In the Third Meditation, Descartes defends the idea that what he calls his “clear and distinct perceptions” can serve as the certain foundations of all his knowledge. In essence, his argument is:

(1) If my clear and distinct perceptions are not true, then God, if he exists, is a deceiver.

(2) God exists. (Proved by the Causal Argument.)

(3) If God exists, he is not a deceiver. (Proved by the Deceit A Defect Argument.)

∴ (4) So, God exists and is not a deceiver. (From 2 and 3)

∴ (5) So, my clear and distinct perceptions are true. (From 1 and 4)

We’ll call the conclusion the “Rule of Truth”. If Descartes can prove the Rule of Truth, then he has no reason to doubt his clear and distinct perceptions. Thus, his clear and distinct perceptions can serve as the certain foundations upon which he can build a stable body of knowledge.

In this handout, we’ll discuss clear and distinct perception, Descartes’s concept of substance, his Causal Argument for the existence of God, and the claim that God cannot be a deceiver.

CLEAR AND DISTINCT PERCEPTION

In the Third Meditation, Descartes introduces the term “clear and distinct perception”. He does not say much about what he means by this phrase; this is unfortunate, since it plays a crucial role not only in the Meditations but in Descartes’s other philosophical works as well. In his Principles of Philosophy, he says that perception is “clear” when it is “present and open to the attentive mind”, and “distinct” when it is “so sharply separated from other perceptions that it contains only what is clear”. But this is not especially helpful.

Clarity. A perception of \( x \) is clear if and only if it represents whatever is essential to \( x \)'s nature.

Distinctness. A perception of \( x \) is distinct if and only if it does not represent as belonging to \( x \) anything that is contrary to \( x \)'s nature.

So, for example, when Descartes perceives with his mind that the nature of the wax is simply to be extended, that's a clear perception (because it represents extension as being essential to the wax's nature) and a distinct perception (it represents nothing else as belonging to the wax's nature; thus it represents nothing as belonging to the wax that is contrary to the wax's nature).

For present purposes, what Descartes thinks clear and distinct perception is is not so important. What is important is how his clear and distinct perceptions work. In the First Meditation, the Deceiving God argument seemed to give Descartes reason to doubt absolutely everything. He acknowledges in the Third Meditation that this includes his clear and distinct perceptions:

Whenever this preconceived opinion about the supreme power of God occurs to me, I cannot help but admitting that, were he to wish it, it would be easy for him to cause me to err even in those matters that I think I intuit as clearly as possible with the eyes of the mind (AW 48a).

And yet when he has a clear and distinct perception, he cannot help but believe it to be true:

On the other hand, whenever I turn my attention to those very things that I think I perceive with such great clarity, I am so completely persuaded by them that I spontaneously blurt out these words: “let him who can deceive me, so long as I think that I am something, he will never bring it about that I am nothing. Nor will he one day make it true that I never existed, for it is true now that I do exist. Nor will he even bring it about that perhaps two plus three might equal more or less than five, or similar items in which I recognize an obvious contradiction” (AW 48a).

Descartes is saying that it's in his nature to be completely persuaded that \( p \) is true so long as he is having a clear and distinct perception that \( p \) is true. At this point Descartes is officially ignorant about whether God exists (AW 48a). But suppose that God does exist, but Descartes's clear and distinct perceptions are false. Then God gave him a nature whereby he is completely persuaded that some false things are true; to wit, those things that he clearly and distinctly perceives. Moreover, God created him in such a way that he is incapable of getting rid of these false beliefs. If God did this, Descartes thinks God would be deceiving him. Thus, he claims:

(i) If my clear and distinct perceptions are false, then God, if he exists, is a deceiver.

Before turning to the next topic, let me note what kinds of propositions Descartes treats as things he clearly and distinctly perceives. We can divide them into two categories. First, there are what we will call self-evident necessary truths. This category includes propositions like “If I think I am something, then I am not nothing,” “If I exist now, then it will never be true that I never existed,” “Two plus three equals five,” and “A square has four sides.” One important characteristic of the propositions in this group is that their denials are obvious contradictions.
The second category consists of truths of consciousness. These are propositions like “It seems to me that I'm sitting by the fire” and “I have an idea of x." Descartes finds himself incapable of doubting such things ("if I were to consider [my] ideas merely as certain modes of my thought, and were not to refer them to anything else [i.e., not to judge whether they resemble anything outside of my mind], they could hardly give me any subject matter for error” AW 35a).

DESCARTES ON SUBSTANCE

Before turning to Descartes's Causal Argument for the existence of God, we should briefly discuss his views about substance. The notion of a substance comes from scholastic philosophers, and ultimately Aristotle. A substance is an independently existing thing. (Note that this is quite different from the more common English use of the term “substance” to mean “stuff” or “material.”) For the scholastics, the primary examples of substances were organisms: a horse is a substance, an oak tree is a substance, a human being is a substance, and so on.

Contrasted with substances are attributes, accidents, or modes (we can regard all three of those terms as interchangeable for now, though we’ll draw a distinction among them in a moment). Substances are things; accidents, attributes, and modes are properties of things, or ways things are. Unlike substances, accidents, attributes, and modes are not independently existing things; their existence depends entirely upon the substance to which they belong.

For example, consider the state of affairs described by (A):

(A) Geoff is drowsy.

Geoff is the substance involved in state of affairs (A), and drowsiness or being drowsy is the accident (or attribute or mode) of Geoff involved in (A). Drowsiness can’t exist on its own; its existence depends entirely on the existence of substances. Geoff, on the other hand, exists on his own; there is no substance whose non-existence makes Geoff’s existence impossible. That’s why Geoff is a substance and drowsiness is not.

Descartes also distinguishes between two kinds of substances. Most substances are finite. This means that they are not completely independent; their existence depends upon some other substance. An infinite substance is completely independent of all other things; its existence depends upon nothing but itself. For Descartes, there is only one infinite substance: God.

Descartes also distinguishes between two kinds of properties. On the one hand, there are modes or accidents; these are ordinary properties like being drowsy, being heavy, thinking about Rome, feeling resentful, and so on. On the other hand, each substance has what he calls a primary attribute. The primary attribute of a substance is its most fundamental way of being. For Descartes there are only two primary attributes: thought and extension. A substance’s modes or accidents all presuppose its primary attribute; for example, being heavy presupposes being extended; thinking about Rome presupposes thought.

DESCARTES’S CAUSAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

The Third Meditation contains a fascinating argument for the existence of God:

(i) I have an idea of God; that is, an idea of a being with infinite reality.
(2) If I have an idea of something with \( n \) degrees of reality, then that idea is caused to exist by something with at least \( n \) degrees of reality.

\[
\therefore (3) \quad \text{So, my idea of God is caused by something with infinite reality. (From 1 and 2)}
\]

(4) If \( X \) is caused to exist by \( Y \), then \( Y \) exists.

\[
\therefore (5) \quad \text{So, God – that is, a being with infinite reality – exists. (From 3 and 4).}
\]

Premises (3) and (5) are logical consequences of the other premises. We'll simply accept (4). The interesting premises of the argument are (1) and (2). We'll tackle premise (2) first.

Descartes thinks that substances are “more real” than modes or accidents. While modes and accidents depend for their existence upon substances, substances do not depend for their existence upon modes or accidents. Infinite substance, meanwhile, is “more real” than finite substance; the latter depends upon the former for its existence but not vice versa.

Now, Descartes, says, “it is indeed evident by the light of nature that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as there is in the effect of that same cause” (AW 49b). We will call this the Causal Principle (CP):

\[ CP. \text{ If } X \text{ is the total cause of } Y \text{'s existence, then } X \text{ has at least as much reality as } Y. \]

The key idea behind CP is that “something cannot come into being out of nothing” (AW 49b). If \( X \) is the total cause of \( Y \) but \( Y \) has more reality than \( X \), then \( Y \) got some extra reality out of thin air; i.e., something (\( Y \)'s extra reality) came into being out of nothing. So, since something can't come from nothing, if \( X \) is the total cause of \( Y \), \( X \) must have at least as much reality as \( Y \).

But the Causal Principle can't motivate premise (2) of Descartes's argument by itself. That's because ideas are merely modes of thinking substance, and so are even less real than the finite substances that have them. As far as the Causal Principle goes, any idea can be caused to exist by a finite substance, or even by another idea. (“...[T]he very nature of an idea is such that of itself it needs no formal reality other than what it borrows from my thought, of which it is a mode” (AW 50a).)

So Descartes distinguishes between what he calls formal and objective reality. Something's formal reality is how much reality it has insofar as it actually exists. An idea has less formal reality than a finite substance, which has less formal reality than an infinite substance. But ideas also have “objective” reality. The objective reality of an idea is equivalent to the formal reality of whatever it represents, or whatever it is an idea of. For example, the objective reality of the idea of the Eiffel Tower is equivalent to the formal reality of the Eiffel Tower. The objective reality of the idea of Descartes is equivalent to the formal reality of Descartes. And the objective reality of the idea of God is equivalent to the formal reality of God.

Descartes now claims that an idea's cause must have at least as much formal reality as the idea has objective reality (“But that a particular idea contains this as opposed to that objective reality is surely owing to some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as there is objective reality contained in the idea” (AW 50a).”) This is what we'll call the Causal Principle for Ideas (CPI):

\[ CPI. \text{ If } X \text{ is the total cause of an idea of } Y, \text{ then } X \text{ has as much reality as } Y; \text{ i.e., the formal reality of } X \text{ is at least as great as the objective reality of the idea of } Y. \]
The motivation behind CPI is similar to that behind CP; indeed, Descartes seems to regard CPI as simply following from CP. If an idea had more objective reality than its cause had formal reality, Descartes thinks that “the idea [would] get [...] something from nothing” (AW 50a). And since you can’t get something from nothing, he thinks that an idea can’t have more objective reality than its cause has formal reality.

But why should we accept the claim that an idea with more objective reality than its cause has formal reality would thereby get something from nothing? One clue comes from what Descartes says in the first set of Objections And Replies to the Meditations (not in our book):

[T]he idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect – not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e. in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect (Second Replies, The Philosophical Writings Of Descartes, vol. II, 75).

So the idea of the sun simply is the sun, but as it exists in the intellect, instead of how it exists “formally”. The sun's degree of reality is the same in both its objective and formal existence. If the idea of the sun had been caused by something with less formal reality than the sun, it would have gotten something – i.e., some reality in the intellect – from nothing. Hence, whatever caused the idea of the sun must have as much reality as the sun has formally in the heavens.

This line of thought is not really persuasive, though, since as Descartes goes on to say, “[T]his mode of being [i.e., existing in the intellect] is of course much less perfect than that possessed by things which exist outside the intellect; but, as I did explain, it is not therefore simply nothing” (ibid., 75). So existing in the intellect is “much less perfect” than existing in reality. Then would it really be an instance of something coming from nothing for the idea of the sun to have been caused by something with less formal reality than the sun? The reality possessed by the sun as it exists in the intellect is less than the reality of the sun existing in the heavens (or so it would seem if the former kind of existence is “much less perfect” way than the latter). So why couldn't the idea of the sun have been caused by something with less reality than the sun? It is not clear how Descartes would answer this question.

Here is another way that CPI might be made plausible. At some places Descartes suggests that things with more reality are not only more independent than things with less reality, but are also more intricate or complex. Now suppose that you have an idea of something – a clock, say. For Descartes having an idea of something is not a matter of having a mental image, but requires understanding. If you have an idea of a clock, then you must understand the clock – how it works, how it was made, etc. But clocks are highly complicated and intricate objects. How could you have come to have that idea? It seems that whatever gave you that understanding must have been as complicated and intricate as what the idea represents; i.e., the cause of that idea must have had just as much reality as a clock. You couldn't have gotten the idea of something so complicated and intricate as a clock just by looking at a marble or a pile of sand. (Perhaps you made the idea up yourself, but then you would have been the cause of your idea of a clock, and you have just as much reality as a clock.)

CPI is equivalent to premise (2) of the Causal Argument. But then if we grant premise (1), we must conclude that Descartes’s idea of God was caused by a being with infinite reality. For CPI dictates that the idea of a being with infinite formal reality must have been caused by a being with infinite formal reality. And Descartes has stipulated that his idea of God is the idea of “a certain substance that is infinite, independent, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful, and that
created me along with everything else that exists—if anything else exists” (AW 51b). Thus the idea of God is just the idea of a being with infinite reality. So God must be the cause of Descartes's idea of God. Given that Descartes has the idea of God, and granting premise (4), we have a proof of God's existence.

Descartes considers a possible objection. He imagines someone claiming that Descartes himself is the cause of his idea of God “through a negation of the finite” (AW 51b). The suggestion is that Descartes has the idea of something with a degree of reality that is somehow limited (e.g., something with finite intelligence, finite power, and so on), and by combining this idea with the idea of negation—the idea of saying that something does not have something, or that something lacks something—he would arrive at the idea of a being with a degree of reality that is not limited. If this is how Descartes arrived at the idea of God, then it could have been caused by a finite substance (i.e., by Descartes himself) and not by an infinite substance.

Descartes rejects this suggestion because, he says, in order to have an idea of something's being finite, he must first have an idea of something's being infinite: “For how would I understand that I doubt and that I desire, that is, that I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being, by comparison with which I might recognize my defects?” (AW 51b).

Important: One might think that a similar argument could be used to prove the existence of anything of which I have an idea. But this is incorrect. Suppose that I have the idea of a unicorn. The CPI says that my idea of a unicorn must have been caused by something with at least as much formal reality as a unicorn. But lots of things have as much formal reality as a unicorn: a horse, my own mind, God. So all I can conclude from the fact that I have an idea of a unicorn is that something with at least as much reality as a unicorn exists. Given that Descartes has already proven that he exists, this is not an interesting result.

THE ‘DECEIT A DEFECT’ ARGUMENT

All that remains is for Descartes to show that God could not be a deceiver:

(1) If God is a deceiver, then he has some defect.

(2) God has no defects.

∴ (3) So, God is not a deceiver.

Descartes's reason for believing (2) is that God is a being with infinite reality. If God had a defect, his reality would be limited in some way. But given that his reality is infinite, it is not limited in any way. Thus, God has no defects.

But why should Descartes think (1)? I think Descartes’s assumption is that if God were a deceiver, then to that extent he would be bad or evil. And being bad or evil is a defect. Yet why should we grant the assumption that being deceitful would make God bad or evil? Granted, it is typically bad or evil to deceive. But this is not always the case, is it? My son believes in Santa Claus; his grandparents encourage this false belief. Does this indicate that they are bad or evil in some way? Sometimes we think it is okay to deceive someone if it is in his or her own interests to be deceived. Without some argument that this is not the case, we don’t have a strong case for (1).

We’ll come back to the idea of God's being a deceiver in the Fourth Meditation.