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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Facets of Certainty: A Critique of the Development of a
Fundamental Cartesian Notion**

A Thesis Submitted to

The Department of Philosophy

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

By

Muhammad Ahmad Sami

Under the supervision of **Dr. Robert W. McIntyre**

July/ 2017

The American University in Cairo

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*To my parents
who planted the seeds of the love of knowledge in my heart
and to Dr. Mohamad Al-Ississ
who provided nourishment and care until those seeds blossomed*

The completion of this thesis could not have been possible without numerous efforts of multiple institutions, and people.

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The American University in Cairo is where I started my higher education as an undergraduate student in Mechanical Engineering. Its liberal arts education allowed me to explore disciplines that I could not have possibly explored otherwise. It is because of AUC that I was able to discover my interest in philosophy. I will forever be indebted to AUC as an institution, especially its philosophy faculty. Dr. Steffen Stelzer's inspiring lectures and the kind of questions they raised forced me to appreciate that there is more to *philosophia* than the scholasticism that was my only focus when I first joined the program. Dr. Robin Weiss devoted tens of hours of her precious time to helping me read and understand some of Aristotle's passages. Dr. Alessandro Topa helped me navigate my way through this program and decide which courses to take and what topics to focus on given my own interests.

As a thesis supervisor, Dr. Robert McIntyre asked me the most challenging questions that made me feel –several times– that my project might actually fail. These challenging questions are the reason why my thesis ended up as a piece that I am truly proud of. I am also grateful for his acceptance of what I now consider a lousy proposal. My thesis readers Dr. Catarina Belo and Dr. Richard Fincham provided important comments on my thesis draft and during my defense upon which I made corrections that changed my thesis to the better. I thank the three of my committee members for an experience that helped boost my confidence in the kind of research I intend to pursue in the future – God willing.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The seventeenth century is one of the most interesting centuries in the history of philosophy and of science. It is the century that gives us Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hobbes, Malebranche and Newton. Despite their differences, one thing that they shared together is novelty. They all differed significantly in the construction of their philosophy from philosophers who discussed the same problems in preceding centuries. These early modern philosophers, unlike their medieval predecessors, took pride in originality and did not see themselves as a continuation of a school founded by an authority like Aristotle, Augustine or Thomas. This might have been because at the closing of the 16th century, in the words of Etienne Gilson, “[r]ational metaphysics was dead; positive science had not yet been born; nothing was left to which the men of those times could still resort, but imagination.”¹ As a result, a new system had to be born. In fact, the Renaissance period was full of calls for a “new philosophy.” By rational metaphysics, Gilson meant the traditions that followed Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus. The scholastic philosophy that is meant here was under severe attack at the time for several reasons, among them is that it was held responsible, by those calling for its replacement, for several corruptions visible at the time like treating church offices as ‘benefices’, illiteracy among the lower clergy and existence of sexual offenses². For a Christian society, such corruptions raised questions mainly regarding the efficacy of the theological and educational system in producing a learned, moral, Christian society. It was contended, for example, that the study of ethics based on scholastic commentaries on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, did not contribute to implanting the love of morals into the hearts of students. It only enabled them to define what morals are and engage in debates about them. Also, the engagement in scholastic education occupied students with the study of the works of men instead of occupying them with the study of the revealed Scripture.

René Descartes is at the center of the attempts to come up with new philosophy. His method of inquiry and his physics to a great extent determine the formation of modern philosophy. Descartes’s philosophical and scientific output have repercussions in the world that we live in today, almost four centuries from the original publication of his work. In this paper, I present a critique of his notion of certain knowledge as it develops *Meditations on First Philosophy*, arguably his main treatment of metaphysics. I argue that although he claims to construct his whole system on the basis of his method of rejecting as if “absolutely false” whatever he finds susceptible to the least doubt, this system is heavily dependent on principles derived from scholasticism. Given this dependence, the whole project of securing certain knowledge is as solid as the principles upon which it is built. If the principles are not supported, they collapse and so the whole project collapses with them. On Descartes’s own terms, his project of securing knowledge that is beyond any doubt fails, for the reliance on such principles cannot be justified by his method. I argue that Descartes does not indicate why he does not subject these principles and concepts to doubt. As a result, the reader is left with a system that does not survive serious scrutiny based on Descartes’s own method.

¹ See Gilson (1999).

² For a survey of late medieval anti-Aristotelianism and the breakdown of medieval philosophy see Menn (2008) and Chapter Four of Gilson (1999).

This reading of Descartes suggests that there is another angle from which we can spot a Cartesian circle. This circle would lie in his reliance on principles that his system is yet to establish. Although the Cartesian reliance on scholastic principles has been pointed towards as early as Hobbes, these principles have not yet been put together to show what role do they play in the formation of particular notions.

Section II is a survey of the intellectual climate that made Descartes's work possible or, as he and many of his contemporaries believed, necessary. This survey should make it clear why Descartes came up with his project. It is important for understanding the Cartesian notion of certain knowledge and its implications to note that Descartes is a product of a peculiar period when a *weakened* scholasticism was taught in schools. This situation called for attempts to provide better solutions to the questions they faced and these solutions gave birth to modern philosophy which is characterized by a break from scholasticism. With the absence of a comprehensive critique of medieval metaphysics and epistemology, I found it pertinent to resort to intellectual and religious forces that were in play early in the seventeenth century that might have resulted in the particular project that Descartes was putting forward. In section III, I present my interpretation of Descartes's notion of certain knowledge. According to my interpretation, Descartes's notion of certainty emphasizes the centrality of the role of both the doctrine of the creation eternal truths and that of God's existence in such a notion of certain knowledge. The rejection of the necessity of eternal truths and the existence of God are, I argue, central to the notion in question and I give them a more comprehensive treatment in the sections that follow. For Descartes, to have true certain knowledge about something is to assent to it *only* after it is perceived clearly and distinctly. This can only be achieved based on trust in the benevolent God who has endowed us with the faculty of perception. This faculty should not judge falsely unless the judgement is based upon a clear and distinct perception. Otherwise, God would be a deceiver. In section IV, I discuss his doctrine of the creation of eternal truths or their dependence of God and hint to its possible ramifications in epistemology. These ramifications will be resorted to in the subsequent section on scholastic principles where I will argue that his rejection of eternal truths is inconsistent with his method. My argument is that given his method and the doctrine of the creation of eternal truths, he cannot establish his very first principle – the *cogito*. In section V, I explain Descartes's theory of ideas as he briefly develops it in the Third Meditation and in his reply to Caterus. On the one hand I show its novelty, while on the other, I show that it might not be a fully developed theory by the time it is utilized in the *Meditations* to prove the existence of God. This is because Descartes, when replying to Caterus, at some points seems inconsistent, which raises questions on the level of development of the theory of ideas that Descartes has. Caterus's objection is explained only briefly for the purpose of contextualizing Descartes's reply during the course of which he expands on his theory of ideas. The doctrinal background for Caterus's objections will be elaborated upon in section VII. In section VI, I examine Descartes's proofs of God's existence and the relationship of these proofs to his theory of ideas, highlighting an essential difference between his system and that of the Aristotelian scholastics. Because of this difference, Descartes starts all of his proofs for the existence of God with an idea that he has of God. The Aristotelian scholastics did not develop their idea of God before establishing his existence. It is after knowing that he exists that they start asking about his attributes. Descartes already has these attributes in mind before proving the existence of God. In section VII, I explain Caterus's objections by explaining their origins in the philosophy of the School, particularly in Suárez. The way he understood

the causality and intentionality of ideas are inconsistent with the ontological nature that they have as objective beings, at least based on the Suárezian definition of them. Descartes has a novel conception of ideas. He is not required to abide by scholastic doctrines. What he would be required to do is provide sufficient defense for his new doctrines in order to show their indubitability. This is what I believe does not occur. In section VIII, the final section before the conclusion, I put together the elements of this thesis to show how the whole construction of the notion of certain knowledge is dependent on scholastic principles, which implies its failure. This, as noted above, is because Descartes refuses to admit of certain principles then he builds his system on notions that derive from such principles.³ I claim that this makes his notion of certain knowledge unfounded, which leads to its inevitable dismissal. Indeed, even if some features of his epistemology might have outlived him until today, the conclusions that he established upon them most certainly did not.

II. THE INTELLECTUAL CLIMATE THAT MADE DESCARTES POSSIBLE

In the *Discourse on Method*, where Descartes first introduces his project, we find the following quote:

But in my college days I discovered that nothing can be imagined which is too strange or incredible to have been said by some philosopher; and since then I have recognized through my travels that those with views quite contrary to ours are not on that account barbarians or savages, but that many of them make use of reason as much or more than we do. I thought, too, how the same man, with the same mind, if brought up from infancy among the French or Germans, develops otherwise than he would if he had always lived among the Chinese or cannibals... Thus, it is custom and example that persuade us, rather than any certain knowledge. (AT VI 16; CSM I 118-119)

Descartes is pointing out that items of purported knowledge that he had were not a result of conviction in “any certain knowledge”. Instead, custom and example persuaded him. He is expressing his dissatisfaction with this state of affairs. This kind of argument is not new in philosophy. Descartes here is echoing arguments from Montaigne and Cicero.

By the time Descartes was born, Michel de Montaigne’s *Essays* were published and in circulation. Montaigne was a philosopher who conceded to the fact that Christians were unable to justify their faith through reason. He was of the view that it was only faith that would embrace the mysteries of religion. However, reason should be in company with our faith, for it is an activity of ours that should be devoted to God’s honor⁴. Of particular relevance to Descartes is the following passage from the *Essays*:

As we say in disputes about religion, that we must have a judge not attached to either party and free from preference and passion, which is impossible among Christians, so it is in this. For if he is old, he cannot judge the sense perception of old age, being himself a party in this dispute; if he is young, likewise, healthy, likewise; likewise, sick, asleep or awake. We would need someone exempt from all these qualities, so that with an unprejudiced judgement he might judge those propositions as

³ He rejects as if absolutely false any piece of knowledge that does not pass his test of being indubitable. He does not allow himself to admit that two plus three equals five or that contradiction is impossible. However, his system depends on these very principles that he does not admit of.

⁴ Referenced in Curley (1978).

of things indifferent to him, and by that score we need a judge that never was.

To judge the appearances we receive of objects we would need a judicatory instrument, to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration, and to verify a demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle⁵.

As for Cicero, the reading and popularization of his work was part of the Renaissance project of reviving ancient philosophy. One of the reasons reference to him, as well as to Seneca, was encouraged is because in their eloquence those “goats and firebrands of words, by which the mind is spurred and inflamed toward love of virtue and hatred of vice”⁶. It was through such writing that the love of virtue could be retained. But Cicero was also a critic of dogmatic philosophy⁷. In his works, as a self-possessed member of the skeptical New Academy, Cicero would recite the arguments of opposing dogmatic schools to show that none of them has arguments that are more convincing than those of the others. The difference, however, between Cicero’s arguments and their employment by the reformers, according to Menn (2008), is that the latter’s starting point was their dissatisfaction with the state of Christianity under scholastic education, not dissatisfaction with their rational arguments; hence the reformers’ deployment of whatever resources they have that would aid in criticizing the established system. This particular point, in addition to the fact that fundamental scholastic ontological doctrines such as hylomorphism were not subjected to proper criticism by modern philosophers including Descartes, supports the suggestion that the need for coming up with a new notion of certain knowledge was not founded on sufficient philosophical criticism of the metaphysics and epistemology of the School.

At the same time, science was increasingly gaining grounds in Europe. The seventeenth century witnessed the emergence of mathematical physics and a mechanistic philosophy that achieved unprecedented progress in explaining particular natural phenomena. The new scientific discoveries were not in agreement with Aristotelian physics and the scholastic philosophical system into which it was incorporated. This philosophical system was reconciled with Christian doctrine in a manner that would render any dissociation from the system of Aristotelian physics a dissociation from Christianity. Also, the progress in science was bringing with it new attitudes towards God and knowledge of him. Theology was no longer the only place to seek the knowledge of God. Marion (2008) tells us that Kepler wanted to be become a theologian at first. However, he decided to become an astronomer instead, since both disciplines provided the same opportunity to know and praise the Creator. But God was now understood through natural science. He was a first cause, a term in a demonstration. The universe was held to be governed by mathematical laws that are understood by God and by humans in the same way. At the same time, theology was shifting from a doctrine of analogy of being to one of its univocity⁸, which was in line with the new scientific understanding of the universe. One proponent of such views was Father Mersenne, Descartes’s friend, correspondent and literary agent. Descartes was opposed to these views that studied God in the same manner in which creatures were studied. He saw God as more transcendent than that and that he should not be subject to the laws of nature or of mathematics. In fact, He is the author of such laws. He objected to Mersenne as follows:

⁵ Montaigne (1957) cited in Curley (1978).

⁶ These are the words of Petrarca cited in Menn (2008).

⁷ For Cicero’s influence on the Renaissance see Schmitt (1972).

⁸ This shift makes the kind of being attributed to God less transcendent and analogous, which makes it a kind of being that is closer to the beings studied by natural science.

As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of Him. And if men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. (AT I 149; CSMK 24)

Descartes is neither in line nor in total disagreement with his contemporaries. He is indeed an esteemed scientist who is so ambitious as to aim for the establishment of a universal science, a method that would unify the sciences and lead to certain knowledge in all of them. But he is also a devout Catholic. He is displeased by the atheism that was spreading at his time as a result of both the skepticism that was replacing the certain conviction of the scholastic system, and the fascination by the results of the new sciences that made the understanding of the universe in no need of God. As a result, the establishment of certain proofs for the existence of God becomes of twofold importance for Descartes. He wants to prove the existence of the God that he, as a Catholic, believes in and to ground, in the knowledge of this God, the certainty of the scientific system that he is establishing. He writes to Mersenne:

The shortest way I know to reply to the arguments which he brings against the Godhead, and to all arguments of other atheists, is to find an evident proof which will make everyone believe that God exists. (AT I 181; CSMK 29).

There is also another motivation for Descartes. He wants his system of science to be published and accepted without having to face the fate of Bruno. He previously had to suppress his treatise *The World*, in which, among other controversial propositions, he establishes that the earth moves. He believed that each part of his physics is dependent on its other parts so that if one doctrine fails, the whole system would follow in failing. He writes a note to Mersenne, letting him know that he “would not wish, for anything in the world, to maintain [his opinions] against the authority of the Church.” (AT I 285; CSMK 42) Descartes is still certain about his conclusions, yet he desires to avoid conflict and to live in peace. So in order to avoid the fate of Galileo and Bruno, his plan is to present, before his physical system, a metaphysical one that is in total agreement with Catholic faith. One that would gain approval from authorities such as the “most learned and distinguished men, the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris” (AT VII 1; CSM II 3). Only then, will his physical system gain acceptance among the public. The metaphysical system allows for the attainment of a certain knowledge of God that accomplishes the goals of: replacing the decadent Aristotelian system, combatting the atheists, reconciling the new science with religion while advancing the sciences.

The historical forces highlighted in this chapter suggest that the need for a formulation of a new notion of certain science was not purely a result of philosophical dissatisfaction with the notions prevalent in medieval philosophy. As remarked above and supported by Menn (2008), the dissatisfaction was more with the state of Christianity rather than with Aristotelian scholastic philosophy.

III. WHAT COUNTS AS CERTAIN KNOWLEDGE

As mentioned above, Descartes lived in a time during which a revolution in natural science was taking place. In the seventeenth century, the anti-Aristotelian scientific environment was transforming *Scientia* from the study of the properties of members of natural kinds gathered together under a known essence, based on formal

and final causes, to a study of the mechanistic behavior of physical systems and of efficient causes⁹. This transformation allowed the natural scientists to provide more accurate explanations of the universe. These explanations offered the possibility of better practical applications of science, improving human intervention and control over nature. For the first time, man, in Descartes's words, was provided with knowledge and tools that would ultimately lead to "make ourselves . . . the lords and masters of nature." (AT VI 62; CSM I 142-3)

Descartes took part in this process of transforming the conception of *Scientia*. He puts forward his theory that there are two kinds of conviction of belief. It is possible that two different people possess the belief or conviction of the same truth while only one of them has *Scientia* or true knowledge, for one of them believes in the benevolent God while the other does not. The two of these people will still have some kind of belief in a true thing. Yet, one of them is worthy of being *Scientia* while the other is not. The other is mere awareness. Here is a striking passage from the *Second Replies*:

The fact that an atheist can be 'clearly aware that the three angles of a triangle are equal two right angles' is something I do not dispute. But I maintain that this awareness of his is not true knowledge, since no act of awareness that can be rendered doubtful seems fit to be called knowledge. Now since we are supposing that this individual is an atheist, he cannot be certain that he is not being deceived on matters which seem to him to be very evident (as I fully explained). And although this doubt may not occur to him, it can still crop up if someone else raises the point or if he looks into the matter himself. So he will never be free of this doubt until he acknowledges that God exists (AT VII 141; CSM II 101).

Here, Descartes is justifying his claim that it does not follow from one's possession of knowledge of a certain truth that he has true knowledge of it. While it is true that the atheist is correct about the three angles of a triangle being equal to two right angles, he is still in doubt about them, at least potentially. The atheist did not secure his knowledge of the principles of geometry in his trust in the veracity of the benevolent God, whose existence is fully proved by Descartes in the *Meditations*. This puts the atheist in the same position of uncertainty and skepticism that Descartes was at in the beginning of the *Meditations*. Early in the *Meditations*, Descartes claimed that he could not even secure his knowledge of truths that are as clear as that two and three add up to five. Descartes does not deny that these truths are eternal; they true in every possible world as long as God is its author. What he says is, as I will explain in the next section, that it is only through the knowledge of God that we know that they are eternal, and it is only because God has known them to be so that they are. In other works, when he speaks in confidence of the truths of mathematics and geometry as eternal truths, he stresses the connection between his knowledge of them being eternal and universal and his knowledge of the existence of God. In *The World* he says:

[E]ternal truths on which mathematicians have usually based their most certain and most evident demonstrations – the truths, I say, according to which God himself has taught us that he has arranged all things in number, weight and measure. The knowledge of these truths is so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them infallible when we conceive

⁹ For a comprehensive account of *Scientia* in the seventeenth century see Kray et al (2010). Two chapters of this volume are dedicated to Descartes.

them distinctly, nor doubt that if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one (AT XI 47; CSM I 97).

In this passage, Descartes claims that knowledge of the eternal truths is “so natural to our souls that we cannot but judge them to be infallible.” This means that we are not capable, upon proper reflection, of judging otherwise. However, in the case that there is a malevolent God, it is possible that he makes us err even at such a foundational level of knowledge, and deceives us at every instant when we think that two and three add up to five. It is not before Descartes establishes the existence of a benevolent God that he trusts that this automatic judgment of his is sound. This passage obviously assumes the existence of such a God.

However, in the context of the discussion of this passage, it is another property of the Deity that is relevant. Descartes is arguing for the constancy and consistency of the laws of nature. In this case, it is God’s immutability that matters. Descartes says: “For what more firm and solid foundation could one find for establishing a truth, even if one wished to choose it at will, than the very firmness and immutability which is in God?” (AT XI 43; CSM I 96) For him, if it was not for God’s immutability we would have not known that such laws are constant but if it was not for His benevolence, we would not even know them indubitably. The former knowledge is related to the physical world while the latter is related to his metaphysical project which also grounds his physics, ethics and medicine. This is because metaphysics, the root of the tree of sciences, is the first in the order of knowledge and is what makes the rest of the sciences (its branches) possible. (AT IXB 14-15; CSM I 186) The atheist, of course, lacking the knowledge of the root, would also be lacking the knowledge of the branches. The atheist cannot *truly* know that two plus three add up to five even if he thinks he knows them. His awareness of them, unlike that of the believer in a benevolent God, is still subject to doubt arising from the possibility of there being a deceiving God or from the skeptic’s arguments against the validity of the knowledge of the senses.

Where does this leave scientific knowledge and investigation conducted before the establishment of the benevolent God? Descartes provides an answer, first in the *Discourse*:

Should anyone be shocked at first by some of the statements I make at the beginning of the *Optics* and *Meteorology* because I call them ‘suppositions’ and do not seem to care about proving them, let him have the patience to read the whole book attentively, and I trust that he will be satisfied. For I take my reasonings to be so closely interconnected that just as the last are proved by the first, so the first are proved by the last, which are their effects. It must not be supposed that I am here committing the fallacy that the logicians call “arguing in a circle”. For as experience makes most of these effects quite certain, the causes from which I deduce them serve not so much to prove them as to explain them; indeed, quite to the contrary, it is the causes which are proved by the effects (AT VI 76; CSM I 150).

then in a letter to Mersenne dated 27 May 1638:

You ask if I regard what I have written about refraction as a demonstration. I think it is, in so far as one can be given in a field without a previous demonstration of the principles of physics by metaphysics—which is something I hope to do some day but which has not yet been

done—and so far as it has ever been possible to demonstrate the solution to any problem of mechanics, or optics, or astronomy, or anything else which is not pure geometry or arithmetic. But to require me to give geometrical demonstrations on a topic that depends on physics is to ask me to do the impossible. And if you will not call anything demonstrations except geometers' proofs, then you must say that Archimedes never demonstrated anything in mechanics, or Vitellio in optics, or Ptolemy in astronomy. But of course nobody says this. In such matters people are satisfied if the authors' assumptions are not obviously contrary to experience and if their discussion is coherent and free from logical error, even though their assumptions may not be strictly true. I could demonstrate, for instance, that even the definition of the centre of gravity given by Archimedes is false, and that there is no such centre; and the other assumptions he makes elsewhere are not strictly true either . . . but that is not a sufficient reason for rejecting the demonstrations. . . (AT II 141–142; CSM III 103).

The previous passages suggest that Descartes is operating here at two ways in which we can say of a particular conviction that it is certain, or two ways in which one can say that can know something and can demonstrate it. He clearly states that 'experience makes most of these effects quite certain' while maintaining that he calls his findings suppositions because he does not demonstrate them. He says that even if his principles or causes remain unproved, their effects count as proofs of them, since experience makes the effects certain and from the certainty of the effects the causes are proved. In the letter to Mersenne, Descartes says that his demonstrations of refraction are demonstrations insofar a demonstration can be given in physics *without the principles of physics being grounded in metaphysics*. But in physics, he says, the readers would be satisfied as long as there is no obvious contradiction between the assumptions and experience. In other words, as long as the demonstration is consistent and has no logical errors. He gives the example of Archimedes' demonstrations regarding the center of gravity. Even though it could be demonstrated that the assumptions of his demonstrations are false, no one can say that his demonstrations are rejected.

This acceptance of demonstrations that are not grounded in metaphysics and the description of effects as being proved by experience indicates that there can be a way in which one can speak of beings certain in a manner other than that established by the *Meditations*. Only the latter is certain knowledge, the former is only a loose expression in common language. In the realm of particular physical postulates, in contrast with the general principles of physics, causes and effects can be deduced from and justified by each other without the need of a grounding science. There are assumed principles from which conclusions stem and these conclusions flow smoothly. They are consistent and are able to explain phenomena that we see in the sensible world. This is a kind of conviction, or, in Descartes's terms, awareness, that both the theist and the atheist can share. What they cannot share is genuine knowledge of the general principles of physics. Hence, the two ways in which one could say that they are certain, and one should not conclude from the loose way that what Descartes is speaking of is certain knowledge. This way is one that can be achieved by physics without having its general principles established by metaphysics as shown above. The true sense in which certainty is used, and the one aimed at in the *Meditations*, has to

have its general principles established by metaphysics. If you cannot justify the reliability of the senses, then you certainly cannot justify the reliability of the causes and effects ascertained by (sensible) experience.

Theories of physics and their practical applications do not seem to be endangered by the skeptic's arguments. What is in real danger is the indubitability of such knowledge and the religious implications of their dubitability. The seventeenth century is when atheism starts to become a philosophical movement rather than an individual position. Skeptical arguments raised about the nature of the knowledge of the senses were not only challenging physics but also the proofs of God's existence that proceeded from the external world. If we cannot trust our senses and the knowledge they give us of the external world, how can we trust the proofs of God's existence developed by the Aristotelian scholastic tradition? Descartes is seeking a knowledge that is not open to any kind of doubt, that which is truly worthy of being called *Scientia*.

In the beginning of the Third Meditations, Descartes introduces his 'truth rule':

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 of it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I know seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive clearly and distinctly in true (AT VII 35; CSM II 24).

What is meant by the "first item of knowledge" here is Descartes's first principle: the *cogito*. The *cogito* is established by Descartes in the Second Meditation when he is trying to establish any item of knowledge for certain and that can be used as a first principle. He finds that it is not possible for him to be deceived when judging that he is something. It is this impossibility of being deceived that makes Descartes certain about the *cogito* and this indubitability is what he takes to be an indication that what he knows is certain. It is certain as long as it is indubitable, just like the *cogito* is. For Descartes, even an evil omnipotent being cannot deceive him about this; he cannot bring it that Descartes is nothing at the moment that he is thinking. This is what gives the *cogito* its special status that makes it the only thing that Descartes is certain about. The *cogito* is incorrigible. It is known in a way such that conceding to doubts raised about it is impossible. Descartes is certain about his own existence, and this incorrigibility rules out any possibility of doubt about it. The incorrigibility of the *cogito* would later on be taken a measure of certainty. If an item of knowledge is of the kind of the *cogito*, this item of knowledge is known with certainty beyond and possible doubt. After establishing this certain indubitable knowledge about the *cogito*, Descartes is tries to find something in it that would allow him attain further knowledge. The critical element that he finds in the *cogito* is that it is "a clear and distinct perception." By clear Descartes means that it is currently present in front of the mind and by distinct he means that it can be differentiated from other perceptions. He concludes that whatever is perceived in such manner is true and that clarity and distinctness is a criterion of truth. This clarity and distinctness is what made the *cogito*

so special that it cannot be false. However, this criterion of clarity and distinctness could not be used to validate his knowledge of the things that he perceived as sensible. This is because what he perceived clearly was not these things themselves but the ideas of them.¹⁰ He does not through his method reject his ideas. What he rejected was other things that he “used to assert” through these ideas. (AT VII 35; CSM II 25) Yet, there would remain other things that Descartes perceives clearly but is not able to establish. For example, “simple and straightforward” laws of “arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five.” (AT VII 35-36; CSM II 25) Descartes does not rule them out from doubt because of the slight possibility of their being a deceiving God. In this passage, Descartes says that the denial of such a law entails a manifest contradiction. However, this manifest contradiction is not sufficient in ascertaining the truth of the fact that two plus three equal five. This is because, as will be explained in the next section, Descartes cannot know whether eternal truths are true unless he knows that there is a benevolent God. This God is yet to be proved in the Third Meditation where this passage occurs.

Gassendi objects to this criterion for truth in his objections to the *Meditations*. His objection is that difference in opinion has occurred among great authorities and each of them claimed that they perceived what they were arguing for clearly and distinctly. This makes clarity and distinctness itself as a criterion in need for a criterion for knowing what a clear and a distinct perception is. Gassendi also adds that some people have very clear and distinct perception of their convictions to an extent that they are willing to die for them. Descartes dismisses these objections. He says that he, as a mind, cannot be influenced by the authorities whose existence is still considered dubitable by the time this criterion for truth is established. As for those willing to die for their convictions, “it can never be proved that they clearly and distinctly perceive what they so stubbornly affirm.” (AT VII 361; CSM II 250) Descartes tells Gassendi that he has already given a criterion to distinguish between perceptions that are clear and distinct and others that are not:

[B]ut I maintain that I carefully provided such a method in the appropriate place, where I first eliminated all preconceived opinions and afterwards listed all my principal ideas, distinguishing those which were clear from those which were obscure and confused (AT VII 362; CSM II 250).

The method that Gassendi has asked for is present in the *Meditations*. It is by going through the meditative process that one eliminates his preconceived opinions in order to be able to differentiate what he has clearly and distinctly perceived from what he has not.

Descartes later discusses clarity and distinctness once more in his *Principles*. The *Principles*, written with the purpose of being a textbook, is more systematic than the *Meditations*. Part 1 on metaphysics contains more or less the same content of the *Meditations* but the order of investigation or of explanation is sometimes changed. This is the case with clarity and distinctness. In the *Meditations*, this criterion is establishing right after the *cogito* and before the proofs of God’s existence. This means that it also comes before the discussion on truth, falsity and error in the Fourth Meditations. While in the *Principles*, this comes after the discussions on God and of

¹⁰ Ideas for Descartes are objects of perception as will be explained in section V.

the discussion on error. While discussing error and falsity, Descartes says that “we will never mistake the false for the true provided we give our assent only to what we clearly and distinctly perceive.” (AT VIII A 121; CSM I 207) This is because our faculty of perception is given to us by God, who is not a deceiver. This makes us unable but to assent to whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly, and knowing that such an assent is an assent to that which is true. Even if this cannot be proved, our minds “are moulded by nature that whenever we perceive something clearly, we spontaneously give our assent to it and are quite unable to doubt its truth.” (ibid) The reason why people err sometimes, is that they assent to what they do not perceive clearly and distinctly. In his reply to Gassendi Descartes said that to know what perceptions are clear and distinct one needs to get rid of their preconceived opinions. This justifies his statement in the *Principles* that many people live their entire lives without ever perceiving something “with sufficient accuracy to enable them to make a judgment about it with certainty.” (ibid)

From the preceding discussion we can conclude that to have true certain knowledge about something one must 1) believe in the benevolent God and 2) attend only to those perceptions that are clear and distinct. The latter only passes his hyperbolic doubt through the establishment of eternal truths which is grounded in the belief in God. Both requirements for true certain knowledge are achieved by Descartes’s method. Of course, for Descartes, it is only his method that can lead to such a kind of knowledge for it starts by escaping the skeptical challenges. Before I discuss Descartes’s solution to the problem arising from skeptical challenges about the proofs for God’s existence, I will discuss the doctrine of the creation of eternal truths as far as it has implications on certain knowledge.

IV. THE CREATION OF ETERNAL TRUTHS

Descartes’s doctrine of the creation of eternal truths requires more elaboration for the purposes of this paper. I want to make clear Descartes’s reasons for thinking they are created and to consider the effect this has on the development of his notion of certain knowledge. Descartes adheres to a doctrine of knowledge of the existence of eternal truths in the same way that he adheres to knowledge of the existence of the external world or beings other than himself and God. He grounds such a doctrine in the existence of God and two of His attributes, namely benevolence and immutability. The implications of Descartes’s belief in a God with such attributes were briefly alluded to in the previous section. God’s benevolence guarantees that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly as an eternal truth, such as the essence of a triangle is true, while the immutability of God’s will guarantees that such truths are necessary. Without either of those two attributes, certain knowledge of the physical world as *res extensa* would not be possible. According to Frankfurt (1977), Descartes first mentions his doctrine of the creation of eternal truths in a letter to Mersenne dated 15th of April 1630, where he writes:

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. Indeed, to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. There is no single one that we cannot grasp if our mind turns to consider it. They are all inborn in our minds just as a king would imprint

his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so. The greatness of God, on the other hand, is something which we cannot grasp even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it beyond our grasp makes us esteem it the more greatly; just as a king has more majesty when he is less familiarly known by his subjects, provided of course that they do not get the idea that they have no king – they must know him enough to be in no doubt about that.

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. ‘But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable.’ – I make the same judgment about God. ‘But his will is free.’ – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power (AT I 145-6; CSMK 23).

Descartes is writing here after he has contemplated and understood his system of metaphysics that provides the foundations of his physics. He tells Mersenne that if it were not for such metaphysical foundations, he ‘would not have been able to discover the foundations of physics.’ (AT I 144; CSMK 22) His proofs for his metaphysical truths, he says, are ‘more evident than the proofs of geometry.’ (AT I 144; CSMK 22)

There are several theses that Descartes is trying to establish in the passage quoted above. *First*: eternal truths, being other than God, are no less created than the rest of the creatures. Otherwise, God would be subject to them, he would not have power in front of them, which is according to Descartes, an improper way to talk about God¹¹. *Second*: the eternal truths are innate to our minds. We are not capable of assenting to their contraries even if we try to do so. Our minds are created in a manner such that they fail to conceive eternal truths as not being necessary. God has the power to implant those truths in our minds without giving us the ability to think otherwise or to go beyond them, like a king “imprints his laws on the hearts of all his subjects.” *Third*: our finite intellect cannot grasp the infinite greatness of God, which makes him more exalted. God’s greatness is a truth even though the mind cannot fully grasp it. This puts a limit to what a mind can grasp, and establishes that there might be truths that are beyond reason. *Fourth*: it should not be judged from reason’s inability to grasp the greatness of God that he does not exist. *Fifth*: there is a connection between eternal truths and God’s will. If his will is changeable, then the eternal truths are changeable. However, our finite minds cannot know more than that. We know that the limits on our reason are not limits on his will, but we do not know what his will does and what it does not. From this we can derive a *Sixth* thesis: thinking about what eternal truths mean independently of our own limited understanding or conception is of no use because our finite minds are limited and there are certain things that they cannot grasp. For as Descartes says in a passage I quote below, if we know the immensity of God’s power, we should not put these questions before our minds.

¹¹ In the same letter he tells Mersenne: “I want people to get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier, I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being.” (AT I 146; CSMK 23) The ‘common and universal’ way might be that of the scholastic philosophers before him. Cronin (1960) says that when Descartes is criticizing previous accounts of God’s power when it comes to eternal truths, he has Francisco Suárez in mind. However, it can be argued that it is not specifically Suárez that he has in mind since the necessity of the eternal truths was a common doctrine before Descartes. This has also been pointed out by Pessin (2010) and Wells (1961). Pessin even argues that Suárez might be closer to an ally of Descartes than to an adversary of his.

The notions that eternal truths are not necessitated upon God, that they are incapable of being doubted by reason, that reason cannot grasp the infinite greatness and power of God, that being unable to grasp God does not entail his non-existence and that there is no use of thinking about these matters are all, in my opinion, in support of Harry Frankfurt's famous interpretation of Descartes¹². He argues that Descartes's project is one of the 'validation of reason' against the skeptic's claims that reason is incapable of acquiring knowledge and whatever reason achieves is susceptible to doubt. Frankfurt quotes the following passage from the *Second Replies*:

What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged 'absolute falsity' bother us, since we neither believe in it or even have even the smallest suspicion of it? For the supposition which we are making here is of a conviction so firm that it is quite incapable of being destroyed; and such a conviction is clearly the same as the most perfect certainty (AT VI 145; CSM II 103)¹³.

In his treatment of the Cartesian doctrine of eternal truths, Frankfurt interprets the doctrine in the light of his general understanding of the Cartesian project. If it is true that the Cartesian project is a validation of reason, then what is required of a doctrine of eternal truths is to show that they are what reason dictates and that it is unimaginable to *conceive* of eternal truths otherwise. Their truth becomes psychological rather than ontological. It remains a matter of what reason dictates or what its proper use leads to and not a matter of absolute truth. God then would not by any means be confined to or limited by these truths, they are true because He knows them to be so. It could have been the case that He had made otherwise what we conceive to be the most fundamental of truths. There would not be an ontological concomitance between what reason validates and what absolutely exists in reality. Descartes writes to Mesland on the 2nd of May 1644:

I turn to the difficulty of conceiving how God would have been acting freely and indifferently if he had made it false that 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. And even if God has willed that some truths be necessary, this does not mean that he has willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident that we cannot put them before our minds without judging them

¹² See Frankfurt (1965) and Frankfurt (1970).

¹³ Frankfurt provides his own translation of the passage from AT. I quote the same passage but from the CSM translation, in order to be consistent with the rest of the translations I use throughout the paper.

entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: ‘that God might have brought it about that his creatures were independent of him’. But if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds (AT IV 118-9; CSMK 235).

The preceding passage can be understood to imply the removal of intelligibility from the mind-independent world, a world where the contradictories are possible. If it were God’s will that contradictories can be true together and that our minds can conceive of them, we would not have thought of them as impossible. Descartes is suggesting that the logically impossible can be possible if God wills it to be. There does not seem so be any changes in Descartes’s doctrine since he expressed it to Mersenne in 1630 till this letter to Mesland in 1644. The only difference seems to be that one letter was before and another after the publication of the *Discourse* and the *Meditations* where Descartes shares his metaphysical project. It is clear that Descartes’s doctrine assumes the existence of the non-deceiving God whose existence is proven in the *Third Meditations*. Before the meditative process that Descartes takes us through, it is not only physical science that we cannot speak of with certainty but also all knowledge. All true knowledge, that is, *Scientia*, depends on knowledge of God and before this belief is secured, it follows from Descartes’s doctrine, there is no guarantee that rational and philosophical discourse is possible. It may occur, but this does not mean that what is subjected to such discourse corresponds to the mind-independent world or to truth taken absolutely. There can be no complete certainty about it. I will leave the implications of this doctrine on the development of Descartes’s notion of certain knowledge till section VIII. Now I move to Descartes’s theory ideas which sets the stage for his proofs for the existence of God.

V. THE THEORY OF IDEAS

The fact that Descartes makes the attainment of certain knowledge dependent on knowledge of God and trust in his veracity makes the discussion of his theory of ideas central to this ongoing treatment.¹⁴ Descartes’s introduction of the theory as we are interested in it is presented, though very briefly, in Part IV of the *Discourse* where Descartes mentions that he has an “idea more perfect than himself” (AT VI 34; CSM I 128). While he argues that there are certain ideas that he is aware of and can take himself to be their origin, he could not account for the existence of this idea in the same manner. He says:

the idea had been put into me by a nature truly more perfect than I was and even possessing in itself all the perfections of which I could have any idea, that is – to explain myself in one word – by God (AT VI 34; CSM II 128).

The discussion of the details of this argument for the existence of God will be left to sections VI and VII of this paper. What is important here is that with the introduction of this notion of idea, Descartes began receiving objections, and that these objections led to developments to theory. In the preface to the reader of the *Meditations* Descartes mentioned that some people have objected to the argument quoted above arguing that the fact that we have an idea of a more perfect being than us is not sufficient in arguing that the idea is indeed more perfect or that what it reflects or

¹⁴ As will be shown in the next section, all of Descartes’s proofs for the existence of God depend on an idea that he has in his mind about God. There are two questions to keep in mind when asking about ideas: how are they formed and what is their ontological status. Vere Chappell considers the theory of ideas ‘the central component of [Descartes’s] theory of knowledge [emphasis mine]’. See Chappell (1986).

represents, even if perfect, exists. Descartes admits that the word idea is itself ambiguous and in the *Meditations*, he provides a more complete theory of ideas. Descartes, admittedly, as he writes to Hobbes, uses the term ideas in a manner that was never used before. This is not an anomaly in his philosophy. It is common to find Descartes naming some of his novel conceptions after conceptions that were common to medieval philosophy. He puts new ideas in old garments. In this section, I distinguish between the two different senses of ideas, formal and objective, and between their origins as Descartes understands them. This should allow us to proceed to questions on their intentionality and their causality, which are two main pillars of my critique of the Cartesian notion of certain knowledge.

In the same preface where Descartes admits of the ambiguity of his use of the term idea, Descartes mentions that “idea” can be taken in two different senses.

‘Idea’ can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect, in which case it cannot be said to be more perfect than me. Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation (AT VII 8; CSM II 7).

This seems to be the first occasion where Descartes differentiates between two senses of the term idea. He then says that a fuller treatment will come later, and by that, he means in the *Third Meditations*. Actually, this treatment turns out not to be the fullest treatment yet. Descartes did not anticipate the objections coming from Caterus.¹⁵ These objections would lead Descartes to further develop and elaborate of the doctrine in the *First Set of Replies*. There Descartes provides the most detailed and explicit explanation of his theory of ideas as present in his corpus¹⁶. By the time we reach the Third Meditation, the only thing that Descartes is sure of is the existence of himself and of his thoughts. He has identified himself as a thinking thing, a substance which has thoughts. Some of these thoughts deserve to be called ‘ideas’ in the strictest sense. He says: “Some of my thoughts are as it were images of things, and it is only in these cases that the term ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate.” (AT VII 37; CSM II 25) Examples that he provides are his thoughts of “a man, or a chimera, or an angel, or God.” (AT VII 37; CSM II 25) Some other thoughts are not properly ideas. When he considered himself as a being that doubts, he did not count doubts as ideas. There are also other thoughts that are not “as it were image if things” such as willing and judgment. These are thoughts that are essential to the thinking substance, but are not ideas. They do not represent anything.

Ideas can be innate, adventitious or factitious. Innate ideas are things like the concepts that we have of “what a thing is, what truth is and what thought is.” These ideas seem to “derive from nature.” (AT VII 38; CSM II 26) Adventitious ideas are those whose source is something that is outside the subject, or at least that is how they appear to the subject, since at this stage the meditator is not yet sure that there is anything else other than him. But still, sounds, sights and feelings coming from without are considered adventitious. As for factitious ideas, they are ideas that are invented by oneself. Descartes gives the example of sirens and hippogriffs. This

¹⁵ A following section will be devoted to the objections from Caterus and their scholastic background. However, in this section I will make use of Descartes’s response to Caterus as an explanation of the theory. I will keep the implications of the discussion between them to the section VII and VIII.

¹⁶ Chappel (1986) believes that Descartes may not have understood Caterus’s reasoning in his objections but he was compelled to respond anyway. This might suggest that Descartes expands on the theory in his *Replies*. He might have not have the full theory developed by the time he wrote the *Meditations*. This reading could be supported by the fact that Descartes had to review the philosophy of the School in the time between the *Meditations* and the *Replies*, in preparation for the anticipated objections.

description of the origins of ideas as Descartes presents them is a description that is, if I may use the term, phenomenal or of them as they appear. He is yet to be sure that this account that he gives is a true one. He has not yet “clearly perceived their true origin.” (AT VII 38; CSM II 26) What matters is that these are how he experiences them. It might end up being true that all these ideas are innate, or all of them adventitious, or all of them factitious.

Is there anything else other than the origins of the three aforementioned ideas that describe the distinction between them? Their dependence on one’s will might be one. It is clear than in the case of factitious ideas, one willingly invents them and makes them up. As for adventitious ones, the role of the will is not apparent. It is not clear how my idea of the arrangement of the Latin alphabets on the keyboard I am typing on now is an invention of my will. This is how keyboards have been ever since they were introduced to me and there was nothing in my knowledge or action before that that would lead to such an arrangement. This is true for me as someone who trusts their senses and believes in an extramental world, where we acquire our knowledge from. But for the Descartes of the *Meditations*, this is not established yet. Like in dreams, things that seem to be independent of one’s will might still be coming from within. Being independent of the will is not enough reason that adventitious ideas actually originate from somewhere other than himself. Moreover, disparity that he has found in ideas that he calls adventitious have led him to further skepticism about their nature. After allowing the possibility that he might have a faculty other than his will that is responsible for inventing adventitious ideas, Descartes examines two different ideas that he has of the sun. The first is the idea of the sun that he gets from the senses which makes the sun seem small. The second is the idea of it that he gets from astronomical reasoning which shows that the sun is much bigger than it seems. Since both ideas contradict each other, they cannot both be true of the sun. So “reason persuades” Descartes that the “idea which seems to have emanated most directly from the sun itself has in fact no resemblance to it at all.” (AT VII 39; CSM II 27) This last statement pertains to a distinction that Descartes made earlier to it between an object and its idea. Before speaking of the two different ideas he has of the sun, Descartes writes: “Indeed, I think I have often discovered a great disparity <between an object and its idea> in many cases.” (AT VII 39; CSM II 27) It is due to this ‘disparity’ that Descartes is able to speak of no resemblance at all between the sun and the idea of it.

Descartes proceeds to speak of different degrees of reality that ideas have. Ideas are not all of the same kind of thing so they are not all of the same thing.

[I]n so far as different ideas <are considered images which> represent different things, they differ widely. Undoubtedly, the ideas which represent substances to me amount to something more and, so to speak, contain within themselves more objective reality than the ideas which merely represent modes or accidents (AT VII 40; CSM II 28).

In the Third Meditation the meditator is only certain of his own existence and not of anything else. Not even of eternal truths. Even though they seem to be true that they only leave room to a very slight doubt, it is possible that he is being deceived by an evil God whose existence with an attribute like malevolence also has a very slight probability. In this Meditation Descartes is trying to determine whether or not God exists and if he does, whether he is a deceiver or not. So Descartes carries on his inquiry into existents other than himself, including God. He says that as far as ideas are considered as modes, they all appear to come from within him in the same fashion. But considering ideas as images is where we can find differences among

them. An idea differs from another by means of its content. My idea of a laptop and my idea of a cat are both adventitious. They both seem to come from the same origin – the external world. However, coming from the same origin does not make them the same thing, for they are obviously different from each other. It is having different objects that makes us differentiate between them. This is in the case that we have two ideas, both of them are of substance. But there might be another case where ideas are not both of substances. I have an idea of my laptop, and also an idea of an accident to this laptop. For example: its blackness. These are two different ideas, but can it be said that they both are of the same kind? Descartes, in the passage quoted above says that they are not. One of the ideas has more reality than the other. The idea of the laptop has more reality than the idea of its color. Why is that? Because the former idea is of a substance and the latter is of an accident, and since substances have more reality than accidents, ideas of substances have more reality than ideas of accidents. This argument is preparing us for his argument for the existence of God. Since different ideas can contain more reality than others based on what these ideas are of, an idea of a finite being should be different from an idea of an infinite being, for their objects are by no means comparable. The passage quoted above is followed by the following passage:

Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances (AT VII 40; CSM II 28).

Descartes here is utilizing something that he postulated earlier, which is the idea that there are degrees in reality. He puts forward this principle in order to give the idea of God a special status that would make it different from other ideas. While it can be understood that Descartes is the source of other ideas, he cannot be the source. Descartes then makes use of the natural light in order to establish the principle of the non-inferiority of the cause. He postulates that the cause must have at least the same amount of reality that is present in the effect. Then, he argues that the idea of God must have a cause that is at least as perfect as it is, which can only be an infinite being other than himself. More elaboration on this argument and its implication on Descartes's notion of certain knowledge will be presented in the next section. What should be our focus here is that Descartes, through the natural light, will introduce the argument that the objective reality of ideas must have a cause. This triggers an objection from Caterus based on his understanding of 'objective being', the kind of being that Descartes attributes to ideas.

The reasoning behind the objections from Caterus will be discussed in section VII. What needs to be indicated here is that a more detailed theory of ideas is developed by Descartes as he replies to Caterus. Caterus's objections raise questions concerning the ontological status of ideas and the kind of being that they possess.

Caterus expresses puzzlement at Descartes's first argument for God's existence, the one that is based on the claim that objective being of the idea of God requires a cause. He starts by asking the following question: what kind of cause does an idea need? Caterus believes that ideas, insofar as they are objects in the intellect, are non-entities. An idea is an "extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself." (AT VII 92; CSM II 67) This idea can exist without its object existing at all. "Objective reality is a pure label, not anything actual." (AT VII 92-93; CSM II 67) That is why he does not understand why do we need to account, through a cause (God), for something that does not have any actual existence (the idea of God and its

content). Descartes responds to Caterus and he divides his response into several points. The first concerns what he understands from Caterus's objection that ideas do not have actual existence. Descartes takes Caterus's statement that ideas do not have actual existence to mean that they do not have existence outside the mind:

He says, first of all, that when a thing exists in the intellect by means of an idea, it is not an actual entity, that is, it is not a being located outside the intellect; and this is quite true (AT VII 103; CSM II 75).

Descartes here *assumes* that Caterus, by saying that 'ideas' are not actual, he means that they do not have being outside the intellect. He proceeds to discuss Caterus's objection:

Next he goes on to say that 'it is not something fictitious or a conceptual entity but something real which is distinctly conceived'; here he concedes everything which I assumed. But then adds 'since it is merely conceived and is not actual' – i.e. since it is merely an idea, and not a thing located outside the intellect – 'although it can be conceived it cannot in any way be caused'. This is to say that it does not require a cause enabling it to exist outside the intellect. This I accept; but it surely needs a cause enabling it to be conceived, which is the sole point of the issue (AT VII 103; CSM II 75).

Here, Descartes seems to be imposing his own view on what Caterus is trying to say. There is no reference in Caterus's argument to anything outside the intellect. This is not what he means when he says they do not have actual being. Actually, he is discussing ideas, entities that Descartes argues have objective being *in the intellect*. The fact that objective being is being in the intellect is a common ground between Caterus and Descartes. It is not clear why would any of them need to state that this being in the intellect is not actual in the sense of existing outside the intellect. This would be the same as one of them saying that being in the intellect is not equal to being outside the intellect. This fact does not require restating. Caterus describes ideas as conceptual entities and being conceptual entities is by definition being in the intellect. The dismissal given by Caterus is of their actuality as they exist in the intellect. He says that these conceptual entities, that by definition are in the intellect, do not have an existence that needs to be accounted for by a cause. It could not be understood to mean they do not exist outside the intellect. Caterus is arguing that this kind of existence in the intellect is not actual. Descartes, for no apparent reason, takes Caterus to mean by actual existence, existence outside the intellect while there is no evidence for this.

Also, when Descartes quotes Caterus as saying that an idea is "not something fictitious or a conceptual entity but real which is distinctly conceived", he is actually misquoting Caterus and altering his view. What Caterus actually says is: "But if 'nothing' means something imaginary or what they commonly call a 'conceptual entity'¹⁷, then this is not 'nothing' but something real which is distinctly conceived." (AT VII 94; CSM II 67-8) The problem here is that Descartes is in conversation with a Caterus who says that ideas are not conceptual entities but something real rather than the Caterus who says that ideas are not nothing but rather they are conceptual entities that are distinctly conceived. As conceptual entities, yes, ideas are not nothing. The fact that we speak of them means that they are not nothing, but this does not mean that they are real beings. The fact that they are not nothing, but are also not

¹⁷ In the footnotes to the CSM translation, the Latin expression for conceptual entity is provided. It is *ens rationis*, literally, 'being of reason'. The origin of the doctrine of beings of reason will be discussed in the chapter discussing Caterus's objection.

real beings, is why they are discussed in metaphysics in the first place, as we will see in section VII. Descartes's misquoting made his interlocutor here someone who says that conceptual entities are nothing, but ideas *are not* conceptual entities. Caterus, the real interlocutor, is saying that they *are* conceptual entities, which makes them not nothing, but still they do not have real being.¹⁸ They are real only insofar as they are conceived. This 'reality insofar as they are conceived' does not make them, for Caterus, worthy of real being that requires a cause. The reason they are described as real is because we conceive of them and are able to speak of them. Caterus would say that squared-circles are real in the same sense. He would even say that void is real in the same sense. We are capable of discussing them and pointing towards them as objects of thought. However, this does not give them any reality that requires a cause. They are beings of reason.¹⁹ That is why Caterus proceeds to say that "since it is merely conceived and is not actual, although it can be conceived, it cannot in any way be caused." (AT VII 94; CSM II 68) Caterus insists that this something "real which is distinctly conceived" is not actual. This means that the concession that Descartes claims does not occur. Descartes is confused as to why Caterus would make this concession then deny that it cannot be caused. This is because Descartes thinks that when Caterus says that something is actual, he means that it exists outside the intellect, so when he says that ideas are not actual but are not nothing, he is still ascribing to them some real being. Descartes in his quoting of Caterus separates between two things. The first is Caterus's remark that being conceived is not the same as being actual and the second is his denial of the existence of a cause for the conception of ideas. Descartes makes this separation by noting that by "not actual" Caterus means that "it is merely an idea, and not a thing located outside the intellect." Descartes then builds on this to tell us that he does accept that the idea's objective being in the intellect does not require a cause in order to exist *outside the intellect*, but he insists that the idea as far as it is conceived does require a cause. The conceiving, for Caterus, is the same as the objective being in the intellect. They are not two different things that allow one to hold a separate doctrine for each of them, requiring for one of them a cause while not requiring it for the other. Descartes, in this passage, seems to fail to discuss Caterus's objection, which raises the question of whether he actually understands the doctrine of conceptual entities, especially that his misquotation entails a contradiction. He says that it is both: conceived, and not a conceptual entity. For Caterus, both things are the same.

Descartes understands Caterus to be saying that an idea as it exists outside the intellect does not require a cause and proceeds to argue for his doctrine based on this misunderstanding. He keeps giving examples of how different ideas are present in the intellect such as an idea of an intricate machine or that of eternal truths like triangles, showing that such ideas as they exist in the intellect are not nothing so they must have a cause that accounts for them. Descartes assumes that there is a common ground between him and Caterus. This common ground is that an idea, in order to exist outside the intellect, must have a cause. I contend, given the discussion of their correspondence that I provide above, that this common ground does not exist. This is because Caterus does not believe that objective being needs to be accounted for by a cause. There is surely not an actual squared-circle that causes the objective being that is a squared-circle being conceived.

¹⁸ Caterus actually remarks that the term nothing here is equivocal. If nothing means nothing that is actual at all, then an idea is nothing (note that Caterus uses actual as opposed to nothing). But if nothing means a conceptual entity, then this nothing is something real.

¹⁹ Section VII offers an explanation of beings of reason as discussed by Suárez.

Before I proceed to discuss the centrality of this theory to Descartes's proofs for God's existence, I need to refer to a distinction that Descartes makes between two kinds of ideas. In addition to existing objectively in the intellect, ideas also exist formally. Before the response to Caterus that I quote above, Descartes considers Caterus's statement that objective being in the intellect is "the determination of an act of the intellect by means of an object, and this is merely and extraneous label which adds nothing to the thing itself." (AT VII 102; CSM II 74) Descartes understands this determination by means of an object to be a reference to "the thing itself as if it were located outside the intellect." (AT VII 102; CSM II 74) Here is another instance where Descartes seems not to understand the doctrine of which Caterus is speaking and that will be explained below. Descartes agrees that in the sense that Caterus is speaking about, objective being would be an extraneous label. However, Descartes is speaking of the objective being of things in the way objects normally exist in the intellect. He agrees that the sun as it exists in the heavens does not change accordingly with the sun as it exists in the intellect. In the intellect, the sun exists as an object of thought which is a different kind of existence from that of which the sun has in the heavens. The former is objective existence while the latter is formal existence. This distinction between formal and objective existence though not present in the scholastic epistemological literature, does have its roots in scholastic epistemology.²⁰ Descartes does not provide enough reasoning behind such a distinction. The only reason we can think of is that Descartes allows real being, namely ideas, to inhere inside the intellect objectively as counterparts to their objects that exist formally outside the intellect. This distinction between counterparts needed to be made, but it remains somehow dependent on a previous epistemology that is scholastic. Scholastic philosophers derived objective and formal concepts from their doctrine of intentional forms. These intentional forms are dismissed by Descartes. This distinction between formal and objective existence in Descartes's is closer to being postulated than to being justified by his system.

VI. PROOFS FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

Descartes's proofs for God's existence are dependent on the conception of God that were common among the Christian scholastic philosophers. He saw the need for proving this God but was not satisfied with the traditional proofs that previous philosophers gave. By this I mean the five ways of Aquinas and their derivatives that were being taught in the scholastic schools by the time he studied at *La Fleche*. Proving God is necessary for Descartes in order to establish certain science and he believes that this can only be done through his method and preceding the discussions in the *Meditations*. These discussions include, above all, his theory of ideas. Before having an *a priori* idea of God, it is not possible to prove His existence. The idea of God is shown by his theory of ideas not to be a mere conception but an ontological reality. This ontological reality is then utilized in Descartes's three proofs of the existence of God. He writes to Father Mesland on May 2nd 1644:

Nevertheless, it seems to me that all these proofs based on his effects are reducible to a single one; and also that they are incomplete, if the effects are not evident to us (that is why I considered my own existence rather than that of heaven and earth, of which I am not equally certain) and if we do not add them to the idea which we have of God. For since my soul is

²⁰ In the objective and formal concepts. For a discussion of the developments in medieval philosophy that gave rise to the distinction see Owens (1982).

finite, I cannot know that the order of causes is not infinite, except in so far as I have in myself that idea of the first cause; and even if there be admitted a first cause which keeps me in existence, I cannot say that it is God unless I truly have the idea of God. I hinted at this in my Reply to the First Objections; but I did so very briefly, so as not to show contempt to the arguments of others, who commonly accept the principle that a series cannot go on forever. I do not accept that principle; on the contrary, I think that in the division of the parts of matter there really is an endless series, as you will see in my treatise on philosophy, which is almost printed (AT IV 112-3; CSMK 232).

What is meant by “these proofs” is the proofs put forward by Descartes’s scholastic predecessors. Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica* offers five ways of proving the existence of God. They present God as 1) “a first cause to change”, 2) “a first efficient cause”, 3) “a *per se* necessary being”, 4) “a cause of all perfection” and 5) “an intelligence which directs everything in nature towards its goal” (ST, I, 2, 3). For Descartes, all these ways of arriving at what will be identified as God can be reduced to a single one. Even though Descartes’s second argument for the existence of God which will be discussed below is essentially different from the second way of Aquinas, it seems that this argument that presents God as a first efficient cause is the single argument that Descartes finds the five ways reducible to, at least in form. Descartes also remarks that these proofs are “incomplete”. Of course, for someone who cannot ascertain that the sensible world exists, it is not possible to construct a proof for the existence of God upon evidence that comes from the very world whose existence he doubts. It is one of Descartes’s primary concerns to prove the existence of the sensible world and his means in this project is to have knowledge of its existence secured through knowledge of a benevolent God.²¹ If he argues, like his predecessors did, that the sensible world needs a first cause, then he will most obviously be arguing in a circle. His argument would be as follows: we know that there is an external world because there exists a benevolent God and we know that there is a benevolent God because the external world requires a first cause. That is why it should be noted that the first difference between his arguments for God’s existence and the scholastic arguments is that his are, consistently with his method, independent of any material that he receives from his senses. As he tells Mesland, his proofs stem from his own existence rather than that of the heavens and earth. His own existence is what he has already established before the Third Meditations, so when taking it as an effect that calls for a cause, he is standing on more solid grounds.²²

Starting from the sensible world with the conviction that it exists is not the only problem, or incompleteness, that Descartes sees in the traditional proofs. He also believes that in order to conclude that whatever cause we find necessary to account for the effects that we see is actually God, we must have an idea of God that we already operate with. The traditional proofs, when looking for a cause, do not yet know what or who God is. They deduce that an uncaused necessary being exists and

²¹ Descartes does not doubt that the external world exists. He is trying to secure the possibility of knowledge. In the meditative process, before establishing the existence of God, the meditator does not know whether the external world exists or whether it is a delusion.

²² Descartes says that he is not “equally certain” that the heavens and earths exist. This can be taken as a subtle reference to an existence of two levels of certainty as discussed earlier in this paper, only one of them is *Scientia*. Nevertheless, how certain Descartes is of his own existence remains questionable. Early in the Third Meditation Descartes provides material for asking this question. The exact passage will be discussed in a later section.

from the material that they have, they work out other attributes that must be attributed to such a being before deciding that this being is what theology calls God. The process of proving this being does not assume an essence or even attributes for such a being. They do not have what Descartes thinks of as an idea of God. While they insist that this being is the uncaused cause for the universe their argument for the impossibility of infinite regress, Descartes argues that the first cause is God because the idea that he has of God already knows God as the first cause. Descartes does not believe in the impossibility of infinite regress but this does not affect his argument for the existence of God for he already knows that being first cause is implicit in the idea of God. Descartes, through his idea of God, is able to know God's essence before knowing of his existence. His scholastic predecessors had to know that he exists before knowing his essence. Their arguments rest on two things that Descartes does not admit of. The first is the existence of the external world, which he only acknowledges after he proves the existence of God. The second is the impossibility of infinite regress, which he denies.

The difference between Descartes's proofs of God's existence and his scholastic predecessors proofs fit into Jorge Secada's (2002) interpretation of Cartesian metaphysics. He interprets it through a distinction that is present throughout his system. It is the distinction between what he calls Cartesian 'essentialism' and what he calls scholastic 'existentialism'. The Aristotelian tradition that stretches from Aristotle himself through the texts that Descartes studies starts its investigation through the sensible world. Individual beings in this world are studied and a process of abstractions leads the investigator from physical properties, to mathematical ones then to metaphysical properties and principles. This system does not claim to know the essence of anything without knowing of its existence. It is through a study of human beings that they are known to be rational animals. 'Rationality' and 'animality' are what they empirically notice as common predicates to the subjects that they call human beings. However, in order to conduct such an investigation, actual human beings must exist first, for without their existence, it is not possible to take note of their actual common predicates. For them, knowledge of existence precedes knowledge of essence. They ask the question 'is it?' before they ask the question 'what is it?'. Like in the case of man, they cannot know what or who God is without knowing whether He exists. That is why, they do not have an 'idea' of God or knowledge of his essence without knowing whether he exists or not. When they find out that he exists, like they find that man exists, they start asking what is the nature of this being. What, besides his existence, do they know about him and whether they can produce an essential definition of him. If they want to produce an essential definition then what is his essence? Here is when the question of essence comes. After the question of existence is answered. Hence then name 'existentialism'.

On the contrary, Descartes takes another road in his investigation. Before he knows that he exists, he knows that he is a thinking thing. He knows his essence before he knows of his existence. He asks the question 'what am I?' before asking the question 'am I?'.²³ His proofs for the existence of God and of the existence of the

²³ A possible objection to this argument might be that Descartes establishes his existence before establishing his essence. 'I am' comes before 'I am a thinking thing'. However, when Descartes establishes his own existence, he is operating with some knowledge of what he is. In his replies to Gassendi, he says that the only action of his that he is certain of is thought, and it is this action that he uses to establish his existence. Also, in the Second Meditation, he says that he now knows that he exists but he does not have a sufficient understanding of what this I this. This is another suggestion that some knowledge of what he is preceded his knowledge that he is.

sensible world also proceed by asking ‘what is it?’ before asking ‘is it?’. It is because of this ‘essentialist’ approach that Descartes finds the scholastic proofs incomplete. His whole project rests on the fact that we cannot know whether anything exists before knowing what it is. Hence, we cannot prove whether God exists before knowing what the subject of this proof is. What ‘idea’ of God does Descartes possess?

There are three different ways in which Descartes uses his idea of God in his proofs for His existence. In the first proof he stresses on God’s infinity, in the second on His independence and in the third on His necessity.

When telling us that ideas are thoughts that are “as if it were images of things”, he says that examples for ideas are the idea of “a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God.” It is noteworthy that all these ideas mentioned are ideas of things other than himself that are presented before Descartes becomes certain that anything other than himself exists. Descartes is speaking of the ideas of these things without knowing whether they exist, and without having, yet, contemplated what they are. This is before he contemplates the origins of his ideas in the manner expressed and explained in the section on ideas. Even if certain ideas are said to come from one’s self, the question remains of how the self is able to differentiate between ideas of different things, how is it that ideas with different objects are initiated? What is it that accounts from the difference between them in origination? He does not offer for these questions answers that goes beyond “having no difficulty in understanding that they could be put together from the ideas I have of myself, of corporeal things and of God” or “see[ing] nothing in them which is so great <or excellent> as to make it seem impossible that it originated in myself” (AT VII 43; CSM II 29).

When Descartes moves from explaining that there is no sufficient reason for him to believe that there are ideas that have their origins outside him as explained above, he finds out that there is another way for investigating the same thing. If ideas that represent substance contain more objective reality than ideas that represent modes or accidents, an idea of an infinite being contains more objective reality than ideas that represent finite beings.

Again, the idea that gives me my understanding of a supreme God, eternal, infinite, <immutable,> omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him, certainly has in it more objective reality than the ideas that represent finite substances. (AT VII 41; CSM II 28).

So this is the idea that Descartes has of God. He is “eternal, infinite, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent and the creator of all things that exist apart from him.” These are attributes that he knows of him *a priori*. His knowledge of them, unlike the knowledge that his predecessors had of them, does not depend on the nature of the effects from which his existence is proved. It is through having the aforementioned idea of God that one can begin to investigate whether this God exists or not. This tendency is observable in the three proofs of God’s existence that he puts forward.

In the first proof, Descartes is after the cause of his idea of God. He takes the cause of it to be God. He is convinced that the idea that he has of God does not originate in him. He is also convinced that it is not invented by him. He knows, by the natural light, that a cause must have at least as much perfection as its effect.

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; 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 (AT VII 41; CSM II 28).

This is not a novel conception. It is part of the traditional account of causality.²⁴ Aquinas and Suárez would both require each property in the effect to be explained by the cause. What is novel in Descartes's doctrine is what follows the previous passage, the need to account for the cause of the objective content of ideas:

But it is also true that the *idea* of heat, or of a stone cannot exist in me unless it is put there by some cause which contains at least as much reality as I conceive to be in the heat or the stone (AT VII 41; CSM II 28).

The idea, which is a mode of the substance which is the mind, has both formal existence and objective existence. The idea has formal existence insofar as it is a mode or an act of thought or of that thinking substance. Its objective existence is its existence as an object of thought. This objective existence has objective content which must be accounted for by a cause. The cause is either in me or outside me. Ideas that Descartes has of corporeal things, of angels, or of other men, he can understand as coming from himself. The only thing that he is certain of is his own existence and from it alone, and from ideas that he has of other finite things, he can provide an explanation for all the ideas that he has other than the idea of God.

As for the idea of God, Descartes finds in it elements that he himself cannot be the source of. There are two principles put forward by Descartes that explain this. First is that he knows by the natural light that the cause must be able to account for everything in the effect. Second is that the idea of an infinite substance cannot result from a finite being. Descartes does not find in himself anything that would be able to account for attributes that he finds in his idea of God, namely infinity, eternity, immutability, independence, supreme intelligence, supreme power and ability to create anything. It is obvious for Descartes that he is finite, that he does not exist from eternity, that he is subject to change, that he is dependent on other things²⁵, and that he does not have power over everything let alone being a creator. Descartes concludes from this that he cannot account for the objective content of his idea of God, i.e. that he is not God. But what if Descartes has the potential to acquire such attributes but they are yet to be actualized? He still rules this possibility out for the attributes of God as represented in Descartes's idea of him are actual so they require a cause that has these attributes actually, for what is merely potential cannot produce what is actual. (AT VII 47; CSM II 32) The cause must contain as much reality as its effect and clearly, this is not the case with potentiality and actuality. This necessitates that there be some existing entity that is other than him and that has at least the same attributes as those attributed to God in his idea. This entity is obviously God. For Descartes, there is not room for the question of whether this idea of God is caused by some other cause. The idea that Descartes has of God represents Him as the creator of all things or first cause, so the formal counterpart of this idea *must* be a first cause. This is something that Descartes would argue cannot be known by his 'existentialist'

²⁴ Of course, there are differences in accounts of causality between Descartes and his scholastic predecessors. The main difference would be that the latter account speaks of the four causes while Descartes does not find the need to do so.

²⁵ I do not know how Descartes, at this stage, excludes himself being independent when he is not certain whether any being other than himself exists. To be dependent is to be dependent on something. If there is no other existent other than Descartes, what is he dependent upon? In the second proof that he presents a few pages later, Descartes, through an analysis of time, acknowledges that he must be dependent on some other being. Such reasoning is absent in the first proof where he implicitly says that he is not independent.

predecessors. It is by virtue of the idea that he has of God that he rules out the possibility of an infinite regress in causes. As he notes in the letter to Mesland quoted above, his knowledge, through the idea of God, of a first cause is what makes his proofs possible since he, as a finite being, cannot judge that an infinite series of causes is impossible. In addition to that, if one arrives at a first cause without having an idea of God as a first cause, he would not be able to conclude that this first cause that he arrived at is God. Descartes adds that his finitude as a human being cannot give a judgement about what is infinite. He even says that he does not believe in the impossibility of infinite regress, which makes his argument fundamentally different from the traditional arguments. He believes that his argument is superior because it begins with a definite idea of God. The first Cartesian proof of God's existence has to start, and indeed starts, with an *apriori* idea of God. It then proceeds to validate the existence of the object of this idea. There are no proofs that Descartes give for the attributes that he predicates to God through this idea. He is working with the traditional conception of God.

The second proof of God's existence can be considered as a proof on its own or as built upon the first proof. In terms of order, it comes directly after the first proof, and is presented while having in mind that the existence of God has already been established. Right after Descartes is done with presenting his first proof, he says that he would "like to go further and inquire whether" he, who has the idea of God, "could exist if no such being existed." (AT VII 48; CSM II 33) In the course of the argument, Descartes makes use of the idea of God to establish the unity of God and that it is not his parents who cause him. Like the first proof, the idea of God remains a premise upon which the proof is built.

In the first proof, Descartes was looking for a cause for the idea of God that he possesses. In the second one, he is looking for a cause of his own existence as a finite being with an idea of an infinite being. He is asking the question whether without the existence of the God that he has proved earlier, his own existence which he is certain of would be possible. Descartes begins by excluding that he has derived his existence from his own self. He is a limited being with many deprivations, like the ones pointed to above. He has limited knowledge, power, being ... etc. If he were the being that gave himself the existence that he has as a thinking thing, he would definitely be able to give himself other perfections that seem to be easier to give than to bring him into existence. In fact, any perfection that he can conceive of is easier to give than existence. But Descartes can conceive of the perfections in the idea of God and he knows that he cannot bestow them upon himself, so he concludes that he cannot be the cause of his own existence. There must be some other entity that he depends on and that gave him existence in the first place.

Descartes proceeds from this to an analysis of time that is introduced only for the sake of his argument for the existence of God. He asks whether he has existed for eternity and hence, there is no need to ask the question of who or what brought him into existence.

I do not escape the force of these arguments by supposing that I have always existed as I do now, as if it followed from this that there was no need to look for any author of my existence. For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others. So that it does not follow from the fact that I existed a while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment – that is, which preserves me (AT VII 48-9; CSM II 33).

This proof from effects is not one that results from a belief in the impossibility of a series of infinite causes that go back in time. It does not even assume a beginning for the effect. Its argument is that a dependent being, a being that is not the cause of itself must have cause. This cause does not have to be a cause of the beginning of the dependent being's existence, but of its preservation in every given instant of time, given the independence of each moment in time from another. This, of course, is based on a particular understanding of time.

[I]t is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence (AT VII 49; CSM II 33).

Each instant of time is independent from whatever instant precedes or follows it. My existence in the past instant does not guarantee my continuing to exist in the present and my existing in the present does not guarantee that I will continue to exist in the following instant. This should be "quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time." This means that the thinking thing is being created once more at every instant. Its creation is not a single act, but an act that is always in repetition. The cause of the thinking thing does not only count for its existence but for its preservation at every given instant. Descartes does not find a real distinction between creation and preservation but only a "conceptual one" as "evident by the natural light." (ibid) This creator-preserver must be independent and cannot be anything other than God, for the idea that Descartes has within himself dictates that God is perfect, so this cause must also be perfect for the cause should contain at least as much perfection as the effect. Being perfect, God cannot be understood by Descartes to be anything but simple which means that it is only one entity that is responsible for his creation-conservation.

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 . . .

The unity, the simplicity, or the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have (AT VI 50; CSM II 34).

Again, Descartes starts a proof for God's existence with an idea that he has of him and makes use of this idea on his way to arrive to God's existence.

The third proof that Descartes provides for God's existence comes in the Fifth Meditation: "The essence of material things, and the existence of God considered a second time." This time, he provides an *a priori* proof. There is no need for an effect that calls for a cause for its existence. The third proof arises directly from the idea that he has of God, but it cannot be complete unless another point is made that was not needed for the first two proofs. The first two proofs occur in the Third Meditation where Descartes is not yet certain that there is anything that has existence other than himself as a thinking thing or as a mind. He contemplates the possibility of the existence of a God, that might be a deceiver or might not be, but he cannot know whether he is a deceiver or not before knowing that He exists. At least, that is how he proceeds in the Third Meditation. In the Fourth Meditation, where he already knows that there is a God, he finally finds the answer to whether the God whose being he is most certain of can be a deceiver.

I recognize that it is impossible that God should ever deceive me. For in every case of trickery or deception some imperfection is to be found; and

although the ability to deceive appears to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive is undoubtedly evidence of malice or weakness, and so cannot apply to God (AT VII 53; CSM II 37).

[W]hen I concentrate on the nature of God, it seems impossible that he should have placed in me a faculty which is not perfect of its kind, or which lacks some perfection which it ought to have (AT VII 55; CSM II 38).

Descartes finally dismisses the possibility of there being a malicious demon that would deceive him even on things that he perceives clearly. Since there is only one omnipotent being, and since this being is perfect, it cannot be that this being deceives. Even if he is capable of deceiving, and if this capability is a sign of power, the will to deceive is evidence of weakness, which cannot be in God. God, who is capable of deceiving, does not deceive.²⁶ That is what the idea that Descartes has of God tells him. The nature of this God is also that he would not place in him a faculty that would lead him to err even when he has a clear and distinct perception of something. On these grounds, Descartes is going to provide yet another proof of God's existence.

The third proof that Descartes provides is what is known as the ontological argument. The argument should go as follows: 1) God is the being whom we cannot conceive of anything that is more perfect than him, 2) if he were non-existent then we would conceive of something that is more perfect than him, 3) therefore God exists. This is not exactly how Descartes presents it though. Right before presenting this proof Descartes is trying to reach the essence of material things. He is thinking of properties that these things have, like shapes. One shape that material things have is a triangle. This triangle has essential attributes, such as that the sum of its angles is equal to the sum of two right angles. Whether there are triangles in the mind-independent world or not, any triangle that is thought of has this attribute. It is part of its essence. This is something that Descartes clearly and distinctly conceives and he cannot accept the possibility that he might be erring in it. Given that what he has of them is a clear and a distinct perception, like he says as early as the Third Meditation, and that he can only fall in error when assenting to a perception that is not clear and distinct, it follows that what he judges of this kind of essences is true of their nature. Note that this is a different question from whether triangles existed or not. Whether they existed or not, they have this essential property and they cannot be thought of without having such properties. The same goes for God. Once more, Descartes begins his proof with his given idea of God. An idea "of a supremely perfect being" that he finds within himself just as surely as the idea of "any shape or number." (AT VII 65; CSM II 45) This idea presents God as a being who always exists. The clarity and distinctness of this idea is not less than the ideas that he has of numbers, shapes and their properties. As a result, Descartes concludes that God exists. Like in the cause of the triangle having necessary attributes, God has a necessary attribute which is existence. Unlike the triangle, the question of God's essence is not different from the question of His existence because his essence is existence.²⁷ This comes after Descartes has established that whatever he conceives of clearly and distinctly is true as the quote from the Fourth Meditation above shows. This means that the existence of God is a necessary conclusion to whatever he establishes in metaphysics up till this point. For the third time, Descartes utilizes his idea of God in proving His existence

²⁶ The omnipotent being shall not be an evil demon. The idea that evil is a privation is found in the tenth of Suárez's *Metaphysical Disputations* and he bases it on his discussion of the nature of evil.

²⁷ The inseparability of God's essence and existence is part of a long tradition in medieval philosophy starting from Avicenna. From a survey of this tradition see Wippel (1982).

and is making use of a conception of God that is not novel, but was present in the old philosophy.

The passage quoted above from Descartes's letter to Father Mesland makes reference to the First Set of Replies. In these replies to Caterus, Descartes's puts forward his understanding of how his proofs are different from those of scholastics like St Thomas Aquinas. His replies to Caterus are of the utmost importance to the present critique for it is a discussion with a scholastic theologian on matters that are of the most relevance to the subject of certain knowledge in Descartes.

VII. THE SCHOLASTIC BACKGROUND OF CATERUS'S OBJECTIONS

The First Set of Objections that Descartes receives come from Caterus, who is a scholastic theologian. His objections are well defined, to the point, and grounded in scholasticism. There are neither objections to the method that Descartes puts forward in the *Meditations* nor to the order of investigation that he takes. There are no discussions on the validation of the senses but he goes directly to questions that mostly relate to theology. Only the first objection has to do with cognition, while the rest are theological. His objections are to: 1) the theory of ideas, 2) the understanding of God as a cause of himself (*causa sui*), 3) having an idea of an infinite being, 4) the ontological proof for God's existence and 5) the real distinction of body and mind. My primary concern will be with the first item of his objections.²⁸

Caterus objects to Descartes's theory of ideas and the proof of God's existence that depends upon the ontological status of ideas that it allows. Namely, the first proof, that the objective being of his idea of God requires a cause that has, formally, as much reality as the idea has objectively.

My question is this: what sort of cause does an idea need? Indeed, what is an idea? It is the thing that is thought of, in so far as it has objective being in the intellect. But what is 'objective being in the intellect'? According to what I was taught, this 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. Just as 'being seen' is nothing other than an act of vision attributable to myself, so 'being thought of', or having objective being in the intellect, is simply a thought of the mind which stops and terminates in the mind. And this can occur without any movement or change in the thing itself, and indeed without the thing in question existing at all. So why should I look for a cause of something which is not actual, and which is simply an empty label, a non-entity? (AT VII 92; CSM II 66-67)

Caterus does not believe that objective being in the intellect is something that needs a cause to account for. At least, that is what he was taught. He calls ideas 'conceptual entities'. In the Latin text, they are *ens rationis*, beings of reason. This naming comes from the standard metaphysics texts that were used for instruction in the schools back in these days, one of which is Francisco Suárez's *Metaphysical Disputations*. Suárez devotes the last of his metaphysical disputations to the discussion of beings of reason. An explication of this doctrine and the role it was understood to play in metaphysics is, in my view, essential to understanding the objection voiced by Caterus.²⁹

²⁸ For a more comprehensive account of Caterus's objections see Verbeek (1995) and Armogathe (1995), both in the same volume.

²⁹ My presentation of Suárez's views depend solely on secondary sources. In my presentation, I stick to areas that are non-controversial among Suárez scholars. Unfortunately, very few articles/chapters are

While Suárez acknowledges that the subject of metaphysics is being as far as it is real, the last of his disputations is a treatment of non-real entities that he calls *entia rationis*. These beings of reason, even if they do not belong to the subject of metaphysics proper, are necessary to discuss in metaphysics for the metaphysician necessarily speaks of entities that have no real being. Metaphysics is where other disciplines obtain their principles from, and these principles must be discussed adequately in order for their proper disciplines to be able to use them in a scientific way. For example, the dialectician might speak of void. Void, by its very definition, is not a real being that exists in reality, but we can still speak of it.³⁰ If void, and other non-beings are not real beings, how are we still capable of speaking about them? Is metaphysics possible without discussions of non-beings? These are the questions that Suárez finds himself prone to answering in the fifty-fourth disputation.

Suárez divides beings of reason into three kinds: negations, privations and relations of reason.³¹ The first two are negative beings of reason while the third is a positive one. Negations are simple negations or impossible beings and do not inhere in something. Privations must inhere in something. Nothingness is a negation, not a privation. An example is possible. When speaking of a man, his non-ability to fly for example is a negation. Man cannot fly. A privation would be blindness. Man in his essence should have sight but in a particular case, a particular man is said to be deprived of sight. In other words, blind. The positive being of reason is the relation. They are adventitious, ie. “not necessarily rooted in what they relate.”³² An example for this would be chimeras. There are not real chimeras to be related to but there are the beings from which the imagination can fabricate the chimera. They can also be related to what has actual being, like temporal precedence. In reality, we observe that an event ‘x’ takes place before another event ‘y’. We automatically construct and abstract an object that we name precedence and we speak of ‘x’ as preceding ‘y’ without ‘precedence’ being an actual being. It is a being of reason that only has objective being in the intellect. It is only a being in so far as it is thought about by the intellect. That is why it is called an extrinsic denomination. It is given denomination only by something other than itself, which is the intellect. The moment the intellect stops thinking about it, it no longer has this objective being. It is a being dependent on something else that thinks about it. It does not have an intrinsic reality.

When the intellect cognizes an external object, it can be said that this objects has objective being in the intellect. Like the beings of reason mentioned above, the object acquires a mode of being fashioned by the intellect. As long as the intellect is contemplating the object, the object is being thought of and hence has an objective being in the intellect. This object as it exists in the intellect has no real likeness to the real object, let alone being itself the same as the real object. Suárez calls the real object the objective concept while the act of thought he calls the formal concept. It is through the formal concept that the objective concept is known and for Suárez it is the objective concept that metaphysics studies for it is what has actual being. It is the

written on this topic but I believe that what is written is sufficient for my purposes, as will be seen in the current discussion.

³⁰ See Darge (2014) for the subject of metaphysics according to Suárez, Shields (2012) for why Suárez discusses beings of reason in his metaphysics text and Navotny (2014) for why it should not be left for other disciplines to discuss what beings of reason are. The three of them are book chapters, two of them are from the same volume and there are points of intersection between them. The interpretation as far as it concerns us does not change though.

³¹ See Boyle (1987).

³² Ibid. Note that adventitious here does not have the same meaning as in Descartes’s theory of ideas.

immediate actual external object of the intellect, represented by the formal concept.³³ By virtue of being thought of, objects receive a dependent kind of being that is not real but merely intentional (*esse intentionale*). In Suárez's own words: a being of reason is "that which has only objective being in an intellect, or, it is that which is thought of by a reason as being, even though it has no entity [being] in itself."³⁴ (DM 54.1.6)

Now we can understand Caterus's objection to Descartes's theory of ideas. For Caterus, ideas do not have any real being. Yes, like Descartes says, they are not nothing, but this does not mean that they are anything real. That is why he says that they are real in so far as they are conceived but still denies that they have any actuality. There is not reality in being thought of in the same manner that there is not reality in something being seen. The fact that there is a wall, that I can see it and that I can speak about it as being seen by me does not mean that this 'being seen' has any reality. Another example is a squared circle. There might be an actual square and an actual circle. From them I derive a concept of an impossible being: a squared-circle. A squared circle is not something real, even though I can speak of it. At the same time it is not nothing, because I am speaking about it. A third example is Muhammad Sami's wing. Muhammad Sami is a human being, therefore he does not have a wing. There is a being of reason in my intellect that is called Muhammad Sami's wing but we cannot say that it is a real being. Yet, it is not nothing for I am thinking about it at the moment. It is merely an extrinsic denomination as Caterus says in the passage quoted above.

Descartes is clearly using scholastic terminology in a manner that is foreign to whatever existed at the time and in his exchange with Caterus. His misquoting of Caterus which entailed a contradiction suggests that he might not have understood what Caterus is talking about. Ariew (2012) suggests that Descartes is not a careful reader of texts. This could be supported by his famous mistaking of the way Suárez understood material falsity while confidently referencing the *Metaphysical Disputations* in his replies to Arnauld. As shown in the section on the theory of ideas, Descartes does not provide a coherent response to Caterus and seems to be responding to something that Caterus does not say.³⁵ In addition to that, he offers no clear explanation of what objective being in the intellect is and he seems to ignore the origins of this doctrine.³⁶ The problem does not lie in ignoring the doctrine as much as it lies in not providing a foundation for a new use. Breaking from the scholastic understanding of a term should not be considered a problem as long as sufficient explanation and justification of the new usage is provided. The question that needs to be answered is: what alternative theory does Descartes provide in order to account for the differentiation between formal and objective being? When Suárez speaks of objective being in the intellect, he already has a theory of concepts from which such a kind of being derives. This theory of concepts is ignored by Descartes, and it is doubtful whether there can be any objective being in the intellect without a tackling of

³³ This doctrine is not foreign to scholasticism. It is present in Aquinas as well. See Renemann (2014).

³⁴ Translated in Nivotny (2014).

³⁵ See pages 13-14 above.

³⁶ By clear explanation, I mean providing a full doctrine, not a postulation that immediate objects of ideas have a real being that needs to be accounted for. Norman Wells (1990) notes that Caterus is quick to deal with Descartes's doctrine as if it is the same as what he has learned as a scholastic. Descartes definitely is operating with a different doctrine and this is acknowledged by the present work. The problem that I find with the Cartesian doctrine is that it is ill-founded, and it borrows scholastic terms that are constructed upon a realist 'existentialist' epistemological framework that he does not accept.

the theory of concepts from which it derives, and a whole epistemology that makes this theory of concepts possible.

VIII. SCHOLASTIC PRINCIPLES

The past sections were an overview of the pillars upon which Descartes builds his notion of certain knowledge. In each section, I attempted to highlight the specific way in which these pillars are reached so as to be able to trace these pillars to their origins and to understand how Descartes arrives at them and whether he is justified in doing so. The order that I followed is intended. I first explained what does Descartes mean when he says that he wants to reach certain knowledge. Then, I presented his doctrine of the creation of eternal truths which implies that he cannot know them before knowing the creator. This means that Descartes, before the concluding passages of the Third Meditations where he concludes³⁷ that God cannot be a deceiver, does not even know whether contradiction is possible or not. Thirdly, I examined his theory of ideas which is involved in every proof that he provides for the existence of God. Fourthly, I explained his three proofs of the existence of God and outlined in each step the premises that he utilizes in these proofs. Finally, I factored in the objection from Caterus as a starting point for illuminating the scholastic foundations of Descartes's project, or his attempt to reach certain knowledge.

In what remains of this paper, I will tackle the foundations of the pillars I just mentioned. I show that Descartes forms an account of certain knowledge that does not have enough foundation. It depends on scholastic conceptions that he rejects, and he calls upon concepts that are derivative of them when he needs them. The problem with Descartes's notion of certain knowledge as I see it is that he does not provide proper foundation for the concepts he uses, and he does not show how these concepts pass his metaphysical doubt.

Being in a transitional period between a philosophy that was no longer considered effective and a new philosophy that was not yet completely formed, Descartes finds himself in a difficult situation. There are very few intellectual weapons that had not been used by the old philosophy and he finds no other tools to have recourse to but those present in the scholastic arsenal. He is building a new project without having a system that would support him when support is needed. Through his method that he explains in the *Discourse*, he rejects as if absolutely false anything that left the slightest possibility of doubt and starts working out a new system that needs to be built on solid certain foundation and the first thing he establishes is his own existence. In order to establish the existence of things other than himself, Descartes appealed to principles borrowed from scholasticism.

Cottingham (1993) acknowledges the problem of considering Descartes totally independent of the philosophy that he rejected. He notes that the understanding of Descartes as a lone innovator cannot survive serious scrutiny. This is not only in doctrines but also in approach. He points out, for example, that Suárez also begins his philosophy by a withdrawal into himself and a calling into doubt his previous knowledge. But the proofs of God's existence are where Cottingham notices Descartes's scholastic tendencies the most. First, he notes that both in *Discourse IV* and the Third Meditation, when Descartes starts proving the existence of God, his pace changes. He no longer speaks with the same freedom and seems to be forced to bring scholastic elements into his proofs. The *causa sui* proof is similar to arguments

³⁷ Descartes concludes that God is not a deceiver in the Third Meditation and examines this conclusion more carefully in the beginning of the Fourth Meditation.

from Plato, Augustine and Bonaventure.³⁸ Namely, the argument that it follows from the existence of himself as an imperfect being that there exists a perfect being, for making comparative value judgements requires some standard for comparison. This tendency to borrow from scholasticism is more present in the first proof though where Descartes borrows from scholasticism the principle of non-inferiority of the cause. Descartes claims that this principle is evident by the natural light and he does not provide a foundation for it. For Cottingham, the use of this principle here is problematic for Descartes transfers it from the realm of the sensible world and its constraints to the realm of thought contents. It is clear here that Descartes is taking a medieval philosophical doctrine for granted. This doctrine is unsupported and in the case of its use in the old philosophy it was grounded in the sensible world.

This brings us to Descartes's doctrine of the natural light.³⁹ It is not only that principle of causality that Descartes takes to be evident by the natural light. Other things too are, like the fact that fraud and deception depend on defect⁴⁰ or like our freedom. Hobbes might have been the first to point out the problem in this argument. He says that "this 'light' can explain why someone obstinately defends or holds to a given opinion, but it cannot explain his knowledge of its truth." (AT VII 192; CSM II 134) This doctrine of natural light is only postulated by Descartes, without being justified. He might have borrowed this idea of light from the tradition of Christian spirituality, that of Augustine and Bonaventure. His Platonic tendencies of retreating from the senses in order to attain truth supports that. Christina Mercer (2014) highlights the influence of spiritual meditations on the structure of the *Meditations* itself. For centuries after Augustine a prerequisite that was had for knowledge is the help of Jesus Christ. This would be achieved by spiritual exercise that aims at self-improvement through prayer and recognition of the unworthiness of one's soul. Only in form does the *Meditations* follow this tradition, but its material elements are absent in Descartes's philosophy. As Secada (2002) says, his epistemological philosophy is not the mystical wisdom of these earlier platonists." This could be stressed by the following quote from Bonaventure that Secada presents:

"I first invite the reader to pray ... lest he believe that reading is sufficient without unction, speculation without devotion, investigation without wonder, observation without exultation, industry without piety, science

³⁸ Descartes's proofs of God's existence, as indicated above, presuppose an idea of God. The idea of God being perfect, good, wise, omnipotent and omniscient is almost identical to the prevailing conceptions of God. The difference between Descartes and Aristotelian Scholastics like Suárez or Aquinas is that Descartes deduced these attributes *a priori*. They, on the other hand, deduced some of them after proving his existence and some others through revelation. Descartes's second proof from his own imperfection is also present in Suárez's twenty-ninth disputation. As for the third proof, the ontological one which precedes from the idea that God's essence is existence. This is a continuation of an already existing tradition in scholasticism. In the second proof, Descartes also proposes a theory of time. He says that it is "quite clear for anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence." (AT VII 49; CSM II 33) The only backing that Descartes provides for this argument is that it is "quite clear" to the "attentive" mind. Without knowledge of the sensible world, I do not understand how is it possible to give such an account for time and build a proof for God's existence upon it.

³⁹ The use of natural light does not seem to have been given adequate treatment. The focus of the discussion by Morris (1973) and the response by Boyle (1999) is on whether it is active or passive which is irrelevant to his paper.

⁴⁰ It is likely that this is borrowed from Suárez. See footnote 28.

without love, intelligence without humility, study without the grace of God, reflection without divinely inspired wisdom.”⁴¹

The goal of spiritual meditations was to help the reader attain enlightenment. However, this enlightenment depends on spiritual elements that are absent in the *Meditations*. The spiritual meditations operated with an ontology that would explain how a certain light is achieved within one’s soul. This analogy of light is also present in Suárez, in the thirtieth of his *Metaphysical Disputations*. However, God remains the source of this light. Descartes uses what Hobbes considers as a metaphoric doctrine of light, but the source of this light is not explained. He seems to resort to this doctrine whenever he wants to establish something without providing an adequate proof for it, like in the case of the principle of non-inferiority of the cause.

The last scholastic principle that I want to refer to has to do with cognition. Nadler (1989) and Hoffman (2009) correctly note that the notion of objective being in Descartes’s commits him to a Thomist theory of cognition. Objective being as discussed above is an object’s being in the intellect. This being in the intellect, of course, is not in the real sense. When I say that I am cognizant of a brown horse, this does not mean that this brown horse is in my intellect naturally but that it is in it spiritually or intentionally. My intellect does not become brown, but it can still be said that the horse is in it. This follows from the doctrine of intentional forms or *species*.⁴² Aristotelian philosophers subscribed to an ontology of form and matter. The difference, according to Aquinas, between cognizers and non-cognizers is that the former are suited to have in themselves, in addition to their own forms, the forms of that which they cognize. Through sensible forms present at the senses and intentional forms present in the intellect, the form of what is cognized is received by the cognizer and made intelligible to him. The accounts of this doctrine have significant differences among scholastics of the middle ages, but what I have stated is the doctrine as Descartes learned it.⁴³ This is not how Descartes understood cognition of external objects though. In the Sixth Replies he says:

“For example, when I see a stick, it should not be supposed that certain ‘intentional forms’ fly off the stick towards the eye, but simply that rays of light are reflected off the stick as set up certain movements in the optic nerve and, via the optic nerve, in the brain as I have explained at some length in the *Optics*.” (AT VII 437; CSM II 295)

Descartes subscribes to a more mechanistic view of cognition. This view, however, does not provide a functional equivalent to the intentional forms. The intentional forms give rise to the formal concept through a process of abstraction and the formal concept in turn is that through which the object of knowledge is known in the objective concept. This process of abstraction is an aspect of the scholastic ‘existentialism’ mentioned earlier. It is part of the scholastic process of acquiring knowledge that starts from extramental being. Descartes borrows the terminology of formal and objective being from the Aristotelian philosophers but as Secada has put it, he borrows the robe without the flesh. The Cartesian doctrine is not grounded in principles that can be acknowledged as self-evident by all readers. Of course, when faced with objections, he accuses the interlocutor of failing to perceive of that which is clear and distinct.

IX. CONCLUSION

⁴¹ Bonaventure (1956) translated in Secada (2002).

⁴² For a comprehensive account of *species* in medieval philosophy see Pasnau (1997).

⁴³ See Chapter 4 of Secada (2002).

I have analyzed each of the components of the Cartesian notion of certain knowledge. Descartes argues that true knowledge, or *Scientia*, is only achieved through trust in the veracity of God. Even eternal truths like the laws of geometry and mathematics cannot be known *truly* by the atheist. This is because he cannot be sure whether there exists a deceiving omnipotent being who deceives him in such knowledge. Securing true knowledge then requires proving the existence of a non-deceiving God, which makes us know that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true. The proofs that Descartes gives for God must start from the subject's mind, for the sensible world is not yet justified against metaphysical doubt, so Descartes gives three proofs of God based on the idea that he has of Him. This idea, at least in the first proof, is seen as a real existing entity whose existence must be accounted for.

I argued that this notion of certain knowledge should inevitably fail and indeed, this is what happens over the one and a half century following the publishing of the *Meditations*. The path that Descartes set for metaphysics had culminated in Kant, who announced that what humans know is merely the appearances of things, not things in themselves. It is my contention that this is perhaps a consequence of the Cartesian notion in question.

As shown in section VIII, some essential elements of this Cartesian notion cannot be justified by Descartes's system. It is evident in his use principle of non-inferiority of the cause, his theory of time, his theory of ideas, his distinction between formal and objective ideas and his ideas of God – all of which are full of borrowing from the old philosophy that he rejects. These principles, in medieval scholasticism, were supported by a tradition of 'general metaphysics' that would justify them before making use of them in what came to be known as 'special metaphysics' Descartes's insistence that they are either results of clear and distinct perceptions or evident by the natural light, makes the resulting notion of certain knowledge psychological rather than ontological.⁴⁴ Even if Williams (1978) is right about Descartes being after absolute truth, this truth would not necessarily correspond to the external world. The criteria that he put is subjective, and the separation that he has done between thought and object had created a problem that did not occur for the medieval scholastics. The cognizer for Descartes is a mind independent of the body, not a soul informing the body. Gilson (1999) finds this central to the loss of knowledge of external world, for this unity of the soul and body made it understandable how the soul knows things that are in the realm of the body. With this separation of mind and body resulting from the skeptical challenge, direct knowledge of the external world becomes a problem. This lack of access to the sensible world resulting from Descartes's dualism and his rejection of intentional forms stems from his rejection of substantial forms.

Robert Pasnau (2004) argues that substantial forms were not rejected for good reasons. He also that the theory of substantial forms rejected by the moderns is one than has developed in a manner that Aristotle never suggested. The failure of today's prevailing theories of substance to provide theoretical support for our intuition of

Descartes does not deny that the notions that were discussed in general metaphysics need to be ⁴⁴ known before being utilized in special metaphysics. What he thinks is that they are simple notions that do not need long and detailed discussions. Here is a passage from the principles. "And when I said that the proposition *I am thinking, therefore I exist* is the first and most certain of all to occur to anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way, I did not in saying that deny that one must first know what thought, existence and certainty are, and that it must be impossible that that which thinks should not exist, and so forth. But because these are very simple notions, and ones which on their own provide us with no knowledge of anything that exists, I did not think they needed to be listed." (AT VIII A 8; CSM I 196)

unity makes the revisiting of the neglected tradition of substantial forms interesting. It is interesting to see what kind of epistemological problems came up in modern philosophy as a result of its abandonment. One of these problems, it could be argued through this paper, is manifest in Descartes's notion of certain knowledge. Whether this failure has repercussions in the philosophy that comes after Descartes could inspire a whole career in academic philosophy.

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