotions other than the locomotion of the universe which are eternal, then each of these locomotions must also be caused by a substance which is immovable and eternal in virtue of itself (1073a26-34). Here, Aristotle is concerned with first movers that are not the prime mover. These movers, which are planets, are substances and there is a first, second, etc. just as the locomotions are ordered (1073a37-1073b3). He is using cosmology to demonstrate his ontological beliefs. These planets are a series of movers which are the first movers of things, but are themselves moved by something. They are moved movers, but they cannot explain the eternal motion of the heavens. There must be an eternal unmoved mover separate from this infinite series of movers.²¹ This separate, primary substance is pure actuality and therefore has no matter. It is the first immovable mover and “. . . is one both in formula and in number; and so, that which is always and continuously in motion is only one. Hence, there is only one heaven” (1074a36-40). Thus, the first cause is pure actuality, immovable, and eternal – it is God; and because God is these things, He is the only first cause.

Descartes' clear and distinct perceptions

Descartes' idea of God is evident in his proofs for the existence of God found in *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Why does he feel the need to prove that God exists? Descartes find this proof necessary in order to ascertain that his clear and distinct perceptions are true. He feels that although ideas can be caused by other ideas, there must be something more than idea that is the cause of all ideas: there must be a first cause (42).²² His reasons for proving God's existence do not include knowledge of God as the cause of the world. This differs from Aristotle's proof for the existence of God, which involves a quest for the first science, which was shown to be theology. Descartes' proof involves a quest for truth. In deriving his proofs, he borrows concepts from the Aristotelian proof, proving a God on the level of ideas similar to God on the level of being for Aristotle. Ultimately, there are significant differences between the two proofs and their resultant God and though Descartes set about to upend Aristotelian beliefs, in terms of his proof for the existence of God, he is largely unsuccessful.

The first of his proofs is found in the Third Meditation. The goal of this meditation is to discover what gave Descartes his first knowledge; what made that first truth clear and distinct?²³ This first truth of which he speaks is the assertion that he thinks, therefore he exists. He begins by regarding images of corporeal things as "empty, false and worthless" (34). He must also look more deeply into himself and to do this, he will try to become better acquainted with himself. He then states the things he knows about himself: "I am a thing that thinks, that is to say, a thing that doubts, affirms, denies, understands a few things, is ignorant of many things, wills, refrains from willing, and also imagines and senses" (34). He is certain that these modes of thinking exist within him, and this list is basically just a review of everything that he

truly knows (34). Descartes now feels that he should consider whether there might be other things belonging to him that, up until now, he has overlooked. In doing this, the following ideas emerge.

Since he is certain that he is a thinking thing, he should also know what is required for him to be certain of anything. In his first instance of knowledge, there is nothing but a clear and distinct perception of what he affirms. Therefore, everything he clearly and distinctly perceives must be true. If this were not the case, if that first instance of knowledge was not enough for him to be certain of the truth of a thing, then it could happen that something he clearly and distinctly perceives is false. He then says that the things he perceives by means of his senses are doubtful, but he clearly perceived the ideas of these things (35).

Other things that he doubts include arithmetic and geometry. He doubts these because some God could have given him a nature such that he might be deceived, even about things that seem obvious. However, he is not claiming that God actually deceived him. There is a preconceived opinion that God has supreme power and supreme goodness, and when considering this opinion, it seems obvious that if he wanted to, it would be easy for God to cause one to err even in matters one perceives as clearly as possible. Descartes, though, has no reason to think that there is a God who deceives as the basis of doubt. To remove this basis of doubt and prove that his clear and distinct perceptions are true, he should inquire whether there is a God, and, if there is, whether or not He can be a deceiver. If he does not know whether or not there is a God, then he can never be completely certain about anything (36). This inquiry is necessary due to the omnipotent nature of God. This all-powerful God was introduced in the First Meditation, and in response to this idea of a powerful creator God, Descartes expressed fear and doubt of his own cognitive capabilities. In the beginning of the Third Meditation, this

fear of God's ability to deceive one has been somewhat diminished by the discovery Descartes makes in the Second Meditation of an indubitable idea, that he knows he is a thinking thing.²⁴ According to Descartes, not even an omnipotent God could make this false, since "he can never cause me to be nothing as long as I think that I am something."²⁵ While there is no longer fear that no idea can ever be known as a true idea, there is still fear that God, if he wishes it, can be a deceiver. Divine omnipotence implies that one could be deceived, however, although this is possible, one cannot believe this when focusing on a certain idea itself, whether it is of oneself as a thinking being or of some other self-evident idea.²⁶

Descartes views his conjecture that God is a deceiver as relying on reasons whose soundness is clarity and distinctness. Once he has shown that this hypothesis is not clear and distinct, he has removed the foundation of the hypothesis and thus the basis of his metaphysical doubt about the truth of clear and distinct perceptions. He establishes the truth of God by considering clear and distinct perceptions in himself. According to this method, the only standard of rationality that one needs to accept is clarity and distinctness of perception. Since he uses this same method in setting up his metaphysical argument for the existence of God, including the possibility of God as a deceiver, the standard he accepts there is also clarity and distinctness.²⁷ Descartes further explores this hypothesis of God as a deceiver: "One may pretend that God is a deceiver – even the true God, but such that is not known sufficiently clearly either to oneself or to the other persons for whose sake one forms this hypothesis."²⁸ In saying that the true God was "not known sufficiently clearly," when the possibility of God as a deceiver was established, Descartes suggests that the hypothesis of a deceiving God was, in fact, thought to be possibly clear and distinct at that point in the argument. The only reason the

hypothesis could function in his argument is solely because of the possibility of it being a clear and distinct perception.²⁹

Descartes' theory of ideas

His discussion of clear and distinct perceptions and the truth of them lead Descartes to discuss ideas. Ideas are thoughts that are like images of things, such as God. With respect to their veracity, Descartes states: “. . . if they are considered alone and in their own right, without being referred to something else, they cannot, properly speaking, be false” (37). He then categorizes ideas as being either innate, adventitious, or produced by himself and gives examples of some ideas.

Whether or not he wants to, Descartes feels heat. For this reason, he believes that the feeling or idea of heat comes to him from something other than himself. Also, it is sending its likeness into him, not something else (38). This is an adventitious idea, drawn from the senses. He also gives the example of two distinct ideas he has of the sun. One idea, that the sun is small, is drawn from the senses. Another idea, namely that the sun is larger than the earth, comes from astronomical reasoning, which is drawn from notions innate in him or fashioned by him in some other way. The idea from the senses is most likely inaccurate: “. . . it was not a well-founded judgment but only a blind impulse that formed the basis of my belief that things existing outside me send ideas or images of themselves to me through the sense organs or by some other means” (40).

These examples are ideas of tangible, somewhat concrete things. There are certain other ideas, however, that show that substances are something more and according to Descartes, these ideas contain more objective reality than ideas representing “modes or accidents” (40). There is such an idea that allows him to comprehend “a supreme deity,

eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent, and creator of all things other than himself,” namely, God (40). This idea has more objective reality than ideas that show finite substances. This leads Descartes to make the assertion that there must be as much reality in the efficient and total cause of something as there is in the effect of that cause: “For whence, I ask, could an effect get its reality, if not from its cause? And how could the cause give that reality to the effect, unless it also possessed that reality?” (40).

Ideas, causality and God

Since there must be as much reality in a cause as there is in the effect of the same cause, Descartes concludes that something cannot come from nothing, and what is more perfect cannot come from what is less perfect (41). His exploration of ideas has resulted in his consideration of causal principles, which seem to draw influence from Aristotle:

This is obvious not only as regards those effects that have actual or inherent reality; but also as regards ideas, in which only representative reality is to be considered. That is: (vi) not merely is it impossible that a previously non-existent stone, say, should now begin to exist without being produced by something containing all that is inherent in the stone, either as it inheres in the stone or in some higher form; or again, (vii) that heat should be induced in a subject previously not hot, except by something of at least the same grade of perfection as heat; but further (viii) I cannot have the idea of heat, or of a stone, without its being put into me by a cause in which there is in fact as much reality as I conceive to exist in the heat or the stone . . . (ix) The specific representative reality comprised in my idea must be got from a cause possessing at least the same degree of inherent reality as the idea has of representative reality. For (x) if we suppose something to be found in an idea that was not in its cause, it will have it from nothing.³⁰

So an idea must come from some cause which has at least as much reality as the idea itself. This is reminiscent of Aristotle’s priority of actuality over potentiality. It seems that what Descartes could be saying is that an idea cannot be caused by an idea that is only potential, it must come from an idea that is actual.

It would appear, then, that one can take an idea, and find an idea from which it came, and then find an idea from which that idea originated, and that this can continue indefinitely.

But Descartes counters this:

. . . although one idea can perhaps issue from another, nevertheless no infinite regress is permitted here; eventually some first idea must be reached whose cause is a sort of archetype that contains formally all the reality that is in the idea merely objectively (42).

If the objective reality of any of his ideas was discovered to be so great that one is certain that the same reality was not in him, whether formally or eminently, and that therefore he could not be the cause of the idea, it must follow that he is not alone in the world.³¹ Something else must also exist, and this something else is the cause of this idea. However, if no such idea is found to be in him, then no argument will make him certain of the existence of things other than himself (42).

It is possible that the ideas he has of other men or animals or angels could have originated from ideas he has of himself, or corporeal things, and of God. He believes that it is possible that the ideas he has of corporeal things originated in himself, but then where did his idea of God originate (43)? Can it be traced to some other idea, or is the idea of God the first idea he previously spoke of?

By “God,” Descartes understands an infinite substance, one that is “independent, supremely intelligent and supremely powerful” (45). This infinite substance created him as well as everything else that exists in the universe. The more he focuses on it, the less possible it seems that any idea or part of an idea could have arisen from himself alone. Therefore, he must conclude that God necessarily exists (45). Though he has an idea of substance in him by virtue of him being a substance, this does not explain how he has the idea of an infinite substance, since he is a finite substance. God is an infinite substance, so the idea of God must

have come from some infinite substance. Therefore, his perception of God is prior to this perception of himself (45).

Descartes now further develops the idea of God. He claims that this idea cannot be considered “materially false” and as having originated from nothing. It is the most clear and distinct idea he has and because it contains more objective reality than any other idea, no idea is truer. The idea of God must be true, if it is to even be possible at all. He could pretend that such a being does not exist, but he cannot pretend that the idea of such a being discloses him to nothing real. Therefore, whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives to be real and true and to involve some perfection, is contained in the idea of a perfect and infinite being, God (46).

Descartes admits that he cannot comprehend the infinite and that there are other things in God he cannot even begin to understand. The infinite cannot be grasped by a finite intellect. Therefore, everything he clearly perceives and knows to contain some perfection must be in God: “The result is that, of all the ideas that are in me, the idea that I have of God is the most true, the most clear and distinct” (46).

The existence of God

Though Descartes is attributing all these perfections to God, he must consider the possibility that they might somehow be in him potentially. His inquiry so far has caused his knowledge to gradually increase, and he has no reason to believe that it cannot increase to infinity. Also, given his increased knowledge, he does not see why he would not be able to acquire the remaining perfections of God. If the potential for these perfections is already in him, there seems to be no reason why the potentiality of the perfections is not enough to produce the idea of such perfections. While there are many things in him that have not yet been actualized, Descartes concedes that none of these pertain to the idea of God, since there is

nothing in God that is potential. Although his knowledge is always increasing, it will never actually be infinite because it will never reach a point where it is incapable of greater increase. God is actually infinite, so nothing can be added to his perfection. Descartes also claims a potential being cannot produce the objective being of an idea, only an actual being can do so (47). Is God this being that is pure actuality?

Descartes states that he is certain that he exists since he cannot doubt that he is a thinking thing. This leads to the question of his existence: would he be able to exist if God did not exist? He writes:

But when I am less attentive, and the images of sensible things blind the mind's eye, I do not so easily recall why the idea of a being more perfect than me necessarily proceeds from a being that really is more perfect. This being the case, it is appropriate to ask further whether I myself who have this idea would exist, if such a being did not exist (48).

If, for example, Descartes received his being from himself, he would never doubt or desire anything, and would therefore be God, since he had given himself all the perfections he had some idea of. He must also have some power within himself that enables him, who exists now, to also exist later. If he had such a power, he would be aware of it, since he is a thinking thing. Since he is not aware of this power, he must depend on some being other than himself for existence, and this being must also be a thinking thing and have within itself some certain idea of God and the perfections attributed to God (48-9).

But where did this being upon whose existence Descartes' own existence relies get its existence? Is it from itself or some other cause? If it received its existence from itself, then the being must be God. It has the power of existing in and of itself and it has the ability to possess all the perfections it has an idea of. These perfections are the perfections Descartes perceived in God. Basically, God has self-consciousness. For Descartes, self-reference in the effect or

idea requires self-reference in its cause. This self-reference introduces the possibility of an infinite causal regress. However, this possibility is discharged only when this self-reference is of the kind found in Descartes' first instance of truth and its self-evident cause. The possibility of infinite causal regression is stopped because the self-reference of the idea is self-consciousness: Descartes is aware of his own cognitive capability and cannot doubt this; he knows that he exists because he is a thinking thing. Descartes is aware of himself, so whatever caused this idea in him must also possess the perfection of being aware of itself, that is, it must possess self-consciousness.³² The unity of all these perfections is one of the most significant perfections in God: “. . . the unity, the simplicity, that is, the inseparability of all those features that are in God is one of the chief perfections that I understand to be in him” (50). For Descartes, this idea of unity could not have been caused by anything other than the cause of the ideas of the perfections themselves:

Certainly the idea of the unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause from which I did not also get the ideas of the other perfections; for neither could some cause have made me understand them joined together and inseparable from one another, unless it also caused me to recognize what they were (50).

Another possibility is that this being received its existence from another cause. Descartes will then inquire in a similar fashion about this cause: did it get its existence from itself or from yet another cause? If another cause, Descartes will then ask the same question about where this cause received its existence: from itself or something else? If something else, this same line of questioning will continue. Eventually, he will arrive at the ultimate cause, namely, God (50). Descartes then states: “Indeed I have no choice but to conclude that the mere fact of my existing and of there being in me an idea of a most perfect being, that is, God, demonstrates most evidently that God too exists” (51).

Descartes has proven the existence of God, but how did this idea come to him? He rules out the possibility of it coming to him from the senses, since it did not come to him unpredictably. It was also not made by him, since he is unable to take anything away from it or add anything to it. He then concludes: “The only option remaining is that this idea is innate in me, just as the idea of myself is innate in me” (51). He asserts that he is made in the image and likeness of God, so why would God not put the idea of Himself in Descartes? Descartes is able to understand this idea by the same faculty by which he perceives himself:

That is, when I turn the mind’s eye toward myself, I understand not only that I am something incomplete and dependent upon another, something aspiring indefinitely for greater and greater or better things, but also that the being on whom I depend has in himself all those greater things – not merely indefinitely and potentially, but infinitely and actually, and thus that he is God. The whole force of the argument rests on the fact that I recognize that it would be impossible for me to exist, being of such a nature as I am (namely, having in me the idea of God), unless God did in fact exist (51-2).

God is the purely actual being in which all other ideas originate.

In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes gives another proof of God’s existence and also discusses what God is. He cannot think of anything besides God alone to whose essence existence belongs. This further implies God as pure actuality. Descartes also cannot understand how there could be more than one God of this kind. Now that he has asserted the existence of one God, he can “plainly see that it is necessary that he has existed from eternity and will endure for eternity” (68). Finally, though he perceived many other features in God, he cannot remove or change any of them (68). He is saying that it is impossible to conceive of God except as existing. The idea of existence is essentially connected with other ideas that together form the idea of God. Because of this, one must say existence is part of the nature of God. Therefore, God necessarily exists.³³

Descartes has proven the existence of God as the ultimate guarantor of the existence of the universe and as the supreme being, but why was there even a question of God's existence if this idea is innate? He states:

. . . as far as God is concerned, if I were not overwhelmed by prejudices and if the images of sensible things were not besieging my thought from all directions, I would certainly acknowledge nothing sooner or more easily than him. For what, in and of itself, is more manifest than that a supreme being exists, that is God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists (69)?

For Descartes, God's existence enables his clear and distinct perceptions to be true. If he were ignorant of God, then other arguments could have been brought forward which would easily cause him to change his opinion, and thus the veracity of his perceptions would never be known. Descartes ultimately concludes:

And thus I see plainly that the certainty and truth of every science depends exclusively upon the knowledge of the true God, to the extent that, prior to my becoming aware of him, I was incapable of achieving perfect knowledge about anything else. But now it is possible for me to achieve full and certain knowledge about countless things, both about God and other intellectual matters. . . (71).

God necessarily exists. Otherwise, there would be no truth in the world.

The Aristotelian God and the Cartesian God

In his proofs for the existence of God, Descartes leaves behind Aristotle's notion of substance. Although he borrows from the Aristotelian proof, Descartes' agenda is different. His goal is not to discover the first cause or causes of the universe as it was for Aristotle, but to discover something that secures the truth of his clear and distinct perceptions. Positing God as the first cause of the universe was a result of forming a first philosophy for Aristotle and positing God as the first cause of ideas was a result of meditating on a first philosophy for Descartes. For both, first philosophy entails a study of being and an investigation into abstract

qualities of existence. God plays a significant role for both philosophers in exploring their respective first philosophies. However, their methodologies are different. Aristotle begins from the standpoint that theology is the first science. His Unmoved Mover is the goal of his first science that studies the first causes and principles. However, divinity for Descartes is a means to prove the truth of his perceptions. His goal was not to somehow align theology and philosophy, but to discover truth in the world. He does not prove the existence of God by asserting theology as his first philosophy: God arises through his quest to prove the veracity of his clear and distinct perceptions.

Though not directly concerned with substance, Descartes' argument for the existence of God through ideas is similar to Aristotle's argument through substance. Descartes takes an idea, and traces its cause back to some original idea that caused all other ideas. Aristotle takes a substance, and traces its cause back to some original substance that caused all other substances. The first idea and first substance are the ultimate causes of existence for Descartes and Aristotle respectively. Descartes' notion of ideas and the cause of ideas is akin to Aristotle's notion of the cause of substance and his distinction between potential and actual being. An idea must come from some other idea, and the idea from which it comes must have as much reality as the idea itself. Similarly, for Aristotle, a substance gets its existence from another substance, which must have the qualities of the substance it caused. A substance is caused by some actual substance. It is as if an idea for Descartes must be caused by an idea that is actual. The possibility of an infinite causal regress is present in each philosopher's assertion, however, both eliminate this possibility by acknowledging the existence of a first uncaused cause. For both, this first cause is a self-caused God, who is the best being. It is best for Aristotle because it is the object of both thought and desire and is pure actuality. Descartes

has in himself an idea of the unity of all of the perfections he perceives in God. This idea of unity is the chief perfection he sees in God, and could not have been placed in him by any being other than God. This is why, for Descartes, God is the best, most perfect being.

So for Descartes, God is self-caused. He is the first cause of universe, in the sense that if God did not exist, then the truth of Descartes' perceptions would not be guaranteed, and thus Descartes, as well as everything else in the universe, would not exist. This is similar to Aristotle's assertion that God is the Unmoved Mover. Descartes' explanation for the self-causation of God follows from the concept of formal causality, comparable to Aristotle's same concept, for "an explanation by formal cause is an explanation based on the essence of a thing."³⁴ Aristotle's explanation for self-causation follows from the essence of being while Descartes' follows from the essence of ideas. Descartes eventually concludes that "the essence of God is such that he must always exist," which is obviously an explanation based on essence.³⁵ While they use similar concepts of causality to explain self-causation, there is a difference between their notions of God as first cause. For Aristotle, God is the first cause as well as the final cause. However, Descartes rejects this notion of final causality. He is not primarily concerned with that which something is made of or material causality, but in the cause of existence or change, of efficient causality.³⁶

This lack of a telos is problematic for Descartes' proofs. For Aristotle, God is the first and final cause: he is the cause of all substance, and he is the end for which substances exist. However, for Descartes, God is no such end. This gives rise to circularity in his argument: for one's clear and distinct perceptions to be true, one must know that God exists and is not a deceiver. At the same time, God exists because one has a clear and distinct perception of God. Descartes is assuming what he is proving, and thus, his proofs are unsuccessful. If his goal

was to overturn and reject parts of Aristotelianism, when it comes to the existence of God, he has failed. He has not sufficiently proven the existence of God from innate ideas. Aristotle's proof based on substance lacks this circularity, and therefore seems more sufficient and plausible than Descartes' proof.

Though Aristotle and Descartes took somewhat different approaches to discovering the first cause of the universe, they arrived at similar conclusions. First, that there is in fact a first cause to the universe, and second, that this cause can be nothing other than God. Aristotle proved the existence of a God that is the most complete being, eternal, and immovable. He reached this conclusion through an inquiry into substance. Descartes attempted to prove the existence of a perfect, eternal, infinite, and immovable God by borrowing Aristotelian concepts. However, he did so not through an inquiry into substance, which he was not particularly concerned with, but through his search for the cause of ideas. Ultimately, God is the cause of the universe for both Aristotle and Descartes. For both, God is necessary for existence.

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1. Aristotle. 1966. *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press. All translations of and references to Aristotle are from here unless otherwise noted.
 2. Miller, Ed L. 1972. *God and Reason: A Historical Approach to Philosophical Theology*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 9.
 3. Kenny, Anthony. 1998. *A Brief History of Western Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 82: Aristotle does not use the word “prior” in the temporal sense, but uses it to denote things that are more fundamental in the order of the existence of beings.
 4. Qtd. in Charlotte Witt, “Teleology in Aristotelian Metaphysics,” in *Method in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Jyl Gentzler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 257.
 5. *Ibid.*, 260.
 6. *Ibid.*, 261.
 7. *Ibid.*, 263.
 8. *Ibid.*
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Scaltsas, Theodore. 1994. *Substances and Universals in Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 170.
 11. *Ibid.*, 173.
 12. καθ’ αὐτο, literally, “according to itself.”
 13. Scaltsas 1994, 181.
 14. Joseph G. Defilippo, “Aristotle’s Identification of the Prime Mover as God,” *The Classical Quarterly* 44, no.2 (1994): 395-6.
 15. *Ibid.*, 393.
 16. This was established in 1072a22-7.
 17. νοῦς is understood to mean the Intellect.
 18. Defilippo 1994, 395.
 19. *Ibid.*, 394.
 20. *Ibid.*
 21. *Ibid.*, 396.
 22. Descartes, Rene. 1998. *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company. All translations of and references to Descartes’ *Meditations* are from here unless otherwise noted. References are passage numbers, not page numbers.
 23. Annette Baier, “The Idea of the True God in Descartes,” in *Essays on Descartes’ Meditations*, ed. Amelie O. Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 363.
 24. *Ibid.*, 360.
 25. Qtd. in Rorty 1986, 360.
 26. *Ibid.*
 27. Alan Gewirth, “Descartes: Two Disputed Questions,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 9 (1971): 291.
 28. *Ibid.*
 29. *Ibid.*, 292.
 30. Qtd. in Robert Delahunty, “Descartes’ Cosmological Argument,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 118 (1980): 37-8.

31. An explanation of reality being in something eminently is given in (Delahunty 1980, 37):
“Being a general is greater than, but in some sense includes, being a colonel; being a bishop is more eminent than, but comprehends, being a priest. Thus the general is ‘eminently’ a colonel, the bishop ‘eminently’ a priest.”
32. Baier, 378-9.
33. Donald Sievert, “Descartes on Theological Knowledge,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 2 (1982): 202-3.
34. Daniel E. Flage and Clarence A. Bonnen, “Descartes on Causation,” *Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 1 (1997): 841.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 845.

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