

The Conceptual Priority of the Perfect

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THE CONCEPTUAL PRIORITY OF THE PERFECT

by

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ABSTRACT
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Marquette University, 2015

The doctrine of the conceptual priority of the perfect (CPP) is the claim that the concept of the perfect is prior to that of the imperfect insofar as possessing the latter presupposes a grasp of the former, but not vice versa. The goals of this study are to provide an account and defense of the Cartesian argument for CPP, to determine the consequences of this priority for the relationship between our concepts of human and divine properties, and to explore its implications for bottom-up accounts of theological concept formation.

I argue that the predicates "perfect" or "infinite" in Descartes' version of CPP are equivalent to "true" or "genuine" and thus function in the same way they would in geometrical examples where the perfection at issue is definitive of the kind and where imperfection constitutes falling short of the kind. I can thus be said to have the idea of a "perfect" circle (of that which is "infinitely" circular, as it were) merely by virtue of having the idea of a circle, yet I cannot apprehend something as imperfect or finite insofar as it resembles but fails to be a circle unless I already possess a concept of the kind in question—a true or perfect circle.

CPP thus implies a qualitative distinction between the perfect and imperfect that, when applied to God and creation, is consistent with a theory of analogy. Unlike traditional 'bottom-up' theories of analogy, however, CPP entails a 'top-down' order of derivation in which concepts of creaturely perfections are derived (via a sort of 'partial negation') from concepts of divine ones.

The 'top-down' order of derivation yields epistemological advantages over the traditional approach, which had always struggled to explain how we can derive analogical concepts of God from creatures. Further, CPP enables its proponents to address the classic anthropomorphism critiques leveled at practitioners of Perfect Being Theology. Though I acknowledge that CPP is not without its own weaknesses, I present a largely sympathetic account of the argument and its relevance for contemporary philosophy of religion.

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Matthew Zdon

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This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of Frank Reilly, radical theologian, teacher and friend.

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Introduction

The doctrine of the conceptual priority of the perfect (CPP) is the claim that the concept of the perfect is prior to that of the imperfect insofar as possessing the latter presupposes a grasp of the former, but not vice versa. In Descartes' philosophy, as well as in that of his rationalist successors such as Leibniz and Malebranche, CPP is most often used to show that our idea of God, or infinite being, is conceptually prior to the idea we have of ourselves.¹ Despite the fact that Descartes appeals to CPP throughout his philosophical works and even though it plays an important role in his arguments concerning the nature and origin of our idea of God, the Cartesian account

¹ Examples from Descartes will follow. Malebranche, in *The Search After Truth*, quotes Descartes' statement of the priority in his April 1649 letter to Clerselier almost word for word: "But not only does the mind have the idea of the infinite, it even has it before that of the finite. For we conceive of infinite being simply because we conceive of being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite. In order for us to conceive of a finite being, something must necessarily be eliminated from this general notion of being, which consequently must come first" (232). In his own statements of the priority, Leibniz prefers to use the term "absolute" to characterize divine infinity. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, a dialogue written in response to Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the character espousing the Leibnizian position argues that "the true infinite, strictly speaking, is only in the absolute, which precedes all composition and is not formed by that addition of parts" (157) and further that the "idea of the absolute is internal to us, as is that of being: these absolutes are nothing but the attributes of God; and they may be said to be as much the source of ideas as God himself is the principle of beings" (158). Spinoza will also employ something like CPP, but for him the priority seems to be the same as the priority of substance to that of mode.

of CPP has been largely neglected by scholars. It is too easy, perhaps, to view it as a relic of Descartes' religious milieu—as one more regrettable respect in which the Enlightenment philosopher failed to be a fully modern thinker—or to dismiss it as a sop to religious authorities, served to make his less-palatable philosophical innovations more appetizing. Especially when viewed in light of his occasional expressions of apparent fideism, e.g., “I have never written about the infinite except to submit myself to it” (CSMK 172), one might forsake CPP as impenetrable to philosophical analysis.

Such interpretations lose much of their appeal when CPP is correctly understood. In the first chapter, I explain how CPP shows that our concept of “perfect” or “infinite” being is not produced by merely negating the qualifications “imperfect” or “finite.” I argue that the predicates “perfect” or “infinite” in CPP are equivalent to “true” or “genuine” and thus function in the same way they would in geometrical examples where the perfection at issue is definitive of the kind and where imperfection constitutes falling short of the kind. In this sense, I can be said to have the idea of a “perfect” circle (of that which is “infinitely” circular, as it were) merely by virtue of having the idea of a circle, yet I cannot

apprehend something as imperfect or finite insofar as it resembles but fails to be a circle unless I already possess a concept of the kind in question—a true or perfect circle. Descartes' own application of CPP to our cognition of geometrical figures, his assertions that our unqualified notion of being or substance is an idea of *infinite* (or perfect) being or substance, his denial that "being" or "substance" can be predicated univocally of creatures and God, and his use of the image/model analogy to describe the relationship between the perfect and the imperfect, all lend support to this interpretation.

In the next chapter, I explore the role CPP plays in Descartes' response to his critics' claims that our idea of God is constructed by amplifying our concepts of creaturely properties. Descartes believes that such amplification is guided by an innate concept of God. Though other interpreters have suggested that this follows from the fact that amplification presupposes an awareness of absolute imperfection, I argue that it is necessary given the qualitative gulf that, according to CPP, must separate creaturely from divine properties. I conclude that amplification is, for Descartes, a heuristic tool employed to guide the "natural light" in rendering explicit the contents of our innate idea of God.

If creaturely goodness or wisdom falls short of goodness and wisdom as such, what could justify the extension of the predicates "good" or "wise" to creatures? In the third chapter, I evaluate various ways of making sense of the positive relation that CPP implies. I argue that Descartes' commitment to the principle that creatures are images and likenesses of God suggests that the positive relation is one of *resemblance*. I proceed to evaluate various ways of making sense of this resemblance, concluding that it cannot be attributed to any form of qualitative identity. For a number of historical and textual reasons, including Descartes' explicit denial of univocity as well as his defense of analogical predication in the context of his analysis of divine self-causation, I argue that the resemblance between creatures and God ought to be interpreted as *analogical* and hence irreducible or primitive.

In the following chapter, I step away from Descartes to provide a historical overview of the theory of analogy. I emphasize that the traditional theory of theological analogy does assume that there is a primitive ontological resemblance between creatures and God. I also isolate a feature of the traditional theory that is inconsistent with CPP, namely, the assumption that our concepts of God are

derived from our concepts of creatures. Instead, I argue that CPP will require a 'top-down' theory of analogy in which concepts of creaturely properties are derived, via a sort of 'partial negation,' from concepts of divine ones.²

The fifth chapter is devoted to explaining and defending the ontology and cognition of analogical resemblance. Analogy assumes that a single term can, through concepts that resemble one another without sharing content, signify things that resemble one another without sharing a common nature or form. I first show how late scholastic advocates of analogy such as Cajetan and John of St. Thomas responded to the Scotistic critique that such analogical concepts possess insufficient unity (or resemblance) to be employed in reasoning without committing the fallacy of equivocation. They suggest that analogically similar concepts can be 'confused' in thought such that they can be regarded as a single concept, which is neither a generic concept derived by abstracting shared content nor the concept of a mere arbitrary collection. I argue that the very same examples of scalar properties (e.g., colors) that Scotus employs to illustrate his own account of univocity by way of modal distinction show that theories of abstraction by confusion are themselves plausible. Finally,

² The terms 'top down' and 'partial negation' are from Robert Merrihew Adams (2008).

I will attempt to render the ontology and cognition of primitive analogical resemblance a little less mysterious by connecting it to more contemporary accounts of concept formation in cases of inexact similarity.

Abstraction by confusion assumes, however, that we already possess determinate concepts of the analogates in question. Scotus had argued that this leaves advocates of the bottom-up approach to analogy with a dilemma: either they must hold that we can obtain determinate concepts of divine properties from concepts of creaturely ones (which appears to violate the ontological difference between them), or they must accept that we can derive only indeterminate concepts of divine properties (which appears to undermine the scientific character of theology). In the sixth chapter I argue that, insofar as it is our concepts of the *creaturely* versions of perfections that are derived, via 'partial negation,' from concepts of divine ones, CPP does not face Scotus' dilemma. I then show how Descartes' explicit application of analogy to divine-self-causation illustrates the advantages of such top-down derivation for philosophical theology. I end the chapter with a discussion of a few examples of top-down derivation suggested by Charles Hartshorne.

In the next chapter, I explore the significance of CPP for contemporary perfect being theology (PBT). PBT is the effort to understand God's nature by appealing to our intuitions about what properties a greatest or most perfect being must have. Critics have alleged that PBT yields an idolatrous and anthropomorphic concept of God insofar as it suggests that the divine perfections differ merely by degree from our own and because it appeals to fallible and biased notions of perfection when identifying candidate properties. To the extent that Descartes' philosophy of religion is an example of PBT, it has been subjected to the same criticism. However, I argue that Descartes' commitment to CPP would enable him to overcome these objections. Our possessing innate concepts of qualitatively distinct divine perfections not only enables us to apprehend our own properties as absolutely imperfect, but guides our own intuitions regarding which properties must be possessed by a perfect being.

I dedicate the final chapter to a general analysis and critique of CPP. Taken as a transcendental argument, I argue that the weakest aspect of CPP is the premise that we apprehend ourselves as imperfect in the *absolute* sense. Though Descartes argued that we could never attain explicit concepts of qualitatively unique divine perfections by

amplifying concepts of our own unless we were at least implicitly aware of such absolute imperfection, both the claim that we do in fact possess these concepts as well as the assumption that we could not construct them solely by modifying concepts of our own properties are questionable. While one could appeal to more general and universal features of human experience as evidence for an awareness of absolute imperfection, such appeals are no less controversial than the alleged presupposition relations of amplification arguments. I end the chapter by noting how the purported primitive resemblance of simple properties (such as different shades of a single color) is disanalogous to the resemblance relation between creatures and God within CPP insofar as the latter assumes a resemblance between various complex (creaturely) properties and a metaphysically simple thing.

Ch. I. CPP and the Argument from Negation

I. Contemporary Reception of Cartesian CPP

The Cartesian doctrine of CPP, says Robert Merrihew Adams, "astonishes readers today."³ The claim has indeed struck many readers as remarkable, and not merely because it, as Adams explains, "is so contrary to the modern tendency to seek to understand the more perfect, the more developed, in terms of the less perfect, the more rudimentary." Many commentators have found it to be obscure if not downright incredible. "It is not obvious how exactly to take this priority," says John Carriero, expressing what seems to be the opinion of many Descartes scholars.⁴ Other interpreters have been less restrained in their criticism. Anthony Kenny, for example, has argued that the "principle that the positive is prior to the negative is worthless."⁵ John Cottingham agrees, noting that "this alleged priority or 'basicness for understanding' evaporates under scrutiny."⁶ More charitable interpreters have thrown up their hands as well. Janet Broughton, despite her best

³ 2008, 91.

⁴ 2009, 191.

⁵ 1968, 136.

⁶ John Cottingham, 1976. In some of his more recent work, however, Cottingham seems to view the argument more positively, though he does not discuss it in detail. See Cottingham, 1994. See also Cottingham's article in Gaukroger, 2006.

effort to construct a plausible argument for the claim, concludes with regret that it is ultimately based on nothing more than an "abstract and contentious metaphysical doctrine."⁷

Not all recent commentary has been negative, however. Though Robert Rubin finds the priority claim "paradoxical," he suggests that it might be analogous to the conceptual priority of the notion of substance to that of mode (in this sense aligning Descartes with Spinoza).⁸ Adams and Stephen Menn stand out amongst recent interpreters in defending the argument largely on its own terms. It is significant that both of these authors approach the argument with an eye towards its Platonic ancestry.⁹ Menn, however, is less interested in defending it than in drawing historical parallels to Neo-Platonic and Augustinian arguments for God.¹⁰ Adams is chiefly interested in the consequences the priority has for the broader rationalist program of constructing concepts of the attributes of finite beings from the concepts of the attributes of infinite being (and for this reason focuses on Leibniz,

⁷ 2002, 152.

⁸ Rubin, 2008. Anat Schectman also understands the priority relation as an instance of the same sort of ontological dependence relation that obtains between substance and mode. See chapter three of her dissertation, 2011.

⁹ For a general account of the Platonic features of Descartes' philosophy, see Buckle 2007.

¹⁰ 1998, 281-93.

rather than Descartes).¹¹ Though he provides a plausible reconstruction and defense of the argument, his account is relatively brief and, as he himself notes, leaves important questions unanswered.

II. The Correlative Concept Critique

Anthony Kenny, John Cottingham and Georgette Sinkler have advanced the most pointed critique of Cartesian CPP. They have all argued that the concept of a perfect being cannot be prior to the concept of an imperfect one since the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect" must be viewed as correlative—i.e., neither concept can be understood without the other. Needless to say, I believe the correlative concept critique is wrong. Yet understanding why it is wrong will help us to clarify the nature of CPP. As I will show, the critique fails to appreciate that when Descartes uses the predicates "perfect" or "infinite" in this context, they are synonymous with "real," "true" or

¹¹ 2008, 91-9. Descartes will sometimes use the term "attribute" in the technical sense to refer to that which is the "essence of a thing" (CSMI 210). This sense is shorthand for "principal attribute." The principal attribute of a body is extension, the principal attribute of a mind is thought. Yet there is also a looser sense of the term in Descartes' works, where it is roughly equivalent to "property" or "mode." I will use the term "attribute" interchangeably with "property" or "quality" throughout this work, unless I indicate otherwise. For a detailed account of this and other terminological ambiguities, see Garber 1992, 63-70.

"genuine."¹² He therefore does not employ the perfect/imperfect distinction as describing a degree of perfection *within* a given kind, but invokes it with respect to a narrower range of cases in which one thing falls short of a perfection that is *definitive of another thing's nature*. This is indicated by Descartes' application of CPP to the case of our idea of a perfect triangle, the only

¹² It should be noted that, within the Cartesian account of CPP, the terms "perfect" and "imperfect" are (at least implicitly) always modifying something (usually being). Further, in the context of Descartes' arguments for CPP with respect to *being*, the terms "infinite" and "finite" are used interchangeably with the terms "perfect" and "imperfect." Recognizing one's limitation can thus be described as either an awareness of finitude or as an awareness of imperfection. This seems to be due to the fact that, for Descartes, an infinite or a perfect being is simply a being possessing every perfection (or reality). Thus I disagree with Philip Clayton (2000, 145) who suggests that Descartes uses the notion of perfection to control or limit the notion of infinity. What this suggests is that in ascribing infinity to God, Descartes thinks he has left himself open to the objection that God would thereby possess attributes incompatible with a perfect being (e.g., extension) and thus must invoke divine perfection to exclude such attributes. Yet Descartes never suggests this; rather, his use of "infinite" indicates that attributes such as extension are actually *incompatible* with the notion of an infinite being. Indeed, Descartes explicitly states that when he uses the term "infinite" it is synonymous with "greatest being." He tends to avoid using the term "infinite," however, because he believed its grammatical construction encourages the mistaken view that it is equivalent in meaning to "not-finite." When Descartes applies CPP to the case of our awareness that a given triangle is imperfect, however, *triangle* and not *being* is the subject and hence he does not use the terms "finite" and "infinite." As I will explain in chapter two, Descartes also describes the human will as "infinite" insofar as it absolute or perfect in essence (i.e., qua kind faculty of the will). That he here uses the term "infinite," rather than just "perfect" as he does in the case of triangles, can be attributed to the fact that Descartes thinks that the human faculty of the will does not *appear* to be any less perfect, qua faculty of the will, than God's. Thus his use of "infinite" to describe the human will retains its theological significance. Since the terms "perfect" and "imperfect" are applicable however to every instance of CPP within Descartes' works, since Descartes prefers these terms, and since the construction of "imperfect" as a grammatical negation of "perfect" corresponds with the conceptual priority asserted by CPP, I will describe the doctrine as the priority of the *perfect* rather than the priority of the *infinite*.

instance where he applies it to something other than our idea of God. There he argues that the notion of an imperfect triangle presupposes that of a perfect one insofar as the notion of a triangle as such *is* the notion of a perfect one. The priority at issue in CPP is thus simply the claim that the negative predicate "imperfect" in "imperfect being," like the predicate "imperfect" in "imperfect circle," has significance for us only if we already possess a notion of, respectively, being or circularity. Since we can nevertheless possess a concept of being or circularity without possessing a notion of something that is like a being or a circle but falls short of these kinds (imperfect being and imperfect circularity), the former concepts have priority.

When Descartes invokes CPP in his arguments for the existence of the idea of God, it is typically as a rebuttal to the (anticipated) counterargument that, since the term "infinite" (*infinitum*) is a grammatical negation of the term "finite," the notion of infinite being is nothing more than the idea of a being that is not-finite (*non finitum*). That the idea of the infinite might be a negation of our idea of the finite is not the only argument Descartes' interlocutors (real and imaginary) can and did wield against CPP. In the objections to the *Meditations*, for

example, Gassendi as well as others argue that the idea of infinite being could be created by *amplifying* our notion of finite being. As we shall see, Descartes believed that CPP overcomes this argument as well. Yet perhaps one of the reasons why he focuses on the negation counterargument is the fact that he believed that the relation between the ideas of infinite and finite being *is* a sort of negation (more precisely, a sort of *partial* negation). Addressing the negation argument is thus also a way for Descartes to clarify the relation between these ideas. In the famous Third Meditation assertion of CPP, the negation relation is not rejected but shown to run in the opposite direction:

And I must not think that, just as my conceptions of rest and darkness are arrived at by negating movement and light, so my perception of the infinite is arrived at not by means of a true idea but merely by negating the finite. On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison. (CSMII 31)

To say that the ideas of rest or darkness are produced by negation is simply to say that they are equivalent to, respectively, “not-light” and “not-moving.” Their

intelligibility is here presented as being entirely parasitic on the ideas of light and motion. The aforementioned critics of CPP find these examples to be less than convincing. Kenny, for example, observes that "there is no way of sorting predicates into positive and negative in the manner required by Descartes' argument. He says that we perceive rest by the negation of movement; but one could as well say that we perceive movement by the negation of rest."¹³ We ought to conclude, says Kenny, that "[t]he argument from doubting, if valid, proves only that the idea of perfection must be simultaneous with the idea of imperfection, not that it must be prior. [...] The ability to use a predicate is not prior to, but identical with, the ability to use its negation."¹⁴ Sinkler agrees with Kenny: "Does one come to recognize the light only after having recognized the dark, the dead after the living, or vice versa? Surely not. One can only recognize or understand these terms together; not one before or after the other."¹⁵

These critics have misunderstood the significance of the examples of negation in this passage. Descartes is using them to illustrate only how conceiving of something as the absence of a perfection or reality (for Descartes,

¹³ 1968, 135.

¹⁴ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵ 1989, 79.

as we shall see, these terms are often synonymous) presupposes an idea of the perfection in question. He did indeed adopt the traditional view that things like darkness are, ontologically, merely the absences of something real and positive (the perfection of light).¹⁶ This ontological disparity ostensibly gives rise to a conceptual asymmetry: while we can conceive of darkness only by conceiving of the absence of the corresponding perfection (light), the perfection itself (light) can be conceived without comparing it to (and so conceiving of) its absence. Yet Descartes need not be read as denying that our ideas of rest and movement are correlative. Given his commitment in his physics that both rest and movement are equally real as modes of extended substance, he would not hold that there is "more reality" in the latter.¹⁷ There is no reason to believe that he wouldn't endorse Kenny's suggestion that we can also conceive of movement as the absence of rest. Descartes' point is simply that *if* we conceive of rest as the absence (negation) of movement, then we must possess an idea of movement. The same presupposition relation would follow for conceiving of movement as the absence of rest. As Cecilia Wee puts it, "Descartes is merely using the

¹⁶ See Wee 2006, 97-101. Another example Descartes cites is the idea of blindness as the absence of sight (CSMII 134).

¹⁷ Wee 2006, 157 endnote # 18.

example of rest and movement [...] as an illustration of the point that some perceptions are of absences of perfections, rather than perfections."¹⁸

Aside from the issue of whether these examples of negations are correlative or not, however, the question we should be asking is this: what do these examples tell us about the significance of the predicates "infinite/finite" and "perfect/imperfect" as employed within CPP? In fact, Descartes does *not* hold that the purported negation pairs are examples of the same relation that holds between our notions of finite and infinite being. He will argue that the notion of finite or imperfect being is obtained via a *partial* negation of the idea of *being as such*.¹⁹ Creaturely being is not apprehended as the absence of being in the way that rest can be apprehended as the *complete* absence of movement, for this would render the idea of finite being equivalent to the idea of nothingness (i.e., non-being).²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid. As I will later argue, this same point is suggested by Descartes' description of the idea of an imperfect triangle as a (partial) "negation" of a perfect one. This should be interpreted as simply the claim that we cannot conceive of a given figure as an imperfect triangle unless we possess the concept of a triangle. This claim does not preclude the possibility that we could conceive of the latter as a negation (imperfect instance) of the former.

¹⁹ In a late letter to Cleselier, Descartes argues that "in order to conceive a finite being, I have to take away something from this general notion of being" (CSMK 377). In the Fourth Meditation, the narrator portrays his ontological status as falling somewhere "between" being and non-being (CSMII 38).

²⁰ For Descartes, the idea of nothingness is equivalent to the idea of non-being and is thus obtained via a *complete* negation of being. It

Rather, to grasp being as finite or imperfect is to apprehend it as falling short of being *while nevertheless resembling it*. Yet the fact that the relation is still a form of negation *is* significant, for it underscores that there is a distinction in *kind* between the two relata. Just as darkness is not a kind of light nor rest a sort of motion, so it will turn out that imperfect (finite) being is not really an instance of being, strictly speaking.

In his otherwise excellent commentary on Descartes' *Conversation with Burman*, Cottingham is similarly misled by purported examples of negations.²¹ His account is worth analyzing in detail, however, since his interpretation will prove instructive. In response to Burman's questions about the significance of CPP within a passage in the *Discourse*,²² Descartes alludes to the above passage in the *Third Meditation* and provides the following explication:

follows that we could conceive of being without conceiving of nothingness, but we could not conceive the latter without the former.

²¹ It should be noted that the actual text of the *Conversation with Burman* was not written by Descartes himself, but represents notes taken by Burman (and perhaps dictated to another). Cottingham, however, makes a strong case for treating the *Conversation* as an accurate representation of Descartes' views. See 1976, xvi-xviii.

²² The passage in question is the following: "reflecting upon the fact that I was doubting and that consequently my being was not wholly perfect (for I saw clearly that it is a greater perfection to know than to doubt), I decided to inquire into the source of my ability to think of something more perfect than I was; and I recognized very clearly that this had to come from some nature that was in fact more perfect" (CSMI 127-8).

In that part of the *Discourse* you have a summary of these *Meditations*, and its meaning must be explicated by reference to the *Meditations* themselves. In that part of the *Discourse*, then, the author recognized his own imperfection by recognizing the perfection of God. He did this implicitly if not explicitly. Explicitly, we are able to recognize our own imperfection before we recognize the perfection of God. This is because we are able to direct our attention to ourselves before we direct our attention to God. Thus we can infer our own finiteness before we arrive at his infiniteness. Despite this, however, the knowledge of God and his perfection must *implicitly* always come before the knowledge of ourselves and our imperfections. For in reality the infinite perfection of God is prior to our imperfections, since our imperfection is a defect and negation of the perfection of God. And every defect and negation presupposes that which it falls short and negates. (CSMK 338)

Cottinham observes that the priority in question is due to the fact that the idea of finite being is in some sense a negation of that of infinite being. Further, he correctly describes the relation of presupposition at the heart of CPP: "A possible answer [to what is meant by this relation of presupposition] is that X presupposes Y if in order to have the concept of X one must have the concept of Y, but not *vice versa*."²³ Yet Cottingham errs, like the others, in focusing on the difficulty of determining which of two opposite predicates is the negative and which is the positive one. He notes that Descartes' examples of negations are always defects or privations of some sort, and allows that some cases, such as the pair "sighted" and

²³ 1976, 72.

"blind," look "intuitively plausible" as examples of this priority: "in order to understand what 'blind' means, we have to have some concept of what it is to be sighted, while the converse does not seem to hold."²⁴ Using the example of an apple, however, he argues that when we apply this example to the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect," no such priority can be found: "To understand what an imperfect apple is, it seems I must have the concept of a perfect apple; but the converse seems equally to hold: I could not know what was meant by a perfect apple unless I had the concept of an imperfect apple. There does not seem to be any priority at all here: in order to understand either of the two terms one must understand what is meant by the other. The two terms rank *pari passu*."²⁵

Cottingham's example is a useful one because it allows us to identify precisely how he has misunderstood the function of the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect" in CPP. When Descartes employs these predicates within CPP, he is actually describing the relationship between the concept of a perfection definitive of a kind and the concept of imperfection as falling short of this kind. As I will argue, the actual claim is that in order to grasp that something is an imperfect X, I must already possess the

²⁴ Ibid., 73.

²⁵ Ibid.

notion of X, which in this case *is* the notion of a perfect X. Indeed, Descartes makes just this point in his correspondence with Clerselier, his last writing on the doctrine of CPP:

I say that the notion I have of the infinite is in me before that of the finite because, by the mere fact that I conceive being, or that which is, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, what I conceive is infinite being; but in order to conceive a finite being, I have to take away something from this general notion of being, which must accordingly be there first. (CSMK 377)

The notion of being *is* the notion of infinite being. The predicate "infinite" doesn't modify or add to the concept of being. Indeed, in the paragraph preceding this, Descartes explicitly states that the predicate "infinite" has the same significance when joined with substance: "By 'infinite substance' I mean a substance which has actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections. *This is not an accident added to the notion of substance, but the very essence of substance taken absolutely and bounded by no defects.*" The predicates "infinite" or "perfect" as applied to being or substance clearly do not have the significance suggested by Cottingham's example. If the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect" functioned in his example as they do in these cases, then 1) we could be said

to necessarily possess the concept of a *perfect* apple simply by virtue of possessing the concept of an apple, for the perfection at issue would not be an ideal degree of sweetness or crispness but that which is definitive of the kind; and 2) our concept of an imperfect apple would not be the idea of something that is an imperfect instance of the kind (e.g., a mushy and bland apple), but the concept of something that is imperfect insofar as it fails to be an apple at all.

III. CPP and the Perfect Triangle

That the comparative predicates in CPP do not function in the way suggested by Cottingham's example can be seen more clearly if we consider Descartes' application of CPP to the idea of a triangle in the Fifth Replies and his explanation of this argument in the *Conversation with Burman*, the only time he explicitly applies CPP to something other than the idea of God. Though critics and defenders of Cartesian CPP have largely neglected this example, it is important for understanding Descartes' argument for two reasons.²⁶ First, it shows that the sense

²⁶ One interpreter who has discussed the triangle example's significance for Descartes' argument for an innate idea of God is Deobrah Boyle. See 2009, 128-136. To my knowledge, however, no one has yet used the geometrical example in an effort to understand Descartes' application of CPP to the idea of God.

of "perfect" used in CPP is equivalent to "true" and second, it clarifies a distinction between conceiving of an object as perfect and merely conceiving of a thing that *is* perfect.

A. Perfect as 'True'

In response to Gassendi's claim that our ideas of geometrical figures must be derived from ideas of sensation, Descartes responds that the figures available to the senses could not provide us with the concepts of geometrical objects since they fail to exhibit essential properties of these objects (in this case, perfectly straight lines). The "true triangle," he says, "is contained in the figure only in the way in which a statue of Mercury is contained in a rough block of wood." He then proceeds to explain, using the example of a face drawn on paper, what actually occurs in childhood when we *seem* to form a concept of a triangle through sense experience of triangle-like shapes:

[S]ince the idea of the true triangle [veri trianguli] was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper, when we saw the composite figure we did not apprehend the figure we saw, but rather the true triangle. It is just the same as when we look at a piece of paper on which some lines have

been drawn in ink to represent a man's face: the idea that this produces in us is not so much the idea of these lines as the idea of a man. Yet this would certainly not happen unless the human face were already known to us from some other source, and we were more accustomed to think of the face than the lines drawn in ink; indeed, we are often unable to distinguish the lines from one another when they are moved a short distance away from us. Thus we could not recognize the geometrical triangle from the diagram on the paper unless our mind already possessed the idea of it from some other source. (CSMII 262)

Descartes later discusses this passage with Burman who argues that we derive the notion of a perfect triangle from our idea of an imperfect one obtained through experience. Notice that "true" in "true triangle" is here treated as equivalent to "perfect," and that Descartes' argument for the priority of our concept of a "perfect triangle" mirrors his CPP arguments regarding the idea of God insofar as it explains the priority in terms of (partial) negation:

Burman: But it is from the imperfect triangle that you frame in your mind the perfect triangle.

Descartes: But why then does the imperfect triangle provide me with the idea of a perfect triangle rather than an idea of itself?

Burman: It provides you with both: firstly itself, and then, from that, the perfect triangle. For you deduce the perfect triangle from the imperfect.

Descartes: That cannot be. I could not conceive of an imperfect triangle unless there were in me the idea of a perfect one, since the former is the negation of the latter. Thus, when I see a triangle, I have a conception of a perfect triangle, and it is by

comparison with this that I subsequently realize that what I am seeing is imperfect.²⁷

The notion of a perfect triangle is here equivalent to the notion of a "true" one because the perfection at issue is the presence of those features (e.g., straightness of lines) that must be included within the concept for it to be a concept of a triangle. Triangularity is not a feature that admits of degrees—a figure either exhibits it or it doesn't. An imperfect triangle is therefore a false one, i.e., not really a triangle at all. We may judge that an apple is imperfect because it is mushy and bland and thus falls short of the crispness and sweetness that we, at least implicitly, take to constitute apple perfection, but there is no sense in which the poor specimen thereby fails to be an *apple*. If we were to modify Cottingham's example to fit the correct sense of perfection within CPP, an imperfect apple would be something along the lines of a wax replica of an apple, while a perfect one would just be an apple.

B. Resolving an Ambiguity in CPP

Aside from its demonstrating that the sense of "perfect" in CPP is equivalent to that of "true,"

²⁷ Cottingham 1976, 26.

Descartes' account of the process by which we come to form the notion of a triangle is also important because it helps us to address an ambiguity in the account thus far. Applied to this example, the correlative concept critique is that the predicate "perfect" in the phrase "perfect triangle" is intelligible to me only if the predicate "imperfect" is too. I cannot judge that a given shape is a perfect triangle without also possessing a concept of triangle imperfection. Despite appearances to the contrary, CPP is entirely consistent with this observation, for the argument does not hold that the predicate "perfect" in "perfect triangle" could be intelligible without its correlate being intelligible too. When Descartes argues that "I could not conceive of an imperfect triangle unless there were in me the idea of a perfect one," what he means by "the idea of a perfect one" is just the idea of a triangle as such. If I possess the concept of a triangle and yet never conceive of it as a standard against which to measure imperfect (false) triangles, the predicate "perfect" or "true" isn't going to have significance for me in this sense (as far as triangles go). Yet since the perfection in question is definitive of a triangle as such, there is a sense in which I could be said to possess a concept of a perfect triangle *simply by virtue of possessing the concept of a triangle*; I do not

have to be aware of its perfection relative to non-triangles. This feature distinguishes the idea of a perfect triangle from the idea of a perfect apple in Cottingham's example—I could not, in this sense, be said to possess the concept of a perfect apple *merely by virtue of* possessing the concept of an apple, so long as the perfection in question (e.g., an ideal level of sweetness and crispness) is not definitive of an apple as such.

The concept of an imperfect triangle within CPP is, however, intrinsically comparative. Thus when Descartes claims that, without the idea of a triangle, "I could not conceive of an imperfect triangle" he is not claiming that, unless he had the concept of a perfect triangle, he could not conceive of a figure that happens to *be* an imperfect one. There is a sense in which I could be said to conceive of an imperfect triangle *merely by* conceiving of, for example, a drawing of a triangle on a chalkboard, or a three-sided figure the angles of which add up to 181 degrees, for both of these things happen to *be* imperfect triangles. Descartes, however, does not hold that my being able to conceive of things that are imperfect triangles is contingent upon my possessing the concept of a perfect one. What does require a comparison and hence a concept of a perfect triangle is the apprehension of this figure as, or

the *judgment that it is*, an imperfect triangle. In order to judge that a given figure is an imperfect *triangle*, I must already possess the concept of a triangle as such. And if I did not apprehend this triangle as *imperfect*, there would be nothing to distinguish my conception from that of which is in fact a perfect triangle.

Descartes' example of the drawing of a face illustrates this distinction. Were I not already familiar with what is in fact a real face, I could not be said to conceive of the drawing as an image of a *face*, for if the object of my thought is to be something more than a mere assembly of lines on paper, I must relate what I see to an actual face. But, of course, I don't need to recall the image of a face to be said to conceive of what is in fact a real face, for I can conceive of one of those simply by conceiving of a face. And if I, upon seeing the drawing, conceive of a face without noticing that the thing before me is, strictly speaking, only the *image* of a face (and hence imperfect), the object of my thought is a real face, not the image of one. So when Descartes concludes that "I could not conceive of an imperfect triangle unless there were in me the idea of a perfect one," what he means by "the idea of a perfect one" is just the idea of a triangle—not the apprehension of this triangle as perfect, which

indeed presupposes a comparison to imperfect ones. On the other hand, the phrase "conceive of an imperfect triangle" should be read as "conceive of a triangle as, or judge a triangle to be, imperfect" and hence presupposing a comparison to the standard (perfect) triangle. For Descartes, the idea of the imperfect within CPP is intrinsically comparative; the idea of the perfect is not.

An example Cottingham cites from the philosophy of language can help us to further disambiguate the roles of the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect" within CPP. In his critique of CPP, he notes that the presupposition criterion for distinguishing positive from negative predicates is similar to J.L. Austin's observation that the affirmative usage of a term is typically a "trouser word," i.e., a term that needs to be understood if its opposite is to be intelligible.²⁸ In fact, Austin's analysis of the presupposition relation of the terms "real" and "fake" can be used to illustrate the true presupposition relation within CPP. Austin observes that, when it comes to these terms, it is actually the "negative use that wears the trousers," since the assertion that something is real has significance only in comparison with ways in which it might

²⁸ Cottingham 1976, 72.

be fake.²⁹ "'A real duck'," says Austin, "differs from the simple 'a duck' only in that it is used to exclude various ways of being not a real duck."³⁰ Thus the term "real" and "fake" belong to the family of what Austin calls "adjuster words," words that allow us to describe ambiguous or borderline cases by shifting the meaning of the terms they modify.³¹ If we discover an animal that looks and behaves somewhat like a duck, instead of inventing a new term for this animal we might simply say that it is like a duck, but it isn't a real one.

We can grant Austin and critics of CPP that the affirmative usage of "perfect/real" can be understood only if we can grasp ways in which a given thing can be "imperfect/fake." This is quite in line with our previous observation that we can be said to conceive of a triangle as perfect only if we can conceive of imperfect instances. Yet this is not the presupposition relation identified by CPP. Rather, the claim is that in order to conceive of various ways of being a fake duck, we must already possess the concept of a *duck*. According to CPP, therefore, it is the notion of a duck that "wears the trousers," for the terms "real" and "fake" as applied to ducks have

²⁹ Austin 1962, 70.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 73.

significance only insofar as the term "duck" does. As Coval and Forrest have argued in an article criticizing Austin's account on just this point, the term "real" is not an adjuster word so much as a "re-adjuster word" since it not only excludes particular ways of being not-real but adjusts the meaning of the term it modifies *back* to the standard, "for if it merely excludes then it ambiguously leaves open the matter of whether or not other ways obtain under which it might still be not a real *x*, i.e. whether it might still be a temptingly aberrant rather than a re-adjusted *x*, a real *x*."³² Even though it is true that the term "perfect" in the phrase "a perfect triangle" has significance for us only in comparison with an imperfect one, the concept of "an imperfect triangle" has significance only by reference to the standard it adjusts (a triangle), and it is this original notion of the *standard* that constitutes the idea of the perfect in CPP.

Descartes' argument is thus fully consistent with Kenny's claim that "the ability use a predicate is not prior to, but identical with, the ability to use its negation." The predicate "infinite" in "infinite being" can have significance for us only in light of the notion of finite being (which is the apprehension of being as

³² Coval 1967, 82.

finite). But Descartes' actual claim is not that it is the apprehension of being as infinite or perfect that is the prior notion, but merely the idea of being itself. Yet we cannot be said to possess a notion of finite being without the notion of being as such, for the notion of finite being in CPP is the apprehension of being as finite. Though he was aware that the term "infinite" could lead to such a misunderstanding, Descartes explained that he retained it since "usage demanded that I use the negation of a negation. It was as if, to refer to the largest thing, I had said it was not small, or had no smallness in it. But by this I did not mean that the positive nature of the infinite was known through a negation, and so I did not contradict myself" (CSMK 192). The term "infinite" is a "negation of a negation" because it is a re-adjuster word, modifying (i.e., negating) the original negation, the adjuster word, "finite." Yet it does not follow that the standard presupposed by the original negation ("finite") does not express "the positive nature of the infinite," for the positive nature of the infinite is being itself.

C. The Standard of Perfection

It is clear that in order to apprehend a figure as an imperfect triangle we must already possess the idea of a triangle as such. Similarly, in order to apprehend a creature as a finite or imperfect being, we must already possess a concept of being as such. Yet there are two further features of the triangle example that may not apply to the case of infinite and finite being. First, the standard of perfection appears to be arbitrary. If we possess the concept of a figure that happens to be an imperfect triangle, it seems we could employ this concept as the standard and apprehend a figure that happens to be a perfect triangle as an imperfect instance of this non-triangular figure. Second, employing a standard of perfection here appears to be unnecessary. Even if we lacked the idea of a triangle as such, we could still conceive of a figure *that happens to be* an imperfect triangle—we would merely be unable to apprehend it as an imperfect triangle.³³

The Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth raises these concerns in his own, more extensive analysis of the process by which we apprehend the imperfection of corporeal

³³ Or we would be unable to conceive of it (mistakenly) as a perfect triangle.

shapes.³⁴ Clearly basing his discussion on the selections from Descartes noted above, Cudworth also uses the analogy of a portrait to explain the relationship between the sensation of an imperfect triangle and the innate idea of a (perfect) triangle. Noting how the idea of a perfect triangle was only "occasionally or accidentally invited and drawn forth from the mind" by the sensation of an imperfect one, he argues that a similar process occurs when a drawing of a face leads us to think of a man, or when a portrait in a gallery prompts the idea of a friend.³⁵ If one did not possess a prior idea of a man or this friend, one "could think of nothing but just that was impressed upon him by sense, the figures of those inky delineations, and those several strokes and shadows of the pictures." But what makes the idea of a man, or a triangle, the standard according to which we measure the imperfection of other things? After all, says Cudworth, "an irregular line and an imperfect triangle, pyramid, cube, are as perfectly that that they are [sic], as the other [perfect thing] is."³⁶

Descartes believes the idea of a "true" triangle is the standard because the "idea of the true triangle was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more

³⁴ 1996, 105-121.

³⁵ 1996, 106.

³⁶ Ibid., 108.

easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper." Since innate concepts are both the earliest (as present from birth) and the simplest in terms of their intelligibility, they are naturally the standards according to which we judge other ideas. In the *Rules*, for example, Descartes characterizes those ideas he would later deem innate as "pure and simple nature[s]" (CSMI 22) that we can grasp through "intuition," i.e., a "conception of a clear and attentive mind, which is so easy and distinct that there can be no room for doubt about what we are understanding" (CSMI 14). Cudworth seems to explain the priority in terms of these criteria as well. He claims that "the mind naturally delights more to think of simple and regular, than of compounded and irregular figures."³⁷

Further, he argues that

If there were no inward anticipations or mental ideas, the spectator would not judge at all, but only suffer, and every irregular and imperfect triangle being as perfectly like to that, which is the most perfect triangle, the mind now having no inward pattern of its own before it, to distinguish and put a difference, would not say one of them was more imperfect than another; but only comparing them one with another, [the mind] would say that this individual figure would be as imperfectly the imperfect triangle as the imperfect was the perfect.³⁸

³⁷ Ibid., 107.

³⁸ Ibid., 109.

Thus for both Descartes and Cudworth, there is nothing in principle preventing us from treating the figure of what is in fact an imperfect triangle as the standard. It is only a *psychological* fact about us—our prior awareness of the true triangle and the ease with which we grasp it in comparison to the imperfect one—that leads us to treat the true triangle as the “rule, pattern, and exemplar” for our judgment.³⁹ Descartes’ claim, in his conversation with Burman, that “I could not conceive of an imperfect triangle unless there were in me the idea of a perfect one, since the former is the negation of the latter” need not therefore be read as excluding the possibility that we could conceive of the drawn figure of a triangle in some other way or as possessing features a perfect triangle lacks. Rather, the significance of the claim that an imperfect triangle is a “negation” of a perfect one is simply that we cannot conceive of the thing before us as an imperfect triangle except by comparing it to a triangle as such. To conceive of an imperfect triangle in CPP is to think of something exclusively in terms of the “real and positive” feature of triangularity that it lacks.

Does the same analysis follow for being? Descartes does believe that the idea of God is innate and supremely

³⁹ Ibid., 109.

intelligible. In the *Meditations*, the narrator asserts that the idea of God is "the first and most important" of "the true ideas which are innate in me" (CSMII 46) and that the content of this idea (or a perfect being) is "self-evident" (CSMII 47). Nevertheless, just as we may, somewhat perversely but nevertheless coherently, apprehend a real man as imperfect in comparison to an image of him (e.g., his lacking various features present in the image), so one might argue that we could, in principle, treat creaturely being as the standard according to which divine being is apprehended as imperfect. However, Descartes believes we *cannot* apprehend God as falling short of his creation since there is nothing "real and positive" found in creation that is absent in God. Note, for example, the following passage in his 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes:

It is quite true that we do not understand the infinite by the negation of limitation; and one cannot infer that, because limitation involves the negation of infinity, the negation of limitation involves knowledge of the infinite. What makes the infinite different from the finite is something real and positive; but the limitation which makes the finite different from the infinite is non-being or the negation of being. That which is not cannot bring us to the knowledge of that which is; on the contrary, *the negation of a thing has to be perceived on the basis of knowledge of the thing itself.* (CSMK 192) (emphasis mine)

In the triangle example, what distinguishes the drawn figure from a perfect triangle could be attributed to features of the drawn figure that the triangle lacks. For example, the drawn figure could be said to possess a line with a certain curvature absent in a true triangle. It seems we could thus conceive of that which is a perfect triangle in terms of its lacking features of the drawn figure. Yet while each of these figures can be apprehended as imperfect instances of the other because their differences are attributable to the fact that each possesses features that the other lacks, Descartes believes that every perfection or reality found in creation must exist in God. Creatures do not have anything "real and positive" that God does not. "The idea of the infinite," says Descartes, "which includes all being, includes all that there is of truth in things" (CSMK 377). Since we cannot conceive of God's being in terms of positive features he lacks, we cannot measure him according to the standard of creation.

Yet even if we cannot apprehend divine being as imperfect in comparison to creaturely being, must we conceive of creaturely being in light of a standard of divine being? Just as we can grasp a given image as a collection of "inky delineations" and "strokes and shadows"

and hence without comparing it to (or having any idea of) its model, or conceive of a figure that is an imperfect triangle without comparing it to the standard of a true triangle, can't we conceive of that which *is* finite being without conceiving it as finite being, i.e., without comparing it to God? In his own attempt to explain the "paradoxical" notion of priority in CPP, John Carriero suggests that the passages arguing for the priority of the perfect "are best read as claims about how we, beings endowed with an idea of God, conceive things that are finite."⁴⁰ Other beings that happen to lack an idea of God, he explains, would still be able to conceive of finite things, but they would not be aware that they are limited (qua beings).

Like Carriero, I am inclined to believe that Descartes thinks we could conceive of creatures even if we lacked an idea of God.⁴¹ Again, when Descartes asserts in the above passage that "the negation of a thing has to be perceived on the basis of knowledge of the thing itself," he should be interpreted as making the relatively uncontroversial

⁴⁰ 2009, 191.

⁴¹ That possessing a concept of God is not a necessary condition for possessing other concepts appears to be confirmed by the narrator's suggestion that "I have the idea of substance in me in virtue of the fact that I am a substance" (CSM 31). Of course, the narrator does not thereby possess an idea of *true* substance, but merely an idea of that which is finite substance.

claim, consistent with the triangle example, that apprehending A as a negation of B presupposes a notion of B. Just as I could conceive of a figure that happens to be an imperfect triangle without comparing it to a true or perfect triangle, so I could conceive of creatures (that happen to be finite beings) without comparing them to infinite being (God). Here it is important to see how the kind of *partial* negation involved in the case of finite and infinite being (or imperfect and perfect triangularity) differs from the *complete* sort of negation involved in examples such as darkness and light or being and nothingness. Since darkness is not imperfect light, but its complete absence, we cannot conceive of it except in terms of the absence of the positive reality in question (light). Yet creatures are not nothing—they have some reality of their own. Just as the idea of an imperfect triangle is more than the apprehension of the mere absence of triangularity, but the idea of something that is *like* a triangle though falling short of it, so the idea of creaturely being is more than the apprehension of the absence of being: it is the idea of that which is not being but *like* it, i.e., finite or imperfect being.

Yet the painting and triangle examples are, in a significant respect, dissimilar to the case of creatures

and God. If we lacked the idea of a (perfect) triangle we could still conceive of things that happen to be imperfect triangles by bringing them under some *other* concept of a positive property they satisfy *fully* (e.g. closed figure). Similarly, a painting of a man falls short of being a man, yet we would nevertheless say that it is a perfect—that is real or true—arrangement of shapes, piece of canvas etc. There are countless ways in which we might say that the painting fully satisfies the criteria definitive of a given positive property. Indeed, it is only because the model lacks positive features possessed by the painting that we can (somewhat perversely) use the painting as the standard and consequently apprehend the model as an imperfect instance of the painting. Even if we lack knowledge of the painting's model and so cannot apprehend it with respect to this standard, we can nevertheless grasp other real and true aspects of it. But Descartes believes that every creaturely property is either an imitation of a property that exists formally (i.e., literally) in God or an even more remote version of one that exists eminently (in some higher way) in him.⁴² So while it seems that we could still

⁴² In the Second Replies, Descartes asserts that "Whatever exists in the objects of our ideas in a way which exactly corresponds to our perception of it is said to exist *formally* in those objects. Something is said to exist *eminently* in an object when, although it does not exactly correspond to our perception of it, its greatness is such that

conceive of creatures without a concept of God, we would be unaware of the fact that these properties are, at best, only imitations of the real thing.

IV. Cartesian CPP and Platonism

Adams has argued that the priority of the perfect is "a main theme of the Platonic tradition."⁴³ Menn agrees, asserting that the Cartesian doctrine is actually "the crucial presupposition of Plotinus' and Augustine's arguments for God, and is originally the teaching of the *Phaedo*, arguing that the perfection of the approximately equal depends on a recollection of the equal-itself."⁴⁴ Our analysis of CPP provides further support for these claims, for both (A) the identification of "perfect" with "real" and (B) the claim that an explicit awareness of imperfection is necessary for distinguishing thought of the imperfect from that of the standard, are features that interpreters have found within Plato's metaphysics and theory of recollection as well.

it can fill the role of that which does so correspond" (CSMII 114). With respect to God, he says, we recognize that some of [the indefinite attributes of which we have some idea] (such as knowledge and power) are contained formally in the idea of God, whereas others (such as number and length) are contained in the idea merely eminently" (Ibid.)

⁴³ 2008, 91.

⁴⁴ 1998, 283.

A recurring theme within the Platonic tradition is an identification of perfection and reality. In his own analysis of the relationship between particulars and Forms in Platonic metaphysics, Richard Patterson has drawn out the consequences of such an identification. Patterson argues that the resemblance relation between Forms and particulars ought to be understood as analogous to that obtaining between models and their images. According to this reading, the imperfection of particulars in comparison with Forms is like the imperfection of images with respect to their models. Though using an image-model analogy to understand Plato's theory of Forms is not novel, Patterson's interpretation is especially relevant insofar as he emphasizes that this analogy underscores a *negative* relation between the perfect and the imperfect: the imperfect, insofar as it is imperfect, is not of the same nature as the perfect. As Patterson argues,

Plato's stock examples of images—paintings, statues, drawings, reflections in mirrors or water, dream images, songs, images in poetry or prose—are *in no case related to their models as copies to standards or as qualified to unqualified exemplars. In these cases the image F is not 'another real F such as its model', nor does it resemble its model with respect to being F: the reflection of Cratylus in the mirror or on water is not another Cratylus; the black-figure warrior on a vase is not another, only qualified or*

imperfect, warrior; the marble Hermes is not itself a god.⁴⁵

Just as an image of a horse is not a horse, so Patterson argues that a particular horse is not really a horse in the sense that the abstract nature of horse (the Form) is. A given form F is *perfectly* F in the sense that it is *really* F.⁴⁶

Descartes uses a similar image-model analogy to describe the relationship between the perfect and the imperfect in CPP.⁴⁷ The imperfect triangle resembles a 'true' one in the sense a shape carved within "a rough block of wood" resembles the statue of Mercury, or the way a portrait of a face resembles that of a "real" man.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁵ 1985, 20.

⁴⁶ Patterson also uses Austin's account of 'real' to illustrate his interpretation: "The use of 'real F' as applied to a model or paradeigma of this sort is what J.L. Austin called the 'ellipsis excluding' use of 'real,' while 'image' or 'imitation', as contrasted with 'model' or 'original' is akin to our usage in 'imitation diamond' or 'imitation leather.' To call the former 'ellipsis excluding' is to observe only that the statement 'this is a diamond' will in certain contexts be elliptical for 'this is an imitation, but not a real, diamond.' A portrait labeled 'Napoleon' is not a real Napoleon, but only -if we fill in the ellipsis -a portrait of Napoleon. On the other hand when we say this is a real (true, genuine) diamond we mean to exclude any such addition: This is no mere imitation, no piece of cut glass that only sparkles like a diamond, but the genuine article[...]" (1985, 21).

⁴⁷ Adams observes that "Of the relations suggested by Plato as obtaining between ordinary particulars and the Forms, the one most used in structuring philosophical theologies has been that of an imitation or imperfect copy to an archetype or exemplar; and something like that is envisaged in Descartes' top-down approach" 2007, 99.

⁴⁸ Why does Descartes here use the analogy of an image of an image—a wooden representation of a statue of Mercury? Perhaps he is here observing a distinction between a perfect instantiation of a triangle and the abstract geometrical nature of the triangle itself—which, depending on your interpretation of Cartesian essences, may itself be

same analogy is explicitly applied to the relationship between creatures and God. At the end of the Third Meditation, for example, the narrator claims that "the mere fact God created me is a very strong basis for believing that I am somehow made in his image and likeness [...]." Later, the narrator notes that it is primarily in virtue of his will that he appears to "bear in some way the image and likeness of God" (CSMII 35). In fact, Descartes even uses the image-model analogy to highlight the sense in which creatures fall short of God. In the *Fifth Objection*, Gassendi argues that while the notion that we "are made in the image and likeness of God" is a principle of Christian faith, he wonders "how may it be understood by natural reason, unless you are putting forward an anthropomorphic picture of God?" (CSMII 213). In response, Descartes argues that it would be absurd to "deny that we are made in the image of God" merely out of fear that this would "make God like a man." This objection, he says, is like

identical with the innate idea of a triangle. Descartes indicates that the imperfection of the drawn triangle is its lacking features definitive of triangularity (straightness of lines) not its being a material instantiation of what is really an abstract object. Thus a perfect instance of a triangle captures the essence of the abstract entity in the way that a perfect statue of Mercury captures the nature of the mythical being. Notice that this same ambiguity attends Plato's account of the imperfection of particulars: are they imperfect simply because they are material instantiations rather than abstract objects, or are they imperfect because, as material instantiations, they fail (and necessarily so?) to exhibit qualitatively identical features?

trying to deny that one of Apelles' pictures was made in the likeness of Alexander on the grounds that this would mean that Alexander was like a picture, and yet pictures are made of wood and paint, and not of flesh and bone like Alexander [...] It is not in the nature of an image to be identical in all respects with the thing of which it is an image, but merely to imitate it in some respects. (CSMII 256-7)

Notice that in denying that images must be "identical in all respects" with their models, Descartes is not committing himself to the view that images must then be qualitatively identical in *some* respects with their models. Rather, an image must merely "*imitate* [imitetur] it in some respects." This passage is best read as supplying a sufficient rather than a necessary condition for a thing's being an image—namely, if something is qualitatively distinct in every way from something else, it could nevertheless be an image of that thing so long as it imitates it in *some* respect.⁴⁹ Since a thing can be an image of another thing without being qualitatively identical with the latter *in any respect whatsoever*, treating creatures as images of God does not presuppose any form of qualitative

⁴⁹ So this still allows us to say that one thing could be an image of another by virtue of being qualitatively identical in some respects. Does this mean that the imitation relation is not a necessary condition for being an image? I don't think so, for it seems that we would want to say that the former, considered as a whole and not with respect to its individual qualities, still imitates the latter. The thing taken as a whole is an imitation, though some of its attributes are copies rather than imitations of some of the model's attributes. Of course, creatures cannot imitate God by being qualitatively identical with him in any respect, and consequently they can be considered images only insofar as they *imitate* (some of) God's attributes.

identity and hence does not lead to anthropomorphism. The negative aspect, i.e., the feature that makes something merely an *image* rather than a *reproduction* of a model, can be secured by the imitation relation alone; an image could imitate its model in every respect and still be merely an image, so long as the relation is only one of imitation.

As we shall see in the next chapter, Descartes holds that creatures are like God in only *some* respects, for God has many (perhaps infinitely many) attributes that creatures fail to imitate in any way. The above passage indicates, however, that Descartes considered creatures to be images of God not because they share qualities with him in a *limited* number of ways, but because they, in a limited number of ways, *imitate* him.⁵⁰ Descartes' use of the image-model analogy thus underscores the negative relation implied in CPP—i.e., the claim that an imperfect thing is imperfect insofar as it fails to be the same kind as the perfect. As an imitation apple is not an apple, nor imitation wood real wood, so the respects in which a given image “imitates” its model are respects in which an image is qualitatively *distinct* from its model. In this sense,

⁵⁰ Perhaps, however, Descartes would hold that if creatures imitated God in every way then they actually would possess a secondary-property in common with God—that of the extensive infinitude of attributes.

the image-model analogy has for Descartes the negative significance of the image-model analogy used by Plato.

The image analogy is put under some strain within the tradition of Theistic Platonism, however, as philosophers and theologians sought to explain how the goodness or reality of creation could be conceived as not representing an addition to, or improvement upon, the goodness and reality of God. Particularly, the image-model analogy could lead one to the mistaken view that creatures differ from God in terms of their possessing something God lacks. In the example above, Descartes had suggested that the imperfection of a painting consisted, in part, of its having features (e.g. paint and wood) that are absent in its model. Yet creatures cannot be said to differ from God by virtue of having something God lacks, for Descartes is committed to the view that whatever reality exists in creatures exists formally or eminently (i.e. in some higher way) in God. Indeed, David Schindler has argued that since Plato normally invokes participation to explain the positive relation between participants and Forms, there has been some pressure within Theistic Platonism to find a principle explaining the *difference* between creatures and

God.⁵¹ Yet he argues that positing such a principle leads to a dilemma of assuming either "a Gnostic ultimacy of two principles, which is ultimately irrational, or to affirm difference as an 'unjustifiable' fall from unity."⁵² In the Fourth Meditation, the narrator appears to grasp the second horn of Schindler's dilemma, ascribing his imperfection to "participation in nothingness," which he says is equivalent to his simply lacking features of God:

I realize that I am, as it were, something intermediate between God and nothingness, or between supreme being and non-being: my nature is such that in so far as I was created by the supreme being, there is nothing in me to enable me to go wrong or lead my astray; but in so far as I participate in nothingness or non-being, that is, in so far as I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects, it is no wonder that I make mistakes. (CSMII 38)

This passage suggests that the failure of creatures to be qualitatively identical in any respect with God is to be explained entirely in terms of their *lacking* features of the "supreme being." They differ from God either in terms of failing to possess correlates of divine perfections, by possessing qualitatively distinct imitations of divine

⁵¹ "Aquinas, following the classical philosophical tradition, affirms that 'that which is the principle of unity cannot be the principle of difference.' If this axiom is simply true, we can find a principle for the difference of the image from the form—and ultimately of the world from God—only by positing a second principle for difference" (2005, 4).

⁵² 4.

perfections, or in terms of possessing properties (such as extension) that exist in God in some higher way (eminently).⁵³

Alexander Nehamas confessed that he had always been puzzled as to why Plato would hold that a necessary condition of the recollection of likes is an explicit awareness that the object that reminds us "lacks something in respect of being similar to that which is remembered."⁵⁴ Referring to Plato's example of the portrait of Simmias, Nehamas asks "Is it really necessary for me to realize that Simmias' portrait, which reminds me of Simmias, does not match the color of his hair? Must I, in one breath, realize that I am looking at Simmias' portrait and that the portrait is inaccurate?" He concludes, however, that the awareness of imperfection is here necessary because it is the only thing distinguishing the apprehension of the imperfect from that of the perfect: "the fact that the portrait does not duplicate all the features of its model

⁵³ As we shall see in later chapters, understanding the resemblance relation between creatures and God in terms of analogy might allow us to understand why creation does not represent an addition to God's goodness or reality. Since the creaturely analogates of goodness and reality are qualitatively distinct from God's goodness and reality, they are incommensurable. In his analysis of Aquinas, Gilson similarly sees analogy as providing a solution to this problem (as well as to the problem of pantheism): "A mere *analogue* of the divine being, the created being can neither constitute an integral part of the divine being, nor be added to it nor subtracted from it. Between two magnitudes of different orders there is no common measure" (2002, 133-4).

⁵⁴ 1975, 112.

must be clear to the spectator if he is to be aware that he is looking not at the model itself, but at a different thing, its portrait or copy, which resembles the model in certain relevant respects!"⁵⁵

As we have seen, an awareness of imperfection plays a similar role in Descartes' account. Since our ideas of the divine perfections are innate and supremely intelligible, we are initially inclined to apprehend creaturely imitations of these properties as instances of the real thing. That the creaturely properties are merely imitations can be evident to us only if we grasp their dissimilarity to the divine properties. As Descartes puts it in the *Principles*, "We pass from knowledge of God to knowledge of his creatures by remembering that he is infinite and we are finite" (CSMI 201). If we are to apprehend a drawing of a face as an image of a *face* rather than a mere collection of lines, we must grasp its likeness to a real face; but if we apprehend this similarity without recognizing its dissimilarity, then this image will be indistinguishable to us from the real thing. Likewise, if we are to apprehend creaturely being and goodness as imitations of true being and goodness, we must grasp their similarity to these properties; but if we do not recognize that the creaturely

⁵⁵ 1975, 113.

properties are imperfect, their likeness to the divine properties will lead us to mistakenly treat them as instances of genuine being and goodness.

V. Why Must the Narrator Compare himself to God?

Appreciating that "perfect" or "infinite" has the significance of "true" or "real" in CPP also allows us at this point to address a common criticism of the *Third Meditation* version of the argument. There, as you may recall, the narrator had argued that his idea of the infinite must be prior to the finite, for otherwise "how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?" (CSMII 31). Granting the narrator the uncontroversial point that he can't judge himself to be imperfect without possessing some corresponding notion of perfection, critics have nevertheless questioned his implicit assumption here that the perfection in question must be *absolute* perfection (i.e. God's). Broughton, for example, asks "Why must he be thinking, even implicitly, that he is not God-like?"⁵⁶ All

⁵⁶ 2002, 149.

he needs in order to think of himself as imperfect, so the argument goes, is an idea of something a little more perfect than he is—an idea of a person who knows a bit more than he does, for example. He can remain uncertain as to whether this thing itself is “wholly perfect,” for all that he needs in order to understand that *he* is not “wholly perfect” is the awareness that *something* is “more perfect” than he is.⁵⁷

Yet this criticism fails to recognize that the argument from doubt expresses the narrator’s sense that he is imperfect as a *thing*. Indeed, at this point in the *Meditation*, the narrator knows only that he is a thinking thing and it is *qua thing* that he judges himself to fall short. After all, the line immediately preceding the argument from doubt asserts that it is the narrator’s idea of God understood as an infinite *substance* (or “thing”) that is prior to the idea he has of himself understood as a finite *substance* (“thing”).⁵⁸ That it is as a *thing* that the

⁵⁷ This is not, in fact, a new criticism—Gassendi raises this very critique in the Fifth Set of Objections: “you might have known a man who was healthier, stronger, better looking, more learned, more restrained and hence more perfect than you; if so, it would not have been difficult for you to conceive an idea of this man and, by comparing yourself with it, to come to understand that you did not have the same degree of health, strength and the other perfections that were to be found in him.” (CSMII 208)

⁵⁸ And as Bernard Williams observes, if Descartes is here claiming to be himself imperfect as a man rather than as a being, then “he has no proof that he is imperfect—for perhaps a perfect man is one whose experiences include doubt and sorrow” (1978, 147).

narrator judges himself to be imperfect is crucial for understanding the sense of perfection that is here being employed, for throughout his works Descartes often uses "perfection" as a synonym for "reality."⁵⁹ Derived from the Latin term *res* or "thing," *realitas* or "reality" can be glossed as "thinghood" or "thingness."⁶⁰ When Descartes compares items according to their perfection understood as thinghood or reality, he usually does so in terms of a three-tiered ontological hierarchy: "There are various degrees of reality or being: a substance has more reality than an accident or a mode; an infinite substance has more reality than a finite substance" (CSMII 117). Kenny thus concludes that, taken in this way, Descartes' ontological hierarchy "does not admit of degrees."⁶¹ When Descartes talks about one thing being more perfect qua *thing* than another, he is making a comparison across these ontological

⁵⁹ In his argument for the causal principle in the Third Meditation, for example, he equates "more perfect" with "contains in itself more reality" (CSMII 28). Carol Rovane observes that, in addition to "the 'degrees of reality' conception associated with the Principle: what is more perfect is literally more real" there are at least three other senses of perfection at work in Descartes. 1) A thing can have "perfections in the plural" in the sense that "one thing can possess various perfections." Here "perfection" is more or less synonymous with attribute or property; 2) there is also "the more familiar notion of attributive perfection: with respect to a given property, one thing may be perfect or imperfect"; finally, 3) "the notion of absolute perfection associated with the idea of God" (1994, 95). See also Kenny 1968, 134-5 and Wee 2006, 98-9.

⁶⁰ Adams 103

⁶¹ 1968, 134.

categories, not within them.⁶² Thus the idea of another finite thinking thing, even one vastly more intelligent and powerful than he, could therefore never explain the narrator's awareness of his imperfection qua *thing*, for *the narrator is no less a thing than any other finite thinking thing to which he can compare himself*. Similarly, the idea of a sweet and crisp apple could never enable me to apprehend a bland and mushy apple as imperfect in the sense of *failing to be an apple*, for one is neither more nor less an apple than the other. Since no finite substance is more of a thing than he is, the narrator's apprehension of his own imperfection qua thing can be explained only by his possessing an idea of that which has "more reality" than finite substance, and the only thing that has "more reality" than finite substance is infinite substance (i.e., God).

⁶² The story is more complicated than this, however. Though the three-part ontological hierarchy suggests that all finite substances have an equivalent amount of formal reality, Descartes suggests in the Sixth Meditation that finite thinking substances are more "noble" than finite extended substance insofar as minds, unlike bodies, are indivisible—a claim that some have linked to the narrator's suggestion in the Third Meditation that his mind might contain modes of extended substance eminently. That finite extended things might fall below finite thinking things in the hierarchy is, however, irrelevant with respect to the argument from doubt in the Third Meditation since the same conditions for the narrator's grasping his imperfection (his possessing an idea of that which is more perfect qua thing than he is) would hold. For a detailed description of this complication of the three-part hierarchy, see Schmaltz 2008, 52-56, 67-71). My position is also consistent with the suggestion that when Descartes talks about necessary features of the (formal) causes of objective reality (of ideas), he may be invoking a more detailed ontological hierarchy.

One might object, however, that it makes no difference whether the argument from doubt assumes that all finite substances are equally perfect (or equally imperfect) qua things, for the notion of degrees of "reality or being" ("thinghood") itself makes no sense. Edwin Curley remarks that "we do not naturally think of either being or perfection as admitting of degrees."⁶³ Indeed, the notion of degrees of reality struck Hobbes as nonsensical as well: "Does reality admit of or more and less? Or does he think one thing can be more of a thing than another?" (CSMII 130).⁶⁴ If one thing is no more a thing than any other, then it is hard to see how the idea of anything, even a divine thing, could give Descartes a sense of his own imperfection qua thing.

In fact, his account is consistent with the commonsense intuition Curley and Hobbes express. That Descartes describes being or reality as something that

⁶³ 1978, 129.

⁶⁴ Descartes' response to Hobbes provides further evidence for Kenny's claim that, for Descartes, "reality does not admit of degrees." Instead of explaining degrees of reality by citing gradations of perfection within the categories of creatures (finite being), which would be to understand "perfection" in its most common sense, Descartes once again explains the distinction of degree in terms of a distinction in kind: "I have [...] made it quite clear how reality admits of more and less. A substance is more of a thing than a mode; if there are real qualities or incomplete substances, they are things to a greater extent than modes, but to a lesser extent than complete substances; and finally, if there is an infinite and independent substance, it is more of a thing than a finite and dependent substance" (CSMII 130). His account here is somewhat more complex since includes a distinction between complete and incomplete substances.

comes in "degrees" or increments of "more and less" is misleading, for it suggests that "being" "real" or "thing" is here used univocally.⁶⁵ So as we might say that two apples are both sweet even though one is sweeter, Descartes' language seems to allow us to say that even though God's being is greater than our own, we are nevertheless both beings in the fullest sense of the term. Yet as we have noted earlier, the term "being" cannot be univocal since God alone is true being. Descartes' explicit assertion in the *Principles* that "substance" is not a univocal term is indeed a consequence of his position that "infinity" signifies "the very essence of substance." There he states that "the term 'substance' does not apply univocally, as they say in the Schools, to God and to other things; that is, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures" (CSMI 51).

That "substance" or "being" as applied to creatures and God are not used univocally is indeed required by CPP. A "perfect" *thing* is perfect, according to CPP, in the sense that it is a "true" or "real" thing, and an

⁶⁵ As I will describe in Ch. 3, Aquinas sometimes uses comparisons of "more" and "less" in cases where univocal predication is not possible. We can reconcile Descartes' denial of univocity with his use of "more" and "less" by interpreting these comparisons as analogical in the sense indicated by Aquinas. God is "more" of a thing than any creature in the sense that he alone is a genuine thing (substance).

"imperfect" thing is apprehended as imperfect qua *thing* insofar as it is seen as falling short of this standard. Understood according to this sense of perfection, a finite substance is apprehended as finite or imperfect insofar as it *fails to be a true substance or thing*, just as a wax apple is apprehended as an imitation apple because it fails to be a genuine apple. And as we wouldn't say that an imitation apple falls short of the genuine article by virtue of having a very low degree of appleness, so we ought not be misled into concluding that finite being or substance falls short by virtue of having only a very low degree of being or thinghood.

VI. The Criteria of True Substance

That substancehood, like triangularity, is something that does not admit of degrees, can be seen more clearly if we describe the criteria of true substance (or 'thinghood') according to which the narrator in the *Meditations* judges himself as falling short. In the passage from the *Principles* where Descartes denies the univocity of "substance," the explanation for this denial is a distinction in terms of ontological dependence: "there is only one substance which can be understood to depend on no

other thing whatsoever, namely God. In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence" (CSMI 51). In his own effort to understand Descartes' talk of "degrees" of being, Curley isolates the dependence criterion as providing evidence for the claim that the scale of being has only three levels (and that, consequently, any two finite substances have the same degree of being). According to this reading, "differences in degree of formal reality are a function of differences in degree of one property, the capacity for independent existence."⁶⁶ Yet Curley's suggestion that the distinction ought to be understood in terms of variations within a *shared* property—"the capacity for independent existence"—is misleading. There are degrees of dependence, and thus we might say that modes are more dependent than finite substances since the latter require only God for their continued existence whereas modes depend on finite substances too. Yet the narrator does not grasp God as possessing a very minimal degree of dependence—God is not merely the least dependent being conceivable. God is apprehended as "independent," as not exhibiting any dependence whatsoever.

⁶⁶ 1978, 129.

Though Bernard Williams notices that Descartes' dependence criterion leads him to deploy the term "substance" in a somewhat equivocal way, he doesn't think much of significance follows from this. Indeed, he thinks we can still speak of degrees of being *within* the category of substance. Though Descartes uses the term "substance" in two different ways, Williams claims that "since all he means by this is that the first sort are created, and God is not, it comes to very much the same thing."⁶⁷ Yet the dependence criterion is not the only one cited in the *Meditations*. In fact, at the time of the argument from doubt in the Third Meditation, the narrator has not yet grasped his imperfection as a dependent thing. Rather, here he judges himself to be imperfect by virtue of his *incompleteness*. The narrator tells us that his understanding that he "doubts and desires" is significant because it is an understanding that he "lacked something." The implication is that he is here comparing himself to something that is lacking nothing, something that is "wholly perfect."⁶⁸ The idea of substance as such is an idea

⁶⁷ 1978, 136.

⁶⁸ The narrator's awareness of his own incompleteness follows an apprehension of his intellectual limitations. Stephen Menn observes that God serves "not just as a standard of perfection in general, but specifically as a standard of intellectual perfection to the soul" (1998, 286). Since, at this point in the *Meditations*, the narrator's only item of knowledge is that he is a thinking thing, it is natural that the standard of perfection according to which he will judge

of something complete or "wholly perfect" in the sense that "whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in [the idea of] it" (CSMII 32). Because this completeness is definitive of substance as such, anything that is seen to lack all that is "real and true" will be apprehended as imperfect in the sense that it falls short of completeness and hence falls short of true substancehood.

That the narrator would view completeness as a criterion of true substancehood is likely a reflection of the fact that Descartes held there was only a conceptual distinction between a substance and its attributes. Attributes are not, in other words, properties that inhere in substances. A body does not, properly speaking, *have* extension—it *is* extension. More precisely, every substance is identical with its *principal* attribute, its "essence," and it is through this principal attribute that other invariable features, other attributes of the substance, are conceived.⁶⁹ As the earlier quoted passage from Descartes

himself will be an intellectual one. As he describes in his *Correspondence*, the idea of God at this point is an idea of "intellectual nature in general," an idea "if considered without limitation, represents God, and if limited, is the idea of an angel or a human soul" (CSMK 55). Indeed, it was this notion of intellectual nature in general that the narrator examined in the Second Meditation.
⁶⁹ "A substance may indeed be known through any attribute at all; but each substance has one principal property which constitutes its nature and essence, and to which all its other properties are referred. Thus extension in length, breadth and depth constitutes the nature of

suggests, the essence or principal attribute of substance is "actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections" which "*is not an accident added to the notion of substance, but the very essence of substance taken absolutely and bounded by no defects.*" To conceive of real or true (infinite) substance is to conceive of that which *is* "actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections." As we will explore further in the next chapter, Descartes held that "the essences of things are indivisible" in the sense that "an idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else" (CSMII 256). Thus to conceive of that which fails to be "actually infinite and immense, true and real perfections" is to think of some *other* essence, and is thus to conceive of something that falls short of substance as such.

We should not therefore attribute Descartes' denial of univocity to the dependence criterion alone, for the

corporeal substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. Everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is merely a mode of an extended thing; and similarly whatever we find in the mind is simply one of the various modes of thinking. For example, shape is unintelligible except in an extended thing; and motion is unintelligible except as motion in an extended space; while imagination, sensation and will are intelligible only in a thinking thing. By contrast, it is possible to understand extension without shape or movement, and thought without imagination or sensation, and so on; and this is quite clear to anyone who gives the matter his attention" (CSMI 210-11).

narrator's intuition in the *Third Meditation* is that he is imperfect qua *thing* insofar as he is "incomplete and dependent." When Descartes says that "there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term [substance] which is common to God and his creatures," we can take him at his word and thus understand him to be including the completeness criterion as well. Substance as such is complete, and anything that fails to be complete cannot be a true substance. Indeed, when the narrator summarizes the conclusion of the argument from doubt at the beginning of the *Fourth Meditation*, both criteria are noted: "[W]hen I consider the fact that I have doubts, or that I am a thing that is incomplete and dependent, then there arises in me a clear and distinct idea of a being who is independent and complete, that is, an idea of God" (CSMII 37).⁷⁰ Again, the narrator's apprehension of imperfection is not expressed in terms of seeing that God possesses the highest degree of something he possesses less of, but through noticing

⁷⁰ Descartes seems to suggest that completeness might be 'contained within' the concept of an independent thing, though it is not obvious that the assertion "an independent being is complete" is analytically true since, in the *Meditations*, he seems to portray completeness as merely something an independent being would have the power to achieve. But in his reply to Arnauld, Descartes suggests the relationship is one closer to logical entailment: "a being whose essence is so immense that he does not need an efficient cause in order to exist, equally does not need an efficient cause in order to possess all the perfections of which he is aware: his own essence is the eminent source which bestows on him whatever we can think of as being capable of being bestowed on anything by an efficient cause.[...] his essence is such that he possesses from eternity everything which we can now suppose he would bestow on himself if he did not yet possess it." (CSMII 168).

properties—completeness and independence—that he (and indeed every creature) lacks absolutely. The narrator grasps himself as imperfect insofar as he falls short of genuine substancehood, and he fails to be a true substance because he lacks the completeness and independence that are definitive of true substance.

A critic might grant the claim that the narrator's reference to completeness and independence lends support to the earlier assertion that his sense of imperfection in the argument from doubt is an awareness of falling short of substance as such. Yet completeness and independence are second-order properties, i.e., properties that supervene on more basic (first-order) ones. If the first-order properties prove to be shared, it could be argued that the qualitative break suggested by the reference to binary second-order qualities is only superficial. The narrator judges himself to be incomplete with respect to *knowledge* and dependent insofar as he lacks the *power* to preserve himself in existence.⁷¹ So even if we accept the claim that the narrator's awareness of his own imperfection in the argument from doubt is an awareness that he is not a true

⁷¹ In response to Arnauld, Descartes asserts that "the inexhaustible power of God is the cause or reason for his not needing a cause" (CSM 165). The narrator's awareness that he is incomplete arises through his being aware that he lacks knowledge and power. Menn argues, however, that at this stage of the meditation power reduces to knowledge since the power of a thinking thing consists in the ability to know.

substance, if the distinction between a "true" substance and a "false" one is merely a matter of God possessing more knowledge or power than we do, then the significance of the argument from doubt is thrown into question. This is so because the standard of substance according to which we see ourselves falling short would appear to be something we could generate by modifying ideas of our own properties. For example, one might arbitrarily designate a "real" apple as that which possesses a high degree of sweetness and crispness. One might then view a less sweet or crisp one as thus failing to be an apple in this strict sense.⁷² Yet since the distinction between being an apple and failing to be one is thus a difference of degree of shared properties (sweetness, crispness), there is no reason to think that the standard itself is something we could not have created by modifying our ideas of the fruit that fell short. Likewise, if the standard of true substance (God) diverges from our own nature merely by degree, then it would appear

⁷² We do something similar in everyday speech. However, rather than using 'perfect' as a synonym for 'real' or 'true' we will use 'real' or 'true' as a synonym for 'perfect,' and hence without really implying that the imperfect instance would thereby fail to really be a thing of the same sort. So, for example, I may point to an exceptionally impressive automobile and exclaim, "now that's a *real* car," but in doing so I am not saying that less impressive instances fail to be cars. In the above example, however, the claim that only really sweet and crisp apples are truly apples does imply that less sweet and crisp ones are not apples.

to be something we could create by amplifying ideas of our own attributes.

Yet Descartes will explicitly deny that *any* attribute can be predicated univocally of creatures and God. When comparing creaturely freedom to God's freedom, for example, he asserts that "no essence [attribute] can belong univocally to both God and his creatures" (CSMII 292). In fact, the existence of a qualitative distinction between divine attributes and creaturely ones is a crucial premise in his arguments against the claim that we can derive ideas of divine attributes by *amplifying* our ideas of creaturely ones. I cannot, for example, arrive at a concept of divine power or knowledge by simply modifying my notion of my own power and knowledge because God's power and knowledge (which are *true* power and knowledge) differs in *kind* from my own. Given God's simplicity, every one of his attributes is a primary attribute and hence identical with his essence. Descartes will concede that we normally become aware of these qualitatively distinct attributes through a process of amplifying ideas of creaturely attributes, yet he will deny the claim that this process of amplification *generates* these concepts. Rather, we are able to arrive at concepts of divine attributes in this way only because an implicit awareness of them was already guiding the process

from the beginning. Amplification merely helps us make these latent notions explicit.

Ch. II. CPP and the Amplification Argument

It should at this point be clear how CPP works as a response to the claim that the notion of God is a mere negation of our notion of creaturely imperfection. Since the judgment that something is imperfect insofar as it falls short of being presupposes a notion of being, the argument from negation can't even get off the ground. Descartes' critics, at least those found in the *Objections and Replies* appended to the *Meditations*, give little indication that they understood, much less accepted, this argument.⁷³ In their responses to Descartes, however, they introduce a different argument against the claim that the idea of God is innate: we generate our idea of God by *amplifying* our notions of creaturely attributes. In the Second Set of Objections compiled by Marin Mersenne, the argument is presented that we can "find within ourselves a sufficient basis" for constructing an idea of God: "for surely I can see that, in so far as I think, I have some degree of perfection, and hence that others besides myself

⁷³ Gassendi, for example, takes Descartes' argument from doubt to be claiming that our awareness of imperfection is relative to the object, rather than the fact, of desire. Using the example of bread, he objects, "when you desire some bread, the bread is not in any sense more perfect than you or your body; it is merely more perfect than the emptiness of your stomach." Descartes responds that "the fact that someone desires some bread does not imply that the bread is more perfect than he is, but merely that someone who needs bread is in a more imperfect state than when he does not need it" (CSMII 254).

have a similar degree of perfection. And this gives me the basis for thinking of an indefinite number of degrees and thus positing higher and higher degrees of perfection up to infinity" (CSMII 88).⁷⁴ Gassendi provides a similar argument in the Fifth Set of Objections: "Although every supreme perfection is normally attributed to God, it seems that such perfections are all taken from things which we commonly admire in ourselves, such as longevity, power, knowledge, goodness, blessedness and so on. By amplifying these things as much as we can, we assert that God is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good, supremely blessed and so on" (CSMII 200).

If the amplification argument assumes that we begin by apprehending a creaturely attribute as imperfect in the absolute sense of failing to be the same kind as the perfect, then the argument has no more force than the argument from negation. This is so because we obviously need to have an idea of the kind the creaturely attribute falls short of if we are to apprehend it as imperfect in this sense. In their own analyses, Adams and Carriero suggest that CPP is intended to address the argument from amplification in precisely this way.⁷⁵ Menn too argues that

⁷⁴ It is suspected, however, that most of these objections were written by Mersenne himself. See editor's comments (CSMII 64).

⁷⁵ Adams 1996, 96; Carriero 2009, 192-4.

the argument against amplification is the *same* as the argument against negation: "I cannot reach the idea of an infinite being by negating the idea of limits or amplifying the idea of a finite being, since I conceive of a finite being by adding the idea of limits to the idea of being as such, and being as such is infinite."⁷⁶

Yet one wonders why our idea of God couldn't be constructed by amplifying concepts of creaturely attributes that are *not* judged to be imperfect in the sense of failing to be the same kinds as the perfect.⁷⁷ To use Descartes' triangle example, we might grant that in order to judge that something is an imperfect triangle I must possess the idea of a (perfect) triangle, but why couldn't I conceive of the drawing as the figure it is and then modify *this* idea so as to reach the idea of a triangle? That perceiving the drawing happened to be the *occasion* for my conceiving a perfect triangle suggests that it in some sense resembles a triangle; and if it resembles a triangle close enough to reliably trigger the idea of one, rather than the idea of a square or a circle, why couldn't modifying this idea of it,

⁷⁶ 1998, 284.

⁷⁷ Broughton argues that it is not enough for Descartes to show "that his idea of God is implicit in his explicit recognition of his imperfections" (2002, 151). Granted that we can't conceive of ourselves as imperfect in the sense of falling short of God without an idea of God, it may nevertheless be the case that this presupposed idea of God was itself constructed from our ideas of creatures in a way that did not involve any such awareness of imperfection.

or viewing this idea in comparison to other similar ideas, enable me to produce the idea of a triangle? Similarly, even though apprehending a particular instance of creaturely goodness as failing to constitute true goodness presupposes a notion of goodness as such, what if we apprehend creaturely goodness without reference to goodness as such? Why couldn't we form the concept of (perfect) goodness by manipulating *this* notion?⁷⁸

The amplification argument does appear to assume that we apprehend a creaturely property as imperfect in *some* sense, for otherwise there is no rationale guiding the process of amplification itself. Boyle, for example, may indeed be right when she argues that "unless we had noticed that our own qualities are limited, we would not see that they can be extended and amplified."⁷⁹ Yet it does not follow that an awareness of limitation would presuppose a notion of God, for we need only be aware of a more perfect creature to see that we are limited in *some* respect. In the version of the argument provided by Mersenne, it is implied that we apprehend a given property as imperfect relative to others that differ by "degree." Thus one could argue that

⁷⁸ The same sort of argument would not work for the argument from negation. Negating features of properties that are finite, but not apprehended as finite, could yield concepts of only diminished creaturely properties.

⁷⁹ 2009, 74.

we can generate an idea of God by amplifying our ideas of creaturely perfections that are judged to be imperfect *relative to other creaturely attributes of the same kind*. For example, we may notice that one creature is less powerful than another creature, and then hypothesize that this latter creature's power may be similarly imperfect relative to some other creature, and so on. Or from the idea of my own power I could derive the idea of a being with less power, and from a comparison between these I could derive the idea of "twice as powerful" (or whatever the given ratio may be). It seems I could then generate an idea of a being twice as powerful as myself, and so on. The idea of divine power would then be what is yielded by our amplifying our idea of creaturely power as far as we can. This sort of amplification argument has also been put forward by modern critics such as Broughton and Rovane.⁸⁰

The amplification arguments provided by Mersenne and Gassendi are more complicated, however, than they first appear. This is because both the anonymous author in Mersenne's objection as well as Gassendi deny that we possess ideas truly representing the infinite in the first

⁸⁰ Rovane asks, for example, whether "the idea of perfect knowledge, in contrast with which Descartes' idea of his own epistemic imperfection can be made intelligible, be construed as the (negative) idea of indefinitely perfected knowledge, and could this idea be derived from Descartes's ideas of his actual states of knowledge and their relative perfection?" (1994, 97-8). See also Broughton 2002, 146-153.

place. Their amplification arguments are not intended to assume the explanatory burden of demonstrating how we generate the notion of God Descartes claims we have (i.e., an idea representing God's essence), but rather intended to show how we create the comparatively *impoverished* idea of God that, according to these critics, we actually have.⁸¹ Given God's greatness in comparison to us as well as our own intellectual limitations, Gassendi suggests that the idea produced through amplification doesn't really capture God's nature: "We have no basis for claiming that we have any authentic idea which represents God; and it is more than enough if, on the analogy of our human attributes, we can derive and construct an idea of some sort for our own use—an idea which does not transcend our human grasp and which contains no reality except what we perceive in other things" (CSMII 200). Hobbes asserts something similar in his own series of objections. He mistakenly assumes that Descartes equates having an idea of God with having a

⁸¹ The version of the amplification argument provided by Mersenne is difficult to interpret on this score. It is only after the argument is provided that the author claims that "you do not have the idea of God, just as you do not have the idea of an infinite number or an infinite line" (CSMII 89). It is therefore not clear whether the anonymous author takes the argument to show that Descartes' idea of God can be constructed by such amplification, or if it is merely intended to show how some lesser idea is or could be constructed. Redefining the content of the idea in question is a standard empiricist response to purported candidates for innate ideas. Showing how a supposedly innate idea could be derived from sense experience becomes much easier if it assumed that the idea does not have the unique or rich content the rationalist thinks it has.

mental image of God, and then goes on to explain how such an image can be constructed by ideas (images) of things we have sensed.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that Descartes appears to agree that the idea of God is, in a sense, *reached* through a process of amplification. In a letter to Regius, for example, he responds to the claim that "it is because we have in ourselves some degree of quantity [of wisdom, power, goodness and the other perfections which we attribute to God] that we form the idea of an infinite quantity" with the surprising statement that "I entirely agree, and am quite convinced that we have no idea of God except the one formed in this manner" (CSMK 147). In response to Hobbes' question as to where we obtain the idea of God's understanding, Descartes argues that, since everyone is aware that there are things he understands, "everyone has the form or idea of understanding; and by indefinitely extending this he can form the idea of God's understanding. And a similar procedure applies to the other attributes of God" (CSMII 132). Indeed, as we shall see in his replies to Mersenne and Gassendi, Descartes will apparently concede that we conceive of the divine attributes through a process of amplification.

At first glance, therefore, one could take Descartes to be agreeing with his critics that our idea of God is wholly *constructed* out of our ideas of creaturely properties. Indeed, his primary concern often seems to be showing that the amplification procedure is nevertheless compatible with his Third Meditation "Trademark" argument for the existence of God. In a letter to Hyperaspistes, for example, he asserts that even though we have the ability to reach notions of divine attributes by amplifying ideas of our own, God himself must have given us this ability or "power": "I did not deny that there is a power in the mind of amplifying the ideas of things; but I frequently insisted that the ideas thus amplified, or the power of so amplifying them, could not be in the mind unless the mind itself came from God, in whom there really exist all the perfections which can be reached by such amplification. I proved this from the principle that there can be nothing in an effect which was not previously present in the cause" (CSMK 192). He makes similar claims about the necessary causal origin of this "power" in most of his responses to the various amplification arguments.⁸² If this sort of response were taken to represent the whole of Descartes' reaction to the amplification argument, it would seem that

⁸² He does this in response to Mersenne's anonymous author (CSM II 100) and in response to Gassendi (CSM II 255).

only a certain faculty, and not an idea of God, is presupposed by our ability to amplify our way to ideas of divine attributes.

I. Amplification and Innateness

Anyone familiar with Descartes' critique of scholastic pseudo-explanation in natural philosophy, however, would notice that this conclusion presents us with an incongruity. One of the reasons Descartes rejected the scholastic theory of forms was his belief that appeal to such forms lacked explanatory force. His basic objection, as Desmond Clarke puts it, is that "one cannot explain any phenomenon merely by attributing a quality or form to it which is named after the effect to be explained."⁸³ It would be odd, however, if Descartes were to deny that a sleeping pill's effectiveness could be adequately explained by citing its dormative power, while at the same time accepting that our ability to modify ideas of creaturely attributes so as to arrive at ideas of divine ones is sufficiently explained by citing a "power" of amplification.⁸⁴

⁸³ 2003, 19.

⁸⁴Nicholas Jolley provides a clear statement of the dilemma as it appeared to Malebranche: "[W]hen the defender of innate ideas resorts to talk of faculties, his claim must be empty unless such faculties can

In fact, Descartes does not always treat this faculty as explanatorily sufficient, for in one place he explicitly states that the "power" of amplification is to be explained by the existence of an innate *idea*.⁸⁵ In his response to Gassendi's claim that the idea of God does not have more objective reality than the (amplified) ideas of finite things taken together, Descartes asserts that

be grounded in non-dispositional properties of the mind. In the case of physical objects it is possible to see how such a grounding requirement for faculties or dispositions can be satisfied; the non-dispositional properties will typically be persistent structural modifications of the kind discovered by science. But no such solution seems readily available to the de-fender of innate ideas, for it is not clear how one can speak of persistent structural modifications in the case of immaterial minds. Thus the hypothesis of innate ideas is in danger of being explanatorily empty" (78, 1988). As I will argue below, the innate idea of God could be such a "persistent structural modification" of the mind. David Rosenthal has addressed the incongruity of Descartes' appeal to faculties in his account of mind, yet he argues that appeal to the faculty of thought, the faculty of judgment, or the faculty of will is not intended to be explanatory but are "reductive in spirit" and hence a "handy way to talk about the abilities a thinking thing must have" (Rorty 1986, 422). This may be true for the broader faculties Rosenthal cites, but it seems to me that Descartes does invoke the "power" of amplification as part of an explanation for our ability to reach concepts of divine attributes by modifying creaturely ones. That Descartes goes on to identify this power with possession of an innate idea suggests that he indeed recognizes that such a power needs to be explanatorily grounded by reference to, in this case, the existence of an innate idea of God.

⁸⁵ Menn 1998, 285; Adams 2007, 95-6; Boyle 2009, 73; Carriero 2009, 193-4; and Beyssade 1996, 180, have all noted that Descartes' considered response to the amplification argument is the claim that we must possess an *idea* of God (or at least the perfect attribute in question) in order to reach an idea of a divine attribute by amplifying an idea of a creaturely one. They do not, however, appeal to the *qualitative* difference between creatures and God to explain why such an innate idea is required. Rather, these thinkers usually just cite Descartes' letter to Cleselier in which he asserts that the idea of being is the idea of infinite being. The problem with this response, as I have indicated, is that it does not address the possibility that we might amplify ideas of creaturely perfections that are *not* apprehended as finite/imperfect.

you yourself admit that these perfections must be amplified by our intellect if they are to be attributed to God. So do you think that the perfections which are amplified in this way are not, as a result, greater than they would be if they were not amplified? *And how could we have a faculty for amplifying all created perfections (i.e. conceiving of something greater or more ample than they are) were it not for the fact that there is in us an idea of something greater, namely God?* (Italics mine) (CSMII 252)

That our ability to conceive of something "greater or more ample" than created attributes is to be explained by our actually possessing an *idea* of this greater and more ample thing is entirely consistent with Descartes' account of innate ideas. Notice, however, that the "faculty" or "power" is not simply *identified* with the idea but is *explained by* it. Descartes' account of innateness is often mistakenly read as claiming that an innate idea is nothing more than a disposition (or "power") for having an occurrent idea. Yet such a reading fails to distinguish the act of perception (the idea's formal reality as a mode of the mind) from the content of the perception (the idea considered in terms of its objective or representational reality). A given thought with a given representational content can be characterized as "innate" insofar as we always had "within ourselves" the faculty for "summoning it up." Yet this faculty *itself* is explained by our possessing innately the idea as an objective reality. We have within

ourselves the power for having a given thought with a given content because we quite literally already possess the objective content featured within the occurrent thought.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ I agree with Boyle in her recent (2009) effort to provide a single, coherent account of Descartes' theory of innate ideas. She suggests that ideas are innate insofar as we possess ideas understood as objective content (ideaO), and it is these (ideasO) that enable us to have certain occurrent thoughts (ideasM). Yet the problem with Boyle's account is that she never explains in what sense ideasO could be said to 'reside' in the mind without being the object of an act of thought (ideaM), for Descartes is usually interpreted as holding that every act of thought (ideaM) takes an object (ideaO) and every objective content (ideaO) is the object of an act of thought (ideaM). It is difficult to understand how conceptual content (ideaO) could 'exist' without being an object of thought. I would argue, however, that Boyle's position can be reconciled with this doctrine if we can show that the ideaO of God is an *implicit* object in every act of thought (ideaM). Such an account would draw on Descartes' occasional portrayal of ideas as innate in the sense of being logical entailed by, i.e., 'contained' within, occurrent ideas (see McRae 1972). Descartes states that there are "certain primitive notions which are as it were the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions. There are very few such notions. First, there are the most general—those of being, number, duration, etc.—which apply to everything we can conceive" (CSMK 218). So we might argue that everything is conceived, at least implicitly, in light of a notion of infinite being. Thus the ideaO of infinite being could be said to be implicitly contained in every act of thought (ideaM). And not only would our possessing this ideaO explain the capacity to have an occurrent ideaM of God, but by virtue of containing the reality of creatures, the ideaO of God could explain the faculty of summing up *any* innate idea—with, perhaps, the exception of the idea of extension since this is not a formal feature of God. If this is Descartes' actual position, it would be somewhat similar to Leibniz's account in which dispositions for ideas are explained in terms of, or grounded by, an infinity of unconscious experiences, i.e., 'petites perceptions'—though in Descartes' case, the 'infinite' content would be the reality contained within the ideaO of God. For Leibniz, says Jolly, "when we ascribe a dispositional property to an object, there must be some non-dispositional property in virtue of which it is ascribed; this non-dispositional property will typically be a persistent structural modification. Thus, in what Mates calls the paradigmatic example, the sugar is soluble in virtue of its crystalline structure; the structural description of the sugar, together with an appropriate law of nature, jointly entail that the sugar is soluble in certain conditions. In Leibniz's view, *just the same basic principles apply when we ascribe a dispositional property to the mind*; for example, when we say that an infant's mind has an innate idea of a triangle. There is the same basic need for a persistent structural modification, but in this case it must be a purely mental one" (1988, 86 emphasis mine). For Descartes, the innate ideaO of God, implicitly contained in every act of thought (ideaM) would, to use Jolly's phrase, be a "persistent structural

Thus we have Descartes' frequent reference to innate ideas as present but somehow submerged, waiting within the "treasurehouse" of the mind to be brought to consciousness.⁸⁷

Why would we need to appeal to an innate idea of God to explain our ability to amplify a given creaturely perfection? In the account provided above, Descartes seems to be arguing that *any* process of amplification presupposes an innate idea. Yet is he really arguing that I could not even amplify the idea of my own intelligence to arrive at the idea of a slightly more intelligent creature unless I possessed a corresponding innate idea?⁸⁸ It may seem that such a conclusion is required by Descartes' claim that an

modification" of the mind, playing the same role of Leibniz's *petites perceptions*. On Leibniz's distinction between mental dispositions (which are always grounded by the properties of substances) and bare, i.e., ungrounded, faculties (which he deemed absurd) see Jolley 1988, 86.

⁸⁷ Those who interpret his account as *identifying* innate ideas with dispositions are thus at a loss to explain why Descartes then refers, in passages such as the following, to ideas as present but somehow submerged: "a mind newly united to an infant's body is wholly occupied in perceiving in a confused way or feeling the ideas of pain, pleasure, heat, cold and other similar ideas which arise from its union and, as it were, intermingling with the body. None the less, it has in itself the ideas of God, of itself and of all such truths as are called self-evident, in the same way as adult human beings have these ideas when they are not attending to them; for it does not acquire these ideas later on, as it grows older" (CSMK 190). Moreover, as the earlier quotation from Jolley indicates, identifying ideas with dispositions threatens to make a theory of innate ideas practically indistinguishable from empiricist accounts, for surely the empiricist will allow that we all have dispositions to form certain ideas given certain stimuli.

⁸⁸ Presumably, the innate idea would here be either the idea of such creaturely intelligence or the idea of something more intelligent (another creature or God).

idea of that which has more reality cannot be derived from an idea of that which has less. Yet our earlier analysis of this principle shows that it does not force him to accept such an implausible conclusion, for the idea of a more intelligent *creature* is not the idea of something possessing more reality than the idea of a less intelligent one; as finite beings, each possesses exactly the *same* degree of formal reality (or thinghood) as the other. Indeed, Descartes' actual claim is far more restricted than an outright rejection of amplification as a means of producing ideas. In his reply to Gassendi, he suggests that the power of amplification calls for an innate idea of God because of the *nature* of the difference between the creaturely attribute amplified and the divine attribute reached:

You agree that I can gradually augment, in varying degrees, all the perfections that I observe in people, until I see that they have become *the kind of perfections that cannot possibly belong to human nature*; and this is quite sufficient to enable me to demonstrate the existence of God. For it is the very power of amplifying all human perfections *up to the point where they are recognized as more than human* which, I maintain and insist, would not have been in us unless we had been created by God. (italics mine) (CSMII 255)

The explanandum is not merely the power to reach through amplification ideas of greater human perfections, but the

ability to reach ideas of perfections that are "recognized as more than human." It is our ability to reach through amplification only *these* sorts of perfections that calls for an innate idea of God. The question, then, is what does Descartes mean by "the *kind* of perfections that cannot possibly belong to human nature"?

II. Divine Perfections as Indefinite

It may initially seem that it is only the quantitatively *indefinite* nature of our ideas of God that precludes their being constructed from concepts of creatures and hence presupposes innate resources. After all, Descartes had agreed with his critics that we arrive at ideas truly representing the divine perfections by "indefinitely extending" the ideas we have of our own. Throughout his works, he defines the indefinite as that in which we perceive no limits. He portrays it as an inherently negative notion in the sense that it merely involves the recognition that we are unable to grasp the limits of a thing.⁸⁹ For example, he argues that we conceive of bodies as "indefinitely divisible [...] because it is not possible to divide any body into such parts, that we do not

⁸⁹ In the *Principles*, Descartes asserts that we conceive of a thing as indefinite when we "negatively admit that their limits, if they have them, cannot be found by us" (CSMI 202).

understand each of these parts still to be divisible" (CSMI 202). He thinks a similar analysis applies to the "extension of the world" and "the number of stars" that God could create (CSMI 201). Descartes' critics, however, had taken the indefinite nature of our ideas of the divine perfections to constitute evidence that these ideas are wholly constructed from our ideas of creaturely perfections and hopelessly incapable of representing their actually infinite natures. Mersenne tells Descartes that "you do not have the idea of God, just as you do not have the idea of an [actually] infinite number or an [actually] infinite line" because these ideas are merely concepts of creaturely perfections extended *indefinitely* (CSMII 89).⁹⁰

Descartes claims that there is more to our idea of the indefinite than his critics seem to realize. Such ideas are not objects "pictured in the imagination" but "perceive[d] with the intellect, when the intellect apprehends, or judges, or reasons" (CSMII 99). In this way, the idea of the indefinite involves an *intellectual* apprehension of

⁹⁰"For surely I can see that, in so far as I think I have some degree of perfection, and hence that others besides myself have a similar degree of perfection. And this gives me the basis for thinking of an indefinite number of degrees and thus positing higher and higher degrees of perfection up to infinity. In the same way, I can surely take a given degree of being, which I perceive within myself, and add on a further degree, and thus construct the idea of a perfect being from all the degrees which are capable of being added on" (CSM II 88).

something that lies beyond our power of conception.⁹¹ Citing the example of an "indefinitely large number," he suggests that this intellectual recognition presupposes innate resources:

Now in my thought or intellect I can somehow come upon a perfection that is above me; thus I notice that, when I count, I cannot reach a largest number, and hence I recognize that there is something in the process of counting which exceeds my powers. And I contend that from this alone it necessarily follows, not that an infinite number exists, nor indeed that it is a contradictory notion, as you say, but that I have the power of conceiving that there is a thinkable number which is larger than any number than I can ever think of, and hence that this power is something which I have received not from myself but from some other being which is more perfect than I am. (CSMII 99-100)

In addition to the apprehension that "when I count, I cannot reach a largest number" there is the intellectual recognition of "a perfection that is above me," viz., "that there is a thinkable number which is larger than any number than I can ever think of." Descartes goes on to assert that when we consider what "power" could be responsible not only for this idea of an "indefinitely large number" but for "other attributes which can exist in the being that is the source of the idea [...] we shall find that it can only be

⁹¹ As I will later describe, Descartes distinguishes conceiving from understanding.

God" (CSMII 100).⁹² Thus the crucial feature distinguishing our ideas of the divine perfections from our ideas of creaturely ones—the feature that precludes the construction of the former from the resources of the latter and hence calls for an innate idea of God—would appear to be their *indefinite* nature.

Aside from the question of why an idea of the indefinite would presuppose innate resources, the above account raises two significant issues. First, if the distinction between divine and creaturely perfections were *merely* quantitative, it would seem that creatures and God could nevertheless be said to possess different degrees of the *same* property. Just as an indefinitely large number is still a number and an indefinitely long line still a line, so it would appear that infinite power or infinite knowledge would still be power and knowledge in the same sense of the term. Such a conclusion would clearly contradict Descartes' denials of univocity elsewhere (e.g,

⁹² In the *Conversation with Burman*, however, Descartes asserts that this argument is not intended to demonstrate the existence of God: "This argument could not have any force for an atheist, who would not allow himself to be convinced by it. Indeed, it is not suitable for this purpose, and the author does not wish it to be understood in this way. It must rather be conjoined with other arguments concerning God, since it presupposes such arguments, and takes God's existence as already proved by them" (CSMK 340). The more perfect being established by the argument is simply that which possesses the formal reality necessary to confer upon us the innate idea that provides us with the power of indefinite amplification. This notion of such a being is to 'thin' to count as an idea of God, which is why the argument could not be compelling for the atheist.

"no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures"). Though Descartes believes that some properties (e.g. such as the attribute of extension) cannot be literally predicated of God since they are contained in Him only "eminently" (i.e., they are part of God's nature only in the sense that he has the power to produce them), those properties that are literally predicable of him, i.e., contained in God "formally" (the pure perfections and transcendentals), must be *qualitatively* distinct from their creaturely instances.⁹³ Yet if God's perfections are *in reality* qualitatively distinct from creaturely ones, then this would seem to entail that Descartes' critics are right and that we do not, in fact, possess ideas truly representing the divine attributes.

⁹³ In scholastic thought, the transcendentals are those properties that are coextensive with being and hence common to all beings (thereby "transcending" the traditional Aristotelian categories). Though there was debate concerning which properties constitute transcendentals, they often included unity, truth and goodness. Scotus later modified the doctrine somewhat by defining transcendentals as those properties that are not limited to a finite being or category. Following Bonaventure, he introduced the disjunctive transcendental finite/infinite being—a transcendental that Descartes appears to incorporate into his own system. A pure perfection is, to use Scotus' definition, any property that is better than anything incompatible with it. Thus wisdom is preferable both to its opposite (foolishness) as well as to being a dog or a rock. All transcendentals are pure perfections, but not all pure perfections are transcendentals (since wisdom, for example, is not common to every being). See Seifert 1991, 909-11. For Scotus' account of pure perfections and transcendentals, see Wolter 1946. Though Descartes clearly endorses a theory of pure perfections in his account of God, his stance on the transcendentals is less clear. For his treatment of transcendentals, see Clayton 2000, 170-171; Carriero 2009, 230-231; and Chappell 1997, 114.

It was a commonplace in scholastic thought to deny univocal predication on the basis of divine simplicity. Yet since most scholastics were Aristotelian empiricists, they believed that our conceptual resources were limited to what could be derived from experience. Like Descartes' own critics, they consequently denied that we possess quidditative knowledge of God's essence or his qualitatively unique perfections.⁹⁴ Descartes, however, boldly asserts that our (innate) idea of God "contains the essence of God" (CSMII 78) and furthermore that God's "perfections are known to us more clearly than any other thing" (CSMI 199).⁹⁵ While he does not think that our cognitive access to God's nature is anything like the complete or comprehensive understanding found in the beatific vision, his philosophical theology, particularly

⁹⁴ For Aquinas, possessing quidditative knowledge of something is to have a definition of its essence. See Rocca 1993, 646.

⁹⁵ Descartes does, however, qualify the first claim: "[T]his idea contains the essence of God, at least in so far as I am capable of understanding it." As I shall argue later in this chapter, this qualification is less significant than it may seem, for he believes that such ideas really contain everything entailed by those features necessary and sufficient for possessing the idea in the first place. In itself, our idea of God is comprehensive insofar as it 'contains' the entirety of the divine essence. Yet given our cognitive limitations, we cannot achieve an explicit understanding of everything it entails. One could interpret the second assertion—that God's "perfections are known to us more clearly than any other thing"—as the relatively uncontroversial claim that what is known "more clearly than any other thing" is merely *that* God has certain perfections, even though we don't really understand how they differ from our own. As I hope to make clear, however, Descartes does believe that our innate ideas of these perfections provide us with some insight into how God's perfections are qualitatively distinct from our own, and hence enable us to apprehend our own perfections as imperfect in the absolute sense.

his arguments for God's existence, presuppose that we have some understanding of the divine essence. Regarding the ontological argument, for example, he asserts that

even if we conceive of God only in an inadequate or, if you like, 'utterly inadequate' way, this does not prevent its being certain that his nature is possible, or not self-contradictory. Nor does it prevent our being able truly to assert that we have examined his nature with sufficient clarity (that is, with as much clarity as is necessary to know that his nature is possible and also to know that necessary existence belongs to this same divine nature). [...] In the case of the few attributes of God which we do perceive, it is enough that we understand them clearly and distinctly, even though our understanding is in no way adequate. (CSMII 108)

Moreover, as we will describe in detail in chapter VI, Descartes holds that we can achieve insight into many features that render God's perfections *qualitatively* distinct from their creaturely correlates. For example, he thinks that we can understand that divine power would not require pre-existing material on which to work and that divine existence would exhibit not merely a very low degree of contingency but absolutely no contingency at all. Though he will argue that we can think of divine existence in terms of God acting as his own efficient cause, he will maintain that we can understand *how* the divine property of deriving existence from oneself is only analogous to, and

hence qualitatively distinct from, the property of deriving existence from another.⁹⁶

A second problem with viewing the indefinite nature of the divine perfections as the sole feature precluding construction of ideas of these perfections from ideas of creaturely ones is the fact that, in numerous places throughout his works, Descartes distinguishes our apprehension of God's essence and individual perfections from our ideas of the merely indefinite. God's essence and attributes alone merit the designation "infinite," for in these cases, he says, "not only do we recognize no limits, but also we understand *positively* that there are none" (CSMI 202, italics mine).⁹⁷ In the Third Meditation, the narrator explicitly asserts that it is his apprehension of God's perfections (in this case, knowledge) as *actually*

⁹⁶ Carriero provides a good general discussion of how Descartes' approach to philosophical theology differs from Aquinas' insofar as Descartes assumes that we "start out with some cognitive purchase on God's essence or nature, that is, some positive knowledge of what God is, as opposed to a merely negative and relative knowledge (e.g., as the first mover unmoved of the motion we see in the world)" (2009, 8). See especially 168-222.

⁹⁷ Descartes provides two criteria distinguishing his use of "infinite" from "indefinite," only one of which is mentioned here. In addition to our understanding that God cannot be limited, we also recognize that God lacks limits in every respect, whereas, in the case of an indefinite quantity, we are unable to recognize a limit in only *some* respect. This latter criterion, which Margaret Wilson has dubbed the "metaphysical criterion" (Rorty 1986, 340) appears to apply only to Descartes' use of "infinite" to describe God's *substance*, which is unlimited in every respect in the sense that it includes every perfection. It does not appear to apply to those cases where Descartes describes God's individual perfections as "infinite." Since it is this latter usage that is of primary interest in this chapter, I do not address the metaphysical criterion in what follows.

infinite, rather than indefinite ("potentially" infinite), that precludes the possibility that, by virtue of being aware of a "gradual increase in my knowledge," he might be able to construct the idea of divine knowledge by amplifying the idea of his own: "[E]ven if my knowledge always increases more and more, I recognize that it will never actually be infinite, since it will never reach the point where it is not capable of a further increase; God, on the other hand, I take to be actually infinite, so that nothing can be added to his perfection" (CSMII 32).

It is not immediately clear what Descartes means by this "positive" understanding distinguishing ideas of the infinite from those of mere indefinite quantities.⁹⁸ In the passage from the *Principles* where he distinguishes the two, he argues that, in the case of indefinite things, "our understanding does not in the same way positively tell us that they lack limits in some respect; we merely acknowledge in a negative way that any limits which they may have cannot be discovered by us" (CSMI 202).⁹⁹ The numerical example suggests that it is in the nature of the

⁹⁸ For an assessment of Descartes' distinction between the actual infinite and the indefinite in the context of the late scholastic distinction between the categorematic and syncategorematic infinite, see Arieu 1999, 166-71.

⁹⁹ Henry More had suggested that Descartes was needlessly confusing things: If a thing that appears infinite to us is not, in reality, infinite, then it must be finite (Rorty 1986, 346). Some contemporary scholars have likewise understood the category "indefinite" to be merely an epistemological one.

indefinite that we cannot conceive its limits, and it is the recognition of this nature—the awareness of a “perfection that is above me”—that ostensibly precludes our constructing such ideas on our own. In the case of the infinite, however, we also have what Cottingham calls a “conclusive reason” to believe that the nature in question *cannot have* any limits. Similarly, Margaret Wilson suggests that our understanding of the divine essence and the divine properties is positive insofar as we see it “*includes or entails* unlimitedness.”¹⁰⁰ We understand that it is in the nature of God that we not only cannot *conceive* of him having limits, but that he cannot, in fact, *have* any. But why does an absence of limits follow from God’s nature? What is this conclusive reason?

The answer can be found in Descartes’ response to Mersenne’s amplification argument. There he begins with what initially appears to be an admission that our idea of God’s intellect differs from our own merely by degree, insofar as it is amplified indefinitely: “the idea which we have of the divine intellect, for example, does not differ from that which we have of our own intellect, except in so far as the idea of an infinite number differs from the idea of a number raised to the second or fourth power. And the

¹⁰⁰ 1986, 353. Emphasis mine.

same applies to the individual attributes of God of which we recognize some trace in ourselves." Since Descartes consistently distinguishes our ideas of God's perfections from ideas of creaturely perfections extended indefinitely, one would expect him to immediately qualify this assertion, and he does so. Yet instead of saying that our ideas of God's perfections are distinct (and not constructible from our own) by virtue of being "actually infinite," he appeals to the qualitative distinction that follows from divine simplicity:

But in addition to this, our understanding tells us that there is in God an absolute immensity, simplicity and unity which embraces all other attributes and has no copy in us, but is, as I have said before, 'like the mark of the craftsman stamped on his work.' In virtue of this we recognize that, of all the individual attributes which, by a defect of our intellect, we assign to God in a piecemeal fashion, corresponding to the way in which we perceive them in ourselves, *none belong to God and to ourselves in the same sense.*" (italics mine) (CSMII 98)¹⁰¹

Descartes is here repeating the narrator's insight, in the Third Meditation, that "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

¹⁰¹ Though we will discuss this in further detail in a later chapter, this puts him at odds with the Scotists who believed that divine simplicity was, in fact, compatible with univocity.

have" (CSMII 34).¹⁰² Since God's properties are identical with his essence and so with each other, there must be a qualitative distinction between, for example, the Goodness that God *is* and the property of goodness that creatures have. The distinction between our idea of an indefinite magnitude ("the idea of an infinite number") and our ideas of God's perfections is here the recognition that the latter are *qualitatively* distinct from creaturely perfections. One might initially view this qualitative distinction as a *second* feature of divine perfections that, in addition to their actual infinity, distinguishes ideas of them from ideas of their creaturely correlates. Yet we shall argue that our awareness of how God's perfections differ *qualitatively* from our own constitutes the conclusive reason for apprehending God as unlimited. God's understanding, for example, is apprehended as infinite or unlimited insofar as it is perceived to be *true* understanding (a faculty of the understanding in the

¹⁰² The narrator is responding to the imagined objection that even if his possessing ideas of the perfections presupposes that they are "found somewhere in the universe," it does not follow that they must be "joined together in a single being." He responds: "[T]he 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. And surely the idea of the unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause which did not also provide me with the ideas of the other perfections; for no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and inseparability of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they were" (CSMII 34).

absolute or full sense, i.e., without qualification), whereas creaturely understanding is apprehended as finite or limited insofar as it is seen to fall short of this kind.

III. The Infinite as the Absolute

The sense of "infinite" employed within CPP provides us with a way of understanding Descartes' distinction between the indefinite and the infinite that captures a qualitative difference between the two. We argued that when Descartes uses "infinite" in the context of CPP, it has the same significance "perfect" does when we say a circle is "perfect" insofar as it is a true or real one. Just as we can be said to conceive of a perfect circle by virtue of conceiving of a circle, so Descartes asserts that "by the mere fact that I conceive being, without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, what I conceive is infinite being" (CSMK 377). Here it is the idea of being as such, not the notion of a greatest or most perfect being (in an evaluative sense), that is equivalent to an idea of infinite being. Like circularity, being is the sort of perfection that cannot be had in greater or lesser degrees. To possess it at all is to possess it in an unqualified

fashion, i.e., fully, absolutely, or infinitely. A perfect circle is in this sense "infinitely" circular insofar as it cannot become "more perfect" qua circle and could thus be said to possess the perfection of circularity absolutely or without "limits." Anything that possesses the perfection of circularity in a limited or qualified fashion must, by virtue of being a non-circle, fall short absolutely of the perfection of circularity.¹⁰³

That this sense of "infinite" is the "positive" understanding to which Descartes alludes appears to be confirmed by the distinction he draws between the indefinite and the infinite in the very same letter to Cleselier in which he equates the idea of being with that of infinite being. He states that when "infinite" is used to describe the divine substance (being), it signifies not "the mere lack of limits" but a "real thing":

By 'infinite substance' I mean a substance which has actually infinite and immense, *true and real* perfections. This is not an accident added to the notion of substance, but *the very essence of substance taken absolutely and bounded by no defects*; these defects, in respect of substance, are accidents; but infinity or infinitude is not. It should be observed that I never use the word 'infinite' to signify the

¹⁰³ This is, perhaps, the notion of infinity that Malebranche uses when he characterizes such ideas as 'infinite.' That Descartes, however, does not seem to use the term "infinite" (in the sense of *actually* infinite) to describe anything other than God (with the exception of the will) might be due to the fact that he prefers to use the term in its traditional (theological) sense.

mere lack of limits (which is something negative, for which I have used the term 'indefinite') *but to signify a real thing, which is incomparably greater than all those which are in some way limited.* (CSMK 377) (emphasis mine)

When Descartes describes God's essence as "infinite," the term signifies more than that we cannot conceive of God as limited in number or degree of perfections. Rather, *it also signifies that we know that he cannot be limited in this way because he is a "real thing," i.e., a substance in the full or absolute sense.* As we indicated in the previous chapter, the term "infinite" functions here as "the negation of a negation" in the same way that terms "real" or "true" do. To conceive of a substance is to conceive of an infinite substance, in the same way that to conceive of a thing is to conceive of a "real thing." Substance as such is therefore "incomparably greater" than finite substance because *finite substance is not true or genuine substance.* Since comparisons of degree or quantity can be made between members of the *same* kind, no such comparison can be made between something that is a substance in a true or unqualified sense (i.e., infinitely) and something that falls short of the kind.

A similar case can be made for the individual divine perfections. They are infinite in essence insofar as they are the "true and real" instances of the perfections in

question.¹⁰⁴ Though Descartes usually reserves this sense of "infinite" (i.e., in the sense of "absolute") for descriptions of God's perfections, he makes an exception for the human will on account of its apparent resemblance to the divine property. In a letter to Mersenne, he states that "the desire that everyone has to possess every perfection he can conceive of, and consequently all the perfections which we believe to be in God, is due to the fact that God has given us a will which has no limits. It is principally because of this infinite will within us that we can say we are created in his image" (CSMK 141-2). One might initially assume that Descartes here describes the will as "infinite" solely because the number of its potential objects, i.e., its scope, appears unlimited. His assertion that it is "principally because of the infinite will within us that we can say we are created in his image" should presumably be taken to say that it is the infinite scope of our will that makes it like God's. Naaman-Zauderer initially suggests this in her own analysis, asserting that

¹⁰⁴ In the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes uses the term "absolute" instead of "infinite" to describe God's perfections: "Since I know from my idea of God that he is the most perfect being and that all absolute perfections belong to him, I must attribute to him only what I know is absolutely perfect. Now take any attribute that I can form an idea of as meeting this requirement -anything I can think of as absolutely perfect perfection: from the very fact that I can form an idea of it, I know that it belongs to the nature of God" (Cottingham 1976, 20).

we “experience our will as infinite in scope and, in this respect, created in God’s image.”¹⁰⁵

Yet, as Zauderer later acknowledges, Descartes does not assert that the human will has the same scope as God’s, for in the *Meditations* he asserts that one of the features that distinguish the two is that God’s will “ranges over a greater number of items.”¹⁰⁶ In the above quotation from the letter to Mersenne, our desire to possess “every perfection [we] can conceive of” is not to be explained by the will’s actually infinite scope, for in fact the number of perfections that we can conceive of is proscribed by the limits of the human intellect.¹⁰⁷ The unlimited scope of the will is more appropriately described as infinite in the negative sense, i.e. as *indefinite*, insofar as we see that it can apply itself to everything of *which we can conceive*. That the will is “infinite” only in the sense of being applicable to an indefinite range of objects appears to be confirmed by Descartes’ admission, in the *Principles*, that

¹⁰⁵ 2010, 138.

¹⁰⁶ Zauderer: “Descartes does not endorse the view that our will extends to every possible object, including all the objects of the divine will. Rather, he argues that he cannot think of a faculty of choice greater than the one he experiences within himself” (2010, 137).

¹⁰⁷ Which is not to say that we cannot will things we do not understand clearly and distinctly, for it is in this sense that the will’s reach extends beyond the intellect. Yet, as Petrik argues, “when [Descartes] says that the will extends beyond the intellect, he does not mean that we have a contentless volition; rather he means that the content of the volition is not clearly and distinctly perceived. It is a confused perception, but a perception nonetheless” (1992, 126-7).

the will's scope entitles us to call it "infinite" only "in a certain sense" (CSMI 204). In fact, Descartes explicitly asserts that the principal feature that makes the human will like God's is not its scope but its *nature or essence*:

For although God's will is incomparably greater than mine, both in virtue of the knowledge and power that accompany it and make it more firm and efficacious, and also in virtue of its object, in that it ranges over a greater number of items, nevertheless it does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will *in the essential and strict sense* [in se formaliter & praecise spectata]. This is because the will simply consists in our ability to do or not do something (that is, to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid). (CSMII 40) (emphasis mine)

In the same way that any apple, however mushy and bland, possesses the perfection of *being an apple* in the full or absolute sense, so the human will, though limited in terms of the knowledge and power accompanying it, appears to possess the perfection of *being a faculty of the will* in the full or absolute sense. And just as a crisp and sweet apple is not more of an apple than a mushy and bland one, so the narrator says that God's will "does not seem any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense." Zauderer, as well as other scholars, therefore suggest that "infinite" has a dual significance for Descartes when applied to the will. It refers not only to the will's unlimited scope (in which case the term

"infinite" is being used loosely and is synonymous with "indefinite") but also to the fact that the human will is infinite *in essence*.¹⁰⁸ Gueroult agrees, characterizing this sense of the term "infinite" as "absoluteness." He argues that "it is not through its capacity of indefinite extension that will can be said to resemble God, but only through its absolute faculty of deciding."¹⁰⁹ Just as God is "infinite" being or "infinite" substance because he has that which is the "very essence of substance *taken absolutely* and bounded by no defects"—viz., "infinite and immense, true and real perfections"—so we appear to have an *infinite* will because we have that which is the very essence of the faculty *taken absolutely* and bounded by no defects—viz., the ability "to affirm or deny, pursue or avoid." Like the circle, which is perfectly or infinitely circular in the sense that it cannot be more perfect qua circle, the human will, at least as it appears to our finite minds, is "perfect and absolute," a faculty of the

¹⁰⁸ Zauderer: "Descartes alludes to another sense in which the human will may be taken to be infinite and, as such, to bear a likeness to the infinite will of God. He states that the divine will does not appear any greater than the human will when considered as will 'in the essential and strict sense'" (80). Commenting on the above quotation from Descartes, James Petrik asserts that "the will's infinity does not depend upon its having an infinite scope in actuality. [...] No, the will's infinity or perfection consists in its simple essence, viz., choice" (1992, 128). See also Gueroult who, in addition to quantitative infinity and infinity as absoluteness, identifies a third sense of the term as "infinity in extension as infinite aspiration toward something else that man does not have" (1984, 232).

¹⁰⁹ Gueroult 1984, 232-3.

will in the full or unqualified sense (CSMK 342).¹¹⁰ The idea of a more perfect will, says the narrator, is "beyond my grasp" (CSMII 40).

And just as something that possesses the perfection of circularity in only a qualified or limited way cannot be a true circle, the narrator asserts that a faculty cannot really be a faculty of the *will* absent the perfection in question, "for since the will consists simply of one thing which is, as it were, indivisible, it seems that its nature rules out the possibility of anything being taken away from it" (CSMII 42). Thus the idea of the will is indivisible in the very same sense that Descartes believes the idea of God is, for "if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea [of God] automatically becomes the idea of something else."¹¹¹ In order to form a correct

¹¹⁰ The sense of "infinite" as *absolute* was also employed by Descartes' rationalist successors. Leibniz, consistently distinguishes the idea of infinite quantities from the idea of the "absolute" which expresses a positive *quality* existing without qualification or limitation: "The true infinite, strictly speaking, is only in the absolute, which precedes all composition and is not formed by that addition of parts" 1981, 157-60. See Adams 1994, 115-19. Similarly, Spinoza differentiates the idea of that which is infinite "as a consequence of its own nature, or by the force of its definition" and consequently "cannot be conceived to be finite" from both the infinite that "can be divided into parts and regarded as finite" as well as the indefinite ("that which is called infinite because it has no limits and that whose parts we cannot explain or equate with any number, though we know its maximum and minimum") (1985, 200-2). Malebranche too appears to invoke the infinite as absolute in his description of God as "the being without individual restriction, the infinite being, being in general" (1997, 240).

¹¹¹ This is part of Descartes' response to Gassendi's objection to his principle that "nothing can be added to or taken away from the idea of God." The full quotation: "it seems you have paid no attention to the

conception of a will, I have to conceive of the power "to affirm or deny, to pursue or avoid," and if I do not include this within my conception, then I cannot be said to conceive of a faculty of the *will*. The priority relation described by CPP would therefore apply to the idea of the will just as it does to the idea of being or the idea of a circle. I conceive of an infinite or perfect will merely by conceiving of a will because every genuine will is and must be a perfect instance of the faculty, just as every genuine circle is and must be a perfect instance of circularity. But in order to conceive of something as imperfect in the sense of falling short of the faculty, I must possess an idea of the faculty in question.

It is nevertheless true that God's will must be qualitatively distinct from our own insofar as it is, in reality, identical with every other divine perfection and the divine essence. Descartes argues that "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which [God] simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything" (CSMI 201).¹¹² Yet even though we

common philosophical maxim that the essences of things are indivisible. An idea represents the essence of a thing, and if anything is added to or taken away from the essence, then the idea automatically becomes the idea of something else. This is how the ideas of Pandora and of all false Gods are formed by those who do not have a correct conception of the true God" (CSMII 255-6)

¹¹² See his May 27th 1630 correspondence with Mersenne: "[i]n God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one

understand *that* God's will must differ qualitatively from our own for this reason, the divine faculty does not appear qualitatively distinct from our own when we consider it in isolation from the other divine perfections.

However, when we conceive of the other divine perfections as distinct properties, we do apprehend them as differing qualitatively from our own. It is this implicit awareness of qualitative difference that enables the narrator to apprehend his own understanding as imperfect *qua faculty of the understanding* [i.e., "considered [...] in the essential and strict sense"]. In the Fourth Meditation, the narrator observes that, other than the will,

there is nothing else in me which is so perfect and so great that the possibility of a further increase in its perfection or greatness is beyond my understanding. If, for example, I consider the faculty of understanding, I immediately recognize that in my case it is extremely slight and very finite, and I at once form the idea of an understanding which is much greater—indeed supremely great and infinite; and from the very fact that I can form an idea of it, I perceive that it belongs to the nature of God. Similarly, if I examine the faculties of memory or imagination, or any others, I discover that in my case each one of these faculties is weak and limited, while in the case of God it is immeasurable. It is only the will, or freedom of choice, which I experience within

being prior to the other even conceptually" (CSMK 25-6); see also his May 2nd 1644 letter to Mesland: "[N]or should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea which we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure" (CSMK 235).

me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp. (CSMII 40)¹¹³

In the above passage, the human faculty of understanding is apprehended as "extremely slight and very finite" because it is seen to fall short of *true* understanding. Burman had objected that "considered in this abstract way [i.e., in the essential and strict sense], understanding is understanding, and so our understanding too is not going to differ from that of God, even though God's understanding ranges over a greater number of objects." Yet Descartes responds that we apprehend how human understanding falls short absolutely, i.e., qualitatively, of the divine sort: "But understanding depends on its object and cannot be separated from it; so it is not the case that 'understanding is understanding.' Moreover, it is not just that our understanding ranges over fewer objects than that of God: rather, it is extremely imperfect in itself, being

¹¹³ Notice that the order of apprehension regarding the faculty of understanding is precisely that which Descartes had described in his statement of the priority of the perfect in this discussion with Burman. There he had argued that, while our *explicit* awareness of imperfection precedes the *explicit* apprehension of divine perfection, the former insight presupposes an (implicit) awareness of the standard in question (CSMK 338). Even though, in the order of explicit awareness, we apprehend our faculty of understanding as imperfect *before* we "form an idea of understanding which is [...] supremely great and infinite," CPP indicates that we can apprehend our own faculty as imperfect (in the essential and strict sense) because we already possess a concept of true (infinite) understanding.

obscure, mingled with ignorance, and so on" (CSMK 341).¹¹⁴

It is because divine understanding appears greater than our own when "considered [...] in the essential and strict sense" that we are able to apprehend human understanding as absolutely imperfect.¹¹⁵ Though we may 'approach' an idea of such understanding by amplifying elements of our own, we cannot thereby *construct* an idea of the divine property in this way.

For Descartes, therefore, the faculty of the will is the *one* respect in which we find ourselves incapable of apprehending ourselves as absolutely imperfect with respect to God. Our apprehension of our will's absolute perfection (or infinity) is thus a good model for how we understand

¹¹⁴ In what sense does understanding depend on its object? Petrik suggests the following: "Descartes seems to be drawing upon the view that there is no faculty of the understanding and that the understanding is simply the sum total of all our perceptions. Thus, to say that our understanding is finite [in this respect] is to say that the number of our possible perceptions is finite. To say that our understanding is limited is to say that our perceptions are limited (1992, 130).

¹¹⁵ It is true that the narrator believes that each of his faculties, including understanding, is "perfect of its kind" (CSMII 38). But this does not mean that these faculties, when considered in the essential and strict sense, do not fall short of God's. Rather, they are perfect of their kind insofar they don't lack anything which they "ought to have" (ibid.) given their function and place within "the whole universe" (Ibid, 39). The faculty of the understanding, for example, is perfect of its kind insofar as it, if used properly, does not lead to error. Thus the narrator states that, even though God could have given him a greater faculty of the understanding "I have no cause for complaint on the grounds that the power of understanding or the natural light which God gave me is no greater than it is; for it is the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things, and is the nature of a created intellect to be finite" (CSMII 42).

the divine perfections generally.¹¹⁶ To apprehend a perfection as actually infinite is to see that it is a complete or absolute (i.e. true) instance of this perfection considered "in the essential and strict sense." Thus we apprehend God as actually infinite goodness, wisdom, love, etc. because he alone has (or more properly, *is*) the genuine or true instance(s) of these perfections. We "understand positively" that these perfections are unlimited in the same way that we see that a perfect circle is unlimited with respect to the perfection of circularity. With the exception of the will, the human analogues of divine perfections are apprehended as "finite" or "imperfect" insofar as they are seen as *failing to be* instances of these perfections considered "in the essential and strict sense." We do not have lesser degrees of these perfections—we do not have them at all.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ But as I will argue in the following section, though Descartes thinks we *understand* God's perfections, we cannot *conceive* of them (or represent them to ourselves) except by using our own (amplified indefinitely) as approximations. No such amplification is possible in the case of the will, however, since the human will already appears perfect in the absolute sense.

¹¹⁷ My interpretation of the term "infinite" is similar to a popular, though not uncontroversial, interpretation of Spinoza's use of the term when he describes God as possessing "infinite attributes." According to thinkers such as Abraham Wolf (1972, 24-7) and Jonathan Bennett (1984, 75-8), this claim does not merely entail but is synonymous with the claim that God possesses *all* attributes, i.e. every attribute that can be instantiated. The claim is therefore compatible with God's possessing a finite *number* of attributes (thought and extension), assuming these are all the attributes that can be instantiated. Wolf argues that "it is a sheer blunder to translate Spinoza's *infinite* by *innumerable*. And it is this mistranslation that is at the root of the

IV. Amplification and Qualitative Difference

If Descartes believes that there is an absolute or qualitative distinction between divine properties and creaturely ones, why would he endorse amplification? If human understanding is qualitatively distinct from divine understanding, in what sense could the indefinite extension of the former enable us to 'reach' an apprehension of the latter? In the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes distinguishes the way in which we conceive of God's perfections—as indefinite—from the intellectual apprehension of these perfections that we do indeed

trouble. By *infinite* Spinoza means *complete* or *all*. Again and again Spinoza insists on his positive use of the term *infinite*; and again and again he uses *perfect* (i.e., complete) or *all* as the equivalent of *infinite*" (26). Similarly, Bennett argues that "It is on that reading of 'infinite attributes' that Spinoza's definition of 'God' is least arbitrary, because best supported by the theological doctrine which he was trying to capture. There was a strong tradition making God the *ens realissimum*, the entity with the most possible reality, and Spinoza hints that he has that in mind when he pauses to say in 1p9—which is not mentioned anywhere else in the Ethics—that the more real a thing is the more attributes it has [...]. The concept of the *ens realissimum* involves totality or supremacy, but not cardinality" (1984, 76-7) Since Descartes sometimes uses the term "infinite" in a quantitative sense, I am undecided as to whether he believes that God's perfections are infinite in number or merely in the way Bennett suggests. When it comes to the infinity of the perfections themselves, however, I believe that the significance of the term is that of absoluteness or totality. Divine understanding is infinite in the sense that it is a perfection of understanding in the *fullest* or *most complete* way, in the same way that a circle is infinite insofar as it possesses the perfection of circularity absolutely or without qualification, i.e., perfectly. Though God may indeed know a quantitatively infinite number of things, characterizing divine understanding as "infinite" in this sense does not entail a quantitative infinity, but rather that God has the perfection of understanding fully and hence that he knows everything there is to know (which may or may not be an infinite number of things). For a detailed analysis of the various senses of "infinite" in Spinoza's work, an analysis consistent with Wolf and Bennett's interpretation, see Kline (1977, 333-52).

possess. The only way we can "represent [God's perfections] to ourselves" is by indefinitely extending their creaturely correlates:

Take for example the perfections of God. We do not imagine these, or conceive of them, but we understand them: the way in which God understands all things in a single mental act, or the way in which his decrees are identical with himself, are things which we understand, but we do not conceive of, since we cannot, so to speak, represent them to ourselves. Thus, we understand the perfections and attributes of God, but we do not conceive of them—or, rather, in order to conceive of them, we conceive of them as indefinite. (CSMK 339)

Taken as a pure object of the understanding, Descartes believes that an idea can be said to actually contain all the content that is logically entailed by those features that are necessary for that idea to be the object of one's thought in the first place, even if the person possessing the idea does not or cannot distinctly perceive everything it contains. Using the example of a triangle, Descartes asserts that we would not deny that a "novice at geometry has an idea of a whole triangle when he understands that it is a figure bounded by three lines" merely because the novice is unaware of further features entailed by the ones of which he is aware. Likewise, "just as it suffices for the possession of an idea of the whole triangle to understand that it is a figure contained within three

lines, so it suffices for the possession of a true and complete idea of the infinite in its entirety if we understand that it is a thing which is bounded by no limits" (CSMII 254).¹¹⁸ From the fact that we may nevertheless be unaware of many of the attributes such a being must accordingly possess, it does not follow that these features are not contained within our idea, so long as this idea truly represents God's nature.¹¹⁹ In this way, says Carriero, "my idea of God makes available to me God's essence in more or less the same way that my idea of a triangle makes available to me its essence."¹²⁰

In his commentary on the above passage, Cottingham argues that Descartes' distinction between

¹¹⁸ The same claim in response to Mersenne: "No one can possibly go wrong when he tries to form a correct conception of the idea of God, provided he is willing to attend to the nature of a supremely perfect being." (CSMII 99) And in the *Principles*: "We can also have a clear and distinct idea of uncreated and independent thinking substance, that is of God. Here we must simply avoid supposing that the idea adequately represents everything which is to be found in God; and we must not invent any additional features, but concentrate only on what is really contained in the idea and on what we clearly perceive to belong to the nature of a supremely perfect being. And certainly no one can deny that we possess such an idea of God, unless he reckons that there is absolutely no knowledge of God to be found in the minds of men" (CSM 211). Descartes recognizes that there is, at least among non-experts, a diversity of opinion about the nature of God. Yet he believes that this can be explained as simply a failure to understand what is contained in the idea. Using the triangle example, he notes that "although everyone is aware of the idea of a triangle not everyone notices equally many properties in it and some people may draw false conclusions about it" (CSMII 257).

¹¹⁹ Nor is the idea of God or the idea of a triangle "augmented" or changed as we discover further features entailed by their essences. Rather, we are thereby only making our idea "more distinct and explicit, since, so long as we suppose that our original idea was a true one, it must have contained all these perfections" (CSMII 256).

¹²⁰ 2009, 172.

“understand[ing]” and “conceiv[ing]” is the distinction between having a concept and grasping or comprehending (through a “kind of internal representation”) everything it involves or contains.¹²¹ As an illustration, he cites the idea of a million pigs: “This is a notion which I can clearly understand—I am perfectly aware of what is meant. On the other hand, I cannot imagine or picture such a vast number of pigs except in a very vague and confused way; such are the limitations of the human brain.” In support of this reading, he cites Descartes’ 1630 letter to Mersenne in which he defends his claim that we understand God to be the creator of the eternal truths: “I say that I know this, not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him [...] To grasp something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one’s thought” (CSMK 25).

Yet Cottingham’s example suggests that the reason why we can’t conceive of God’s perfections—as well as the reason why conceiving of the *indefinite* amplification of our own could constitute an imperfect substitute for these conceptions—is the *quantitatively* infinite nature of divine

¹²¹ 1976, 75. In this sense, conceiving would fall somewhere between pure understanding and imagination.

perfections. Though we cannot conceive of a million pigs, Cottingham argues that

[w]hat I can do, however, is to try to grasp, or 'get my mind round' the bafflingly large number, so that my conception of what is involved is rather more vivid than the pure and simple understanding of what is meant. One way of going about this might be to think of ten groups of one hundred pigs; then think of this number put together in a field; then think of a thousand such fields. This seems to be the sort of process which Descartes has in mind [in the passage above] apropos of conceiving of the infinite perfections of God: e.g. to grasp what is involved in the concept of infinite knowledge, one has to think of possessing a little more knowledge than one has at present, and then a little more again than this new amount, and so on.¹²²

However, in the passage (above) from the *Conversation with Burman*, the perfection at issue is not merely the uniquely large scope of divine knowledge (which perhaps includes a quantitatively infinite number of things), but "the way" God knows these things "in a single mental act." Menn suggests that the single act by which God knows all things is the apprehension of his own will. In this, he explains, Descartes would be following scholastic tradition: "God knows things outside himself because he knows his own will, and because he knows the necessary truth (entailed by God's essence) that whatever God wills is as he wills it to be. So God does not have to 'look at' or 'make contact with'

¹²² 1976, 76.

things outside him, and his success in knowing does not depend on anything outside his own essence: he 'looks' only at himself (and from eternity, before there is anything but God to look at), and his ability to know his creatures depends only on his power to produce them as he wills."¹²³ How could amplification, which is a purely quantitative modification, give us cognitive purchase on such a *qualitatively* distinct perfection?

Descartes' explicit use of analogy in his account of divine necessary existence will here prove to be especially illuminating, for he uses a geometrical example to illustrate the heuristic utility of conceptual amplification in the context of qualitative distinction. This example suggests that our cognitive access to the divine perfections by way of creaturely ones is similar to the cognitive access we have of certain geometrical figures by virtue of the indefinite amplification of others. In his reply to Caterus' objection to characterizing God as self-caused, Descartes argues that even though God is his own cause only in the sense that his "inexhaustible power [...] is the cause or reason for his not needing an [efficient] cause" we are nevertheless "entitled to think that in a sense he stands in the same relation to himself as an

¹²³ 1998, 339.

efficient cause does to its effect" (CSMII 80). In his effort to justify the use of efficient causality as a model for divine self-causation, he appeals to the "way in geometry the concept of the arc of an *indefinitely* large circle is customarily extended to the concept of a straight line; or the concept of a rectilinear polygon with an *indefinite* number of sides is extended to that of a circle" (emphasis mine). Similarly, we conceive of divine self-causation by amplifying our concept of efficient causal power up to the point at which it includes the power to preserve oneself in existence. This procedure, says Descartes, is

necessary for guiding the natural light in such a way as to enable us to have a clear awareness of these matters. It is exactly the same sort of comparison between a sphere (or other curvilinear figure) and a rectilinear figure that enables Archimedes to demonstrate various properties of the sphere which could scarcely be understood otherwise. And just as no one criticizes these proofs, although they involve regarding a sphere as similar to a polyhedron, so it seems to me that I am not open to criticism in this context for using the analogy of an efficient cause to explain features which in fact belong to a formal cause, that is, to the very essence of God. (CSMII 168)

Though the details of the analogy Descartes proposes between efficient and formal causes of existence will have to be left to a later chapter, the geometrical example

illustrates important features of Descartes' understanding of amplification as a tool for philosophical theology. In the same way that an idea of a true circle cannot be gradually formed by amplifying features of a polygon but is attained when we 'reach' in thought the idea of a figure that has the approximated perfection in the fullest way possible (i.e., infinitely), so "the idea of God is not gradually formed by us when we amplify the perfections of his creatures; it is formed all at once and in its entirety as soon as our mind reaches an infinite being which is incapable of any amplification" (CSMII 256). Just as the indefinite amplification of the number of sides of a polyhedron does not enable us to *construct* an idea of a sphere, so we cannot *construct* ideas of divine perfections, or the divine essence, by amplifying ideas of ourselves because amplification could never overcome the *qualitative* gulf that separates the natures.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, as in the geometrical example, we recognize that we can approach (asymptotically) the notion of God by amplifying features of ourselves. This procedure enables us to represent to

¹²⁴ Leibniz (1981, 157) makes a similar claim in his response to Lockean amplification arguments intended to show that our ideas of God are nothing more than our ideas of creaturely attributes amplified indefinitely. He argues that "The true infinite, strictly speaking, is only in the absolute, which precedes all composition and is not formed by that addition of parts."

ourselves certain aspects of the approximated figure that, he says, "could scarcely be understood otherwise."

We can use this geometrical analogy to understand Descartes' somewhat perplexing statements regarding the use and value of amplification. Consider the perfection of understanding. Descartes had agreed with his critics that "everyone has the form or idea of understanding; and by indefinitely extending this he can form the idea of God's understanding. And a similar procedure applies to the other attributes of God." This sort of statement seemed incompatible with other remarks disparaging the value of amplification for cognizing this perfection. In the Third Meditation, for example, the narrator had argued that I cannot generate an idea of God's knowledge merely by noticing a "gradual increase in my knowledge" since "this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential {but only what is actual and *real*}" (CSMII 32) (emphasis mine).¹²⁵ Yet if God's understanding alone is *actual* understanding, how can the amplification of the false (human) perfection give us any cognitive access to the genuine (divine) one?

If we take the geometrical example seriously, however, the first thing we notice is that the indefinite

¹²⁵ The parenthetical insertion "but only what is actual and real" was added by Descartes to the French version of the *Meditations*.

amplification of our idea of human understanding would be the indefinite *approximation* of the perfection of God's understanding in the same way that the indefinite amplification of our idea of a rectilinear polygon is the indefinite *approximation* of the perfection of circularity. Just as a rectilinear polygon is not a circle, and cannot become one through the indefinite amplification of the number of its sides, so human understanding is not true (infinite) understanding, and cannot become such understanding merely by indefinitely increasing its scope or degree of certitude. Thus if Descartes' critics were right that our idea of God's understanding is nothing more than the idea of human understanding amplified indefinitely, then we could no more be said to thereby possess an idea of God's understanding than we could be said to possess the idea of a circle by virtue of conceiving of a rectilinear polygon with an indefinite number of sides.

Yet in the geometrical example, the process of amplification is guided by an imperfect though real understanding of the qualitatively distinct nature approximated. Descartes argues that the reason we accept the Archimedean analogy is because we *already* recognize that a rectilinear polygon with an indefinite number of

sides resembles, but is not the same as, a circle.¹²⁶ Though we recognize that only the circle possesses the perfection of circularity in an infinite or unlimited fashion (i.e., truly) we understand that we can approximate infinite (true) circularity by amplifying a rectilinear polygon. The goal of the proof is not to 'give' us an idea of a circle, for we already possess an understanding (albeit an imperfect one) of this nature. Rather, the aim is to unpack (or render explicit) elements of our idea of a circle that we cannot represent to ourselves. Presumably, part of the understanding amplification can confer in the proof we are considering is an understanding of the approximate area of a circle. If we possess the concept of a circle with a given set of dimensions, Descartes would hold that this feature—the circle's area—would already be contained within our idea. Yet if we do not understand how to 'unpack' our idea so as to represent to ourselves this feature—the exact area of the figure—we can use analogous figures whose areas

¹²⁶ As I will argue in the chapter on top-down derivation, Descartes explicitly argues that the analogy at play here is one in which we derive an analogous 'common' concept from concepts of analogous entities. The analogy is *not* one of using the concept of one figure to indeterminately represent another of which we have no positive knowledge. Archimedes' proofs presuppose a prior apprehension of the similarity between the figures and thus a prior possession of both the concepts of a polygon and a circle. Descartes imagines Archimedes making this very point: "If I thought that a sphere could not be taken to be a rectilinear or quasi-rectilinear figure with an infinite number of sides, I should attach no force to my proof, since the proof does not strictly apply to a sphere as a curvilinear figure but applies to it only as a rectilinear figure with infinitely many sides."

we *do* know to represent to ourselves (conceive or grasp) an *approximation* of this feature. Specifically, if we already understand how to conceive (or represent to ourselves) the area of a rectilinear polygon, inscribing a circle within two such polygons whose sides are indefinitely extended could give us an approximation of this circle's area. This procedure, however, already assumes that we recognize that there is a fundamental resemblance between the figures.

Similarly, Descartes has argued that we already see how divine understanding differs qualitatively from our own. Even though we cannot conceive (represent to ourselves) everything such a perfection entails—e.g., “the way in which God understands all things in a single mental act”—these features are really contained within our concept of infinite (true) understanding. Yet because we can represent to ourselves the (discrete) way in which humans understand things, and we further recognize that this faculty resembles the divine one, we can use ideas of *this* kind of understanding to represent to ourselves *approximations* of the divine perfection. We can, for example, amplify indefinitely the scope and degree of certainty of human knowledge, and then use this idea to approximate the perfection of divine understanding, a

reality that we can otherwise only 'touch' with our minds.¹²⁷

According to Descartes, the fundamental mistake that his critics make regarding our cognition of God is not the assumption that we conceive of the divine perfections by conceiving of amplified versions of creaturely ones. He had agreed, in his letter to Regius, that our idea of God is "formed in this manner." Rather, what his critics fail to realize is that such amplification presupposes, and is guided by, an innate *understanding* of the approximated

¹²⁷ Or consider the example of eternity. The traditional view of divine eternity is that God exists 'outside' of or 'apart' from time (see Helm 2014). We may conceive of eternity by extending the duration of a thing's existence indefinitely into the future, but this sort of amplification does not provide one with a concept of eternity, but merely sempiternity. Though Descartes doesn't use this example, Leibniz does in his *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1998). In response to Philalethes' objection that "we have no positive idea of an infinite duration, i.e. of eternity," Theophilus (the character espousing the Leibnizian position) argues that we do have such a positive idea, "provided that it is conceived not as an infinite whole but rather as an absolute, i.e. as an attribute with no limits. In the case of eternity, it lies in the necessity of God's existence: there is no dependence on parts, nor is the notion of it formed by adding times" 159. Philalethes retorts: "'Again we are apt to think we have a positive comprehensive idea of eternity, which is as much as to say that there is no part of that duration which is not clearly known in our idea. But however great a duration someone represents to himself, since what is in question is a boundless extent there must always remain a part of his idea which his still beyond what he represents to himself and which is very obscure and undetermined. And hence it is, that in disputes and reasonings concerning eternity, or any other infinite, we are very apt to tangle our selves in manifest absurdities.'" Theophilus responds by emphasizing, as Descartes does, that the idea of the infinite is an object of understanding, not something we can imagine: "[W]e have a 'comprehensive', i.e. accurate, idea of eternity, since we have the definition of it, although we have no image of it at all. But ideas of infinites are not formed by the assembling of 'parts'; and the mistakes people make when reasoning about the infinite do not arise from their having no image of it" (158).

(qualitatively distinct) perfections in question. We recognize that we can 'approach' the nature of the divine intellect by amplifying features of our own *only because we already grasp an underlying similarity between the two faculties*. In this way, amplification presupposes an innate intellectual idea of the approximated nature. We do not need to possess an idea of a circle in order to amplify the number of sides of a rectilinear polygon; we *do* need such an idea if the amplification includes the *recognition or insight* that we can thereby *approximate, but never reach*, the nature approximated. Similarly, we do not need to possess an idea of divine power or knowledge in order to use amplification to produce the idea of a more powerful or knowledgeable creature; yet we *do* need to possess such ideas if we are to amplify these human perfections "up to the point where they are *recognized* as more than human," for this is to use and regard the amplified perfection as an approximate representation of the qualitatively distinct divine perfections.¹²⁸

¹²⁸Emphasis mine. Though Jacques Maritain (1944) also takes these mathematical examples to illustrate how Descartes viewed the role of amplification for understanding God, he misunderstands their significance. According to Maritain, the examples show "how Cartesian thought is riveted to univocity [and hence to anthropomorphism] and confuses the metaphysical analogy of the creature to the creator with an entirely different type of analogy—that of the passage to the geometrical limit, which causes mathematically to pass from one specific type to the other simply by increasing to infinity in the same line" (125). On the contrary, the mathematical examples are used to

Understanding "infinite" as expressing a qualitative difference also explains why Descartes would hold that we are always and *necessarily* in the position of novices when it comes to representing to ourselves what is contained in our ideas of God's essence and perfections. In the Third Meditation, the narrator asserts that we could never grasp the nature of those perfections that we know are contained formally in God, nor could we hope to understand, much less grasp, the "countless" others that are undoubtedly in him that have no creaturely correlates (CSMII 32). To this, Gassendi objects that the narrator would forever lack a "true" (complete) idea of the infinite. Yet Descartes argues that the very fact that we can *never* represent to ourselves everything contained within the idea is one of the features contained within the notion of an infinite being:

For the idea of the infinite, if it is to be a true idea, cannot be grasped at all, since the impossibility of being grasped is contained in the

illustrate the value of amplification *in light of the recognition of qualitative difference*. Descartes never suggests that the indefinite amplification of the number of sides of a polyhedron could enable us to "pass" from the idea of this figure to the idea of a sphere. In these examples, we already possess concepts of both, and amplification is merely a heuristic tool for representing to ourselves features of one by likening it to the other. The examples should not therefore be taken to show that Descartes thought that our ideas of the divine perfections are nothing more than ideas of creaturely perfections extended indefinitely (which is a form of natural theology that critics such as Gassendi had endorsed, and that Descartes, as I have shown, has denied).

formal definition of the infinite. Nonetheless, it is evident that the idea which we have of the infinite does not merely represent one part of it, but really does represent the infinite in its entirety. The manner of representation, however, is the manner appropriate to a human idea." (CSMII 253)¹²⁹

Finite minds can grasp only finite natures. In other words, since our faculty of understanding is radically imperfect, we can represent to ourselves (conceive) only creaturely being and creaturely perfections. As the narrator asserts in the Fourth Meditation, "it is the nature of a created intellect to be finite" and "it is in the nature of a finite intellect to lack understanding of many things" (CSMII 42). Even though God really is an object of our understanding, his qualitatively distinct nature entails that we cannot represent him to ourselves except in "the manner appropriate to a human idea," i.e., in terms of what are *qualitatively* distinct creaturely perfections. The best we can do is approach, or approximate, the divine properties by indefinitely amplifying our own.

Adams and others are therefore right, in a sense, that Descartes' argument against amplification is the same as the argument against negation. Yet this is not, as these

¹²⁹ The fact of its incomprehensibility is, in this sense, a necessary component of its intelligibility. Descartes uses the metaphor of a king who discloses his majesty to his subjects by keeping his distance from them. As Beyssade explains, "distance is a mark of majesty, and to decrease familiarity is not to decrease knowledge, but to disclose to a subject the true knowledge of his unequal relation to his king" (1992, 88).

interpreters suggest, because we can't conceive of creaturely perfections without comparing them to standards of divine perfection. Rather, it is due to amplification's inability to overcome the *qualitative* divide separating infinite (true) perfections from finite (false) ones. A polygon with an indefinite number of sides is still just a polygon, and unless such a figure is apprehended as an *approximation* of a circle, it could never represent the nature in question (circularity). In other words, we must conceive of the polygon as, or judge it to be, an *imperfect* circle. And in order to do this, we must already possess, however obliquely, a concept of a *perfect* (true) one. Likewise, to apprehend indefinitely amplified creaturely perfections as approximations of divine ones is to conceive of them as, or judge them to be, absolutely imperfect instances of divine perfections. As CPP indicates, we can do this only if we already possess concepts of the perfect attributes in question.

V. The Nature of the Qualitative Difference

The absolute or qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely properties presupposed by CPP shows why we cannot construct ideas of the former by amplifying those of

the latter even in cases where we do not judge creatures to be imperfect in the absolute sense. An idea of that which has 'more reality' cannot be derived from an idea of that which 'has less' for this apparent distinction in degree is actually a distinction in *kind*.¹³⁰ Descartes cannot, however, be committed to the general view that, if two properties are qualitatively distinct, an idea of one can never be used to construct an idea of the other. That this must be so is clear from the fact that he obviously thinks that ideas of some creaturely perfections are *derived* (by partial negation) from ideas of qualitatively distinct divine ones.¹³¹ As we have mentioned in the first chapter, the qualitative distinction at issue is a unique one:

¹³⁰ David Cunning has also observed that "most commentators argue that Descartes' argument for the view that we do not compose an idea of infinitude is that we would not have an idea of finitude unless we first had an idea of infinitude" (2010, 116f). He argues, as I have, that "Descartes is also offering the argument that we notice that our idea of an infinite substance is an idea of more reality than is represented by a composite of finite ideas." Cunning does not, however, explain what it means for infinite substance to have "more reality" in this way and does not suggest, as I do, that it signals an absolute or qualitative divide.

¹³¹ Does Descartes believe we can derive the idea of a creaturely property from the idea of another qualitatively distinct creaturely one? He does not seem to think that we can derive the idea of the attribute of extension from the idea of the attribute of thought. In fact, when he wants to emphasize the distinction between his ideas of mental and extended created substance—which is clearly a qualitative one—he notes that the difference between the two ideas is surpassed only by that obtaining between our idea of God and creatures. If I cannot generate an idea of mind by modifying an idea of body (or vice versa), surely the idea of my own mind cannot enable me to construct a concept of God's. The supreme difficulty, however, will be in explaining how I can nevertheless derive an idea of a finite mind from that of God's. Malebranche accepts a similar distinction between God's mind and our own, arguing that the term "mind" cannot be used univocally of the two since "God is higher above created minds than created minds are above bodies." (1997, 250)

creaturely attributes are qualitatively distinct by virtue of being *imitations* of divine attributes. Descartes accepts what may appear to be contradictory theses: 1) God possesses all the reality or perfection found in creatures and 2) nothing can be predicated univocally of God and creatures since none of the pure perfections and transcendentals exist in them with the same nature. This is a paradox that we will address at length in the next few chapters. For the moment, however, it is enough to note that Descartes' considered view must be that an idea of a property can be derived from an idea of a qualitatively distinct one only if the latter is a divine property.

Indeed, ideas of creaturely attributes, not divine ones, are actually created through the process of amplification. We do not need to possess an idea of a divine attribute to apprehend a given creaturely attribute as imperfect relative to another creature's.¹³² Yet insofar as the process of amplification requires us to view creaturely attribute as *absolutely* imperfect, i.e., imperfect in the sense of failing to be the same *kind* as the perfect, we thereby come to possess, for the first time, the notion of this creaturely attribute as a thing

¹³² Which is not to say that we do not, as a consequence of possessing concepts of divine attributes, thereby view one creaturely attribute as more perfect (by degree) than another given the fact that it resembles the divine attribute more closely.

that resembles, but fall short of, a certain perfection. Descartes' triangle example can be used to illustrate how the apprehension of imperfection constitutes the creation of a novel idea.¹³³ Prior to attaining the insight that the drawn figure is an *imperfect* triangle, Descartes claims we apprehended it simply as a triangle. Though grasping its imperfection enabled us to then see that this original notion of a geometrical triangle was in fact the notion of a *perfect* one, we did not thereby augment this latter notion. We do, however, emerge with a new idea—that of a thing that resembles, but falls short of, a triangle. This is an idea that is distinct from both the notion of a triangle and the figure apprehend as a mere assembly of lines. This new idea of an imperfect triangle is created via what Descartes here calls a "negation," though elsewhere he clarifies that this is really a partial negation, a matter of "taking something away" from the idea of being in general. The idea that would be produced by a complete negation would simply be the idea of a thing that is not a triangle. There is obviously more, however, to our notion of an imperfect triangle, for we grasp the imperfect

¹³³ Though Descartes seems to hold that we become aware of creaturely imperfection via the amplification process, he never suggests that a similar process must hold for geometrical cases, for example. Burman doesn't specifically suggest that we derive the concept of a true triangle by amplifying the attributes of imperfect ones, but that we "deduce the perfect triangle from the imperfect."

as in some sense *resembling* the perfect. Though the drawn figure is not a triangle, it is nevertheless *like* a triangle. The nature of this positive relation between the perfect and imperfect will be the subject of the next few chapters.

Conclusion: The Recognition of Imperfection

That the achievement of philosophical reflection is not an awareness of the perfect thing as such but the *recognition* of its perfection presents us with one more parallel between Descartes and the Platonic tradition. Plato is most often interpreted as holding that, prior to an explicit awareness of the Forms, some knowledge of them is already involved in everyday concept acquisition.¹³⁴ Recollection provides us with the ability to classify particulars under concepts that we otherwise would have no way of acquiring. As Lee Franklin argues,

Most people have no idea that the items of the sensible world are images of Forms. This is an awareness granted only by philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, what all people can do is classify sensible particulars by reference, in most cases unknowing reference, to the Forms. According to Plato,

¹³⁴ Dominic Scott, however, has argued in his *Recollection and Experience* (1995) that Plato held recollection involves only the explicit awareness of the Forms and hence that ordinary concept acquisition is to be explained in empiricist terms.

our ability to do this requires that we are acquainted with the Form itself, and that we have it in mind whenever we predicate it. In this way, Forms play a role akin to that of concepts. Just as children and non-philosophers can possess a concept without giving any thought to concepts as such, so Plato thinks we can have a Form in mind without knowing it.¹³⁵

Similarly, Descartes seems to hold that, prior to philosophical reflection, we nevertheless draw on our innate knowledge in our everyday cognitive activities. Before we ever distinguish a true triangle from an imperfect or finite (false) instance, we implicitly employ the concept of a perfect or infinite (true) triangle when we classify various sensible instances as triangles. An unreflective awareness of the divine nature seems to play a similar role, enabling us to classify, for example, various human properties as instances of knowledge, power, goodness or beauty. Only subsequently do we recognize that these creaturely instances fall short absolutely of the standards we had unknowingly employed, and hence that these standards constitute the true instances of these attributes. Indeed, Menn suggests that, in the *Second Meditation*, the narrator's notion of intellectual attributes are, unbeknownst to the narrator, really notions proper to God's

¹³⁵ 2005, 298.

intellect.¹³⁶ Descartes appears to say as much when he claims that the idea of "intellectual nature in general [...] is the idea which, if considered without limitation, represents God, and if limited, is the idea of an angel or a human soul" (CSMK 55).¹³⁷ If this is the case, however, the notions must not yet be clear and distinct, since the narrator does not apprehend his intellectual properties as, for example, intrinsically incomprehensible. Such confusion is, perhaps, to be expected at the beginning stages of the narrator's meditation. After he has established that he is a *thinking* thing, he can then achieve the insight that "I am not myself the supreme being and am lacking in countless respects" (CSMII 38). This apparent disambiguation of the ideas of self and God is, if Menn is correct, the *derivation* of the idea of the imperfect from the notion of the perfect.

The arguments from amplification were intended to undermine the claim that the idea of God is innate by

¹³⁶ "When we learn in the second Meditation that the soul thinks (knows, judges, doubts, desires to know more), we are already implicitly conceiving an ideal standard of thought, a being which possess of itself the intellectual perfections we can only gradually acquire[...]" (288).

¹³⁷ Descartes' use of the phrase "in general" here appears to be equivalent to the sense of "infinite" or "perfect" in CPP. This is the sense of the phrase that Malebranche appears to employ in the *Search After Truth* when he describes God as "the being without individual restriction, the infinite being, being in general" (240), and the idea of God as an idea "of being in general, of being without limit, of infinite being" (318). He likewise describes our desire for infinite goodness, or the good as such, as an "impulse towards the good in general" (267, and 268-9).

showing how we could construct ideas of divine perfections (and, indeed, the idea of God himself) by merely amplifying our ideas of creaturely perfections. The principle of CPP—namely, the claim that I could not apprehend something as falling short of the perfection definitive of a thing without already possessing a notion of the thing in question—shows why none of these amplification arguments can indeed provide us with an authentic idea of God (i.e., an idea representing God's nature). First, if amplification presupposes an awareness of the creaturely attribute's absolute imperfection, we must already possess a notion of the perfect kind the creature falls short of. Second, if such an apprehension of absolute imperfection is not assumed, and we apprehend creaturely attributes as either the things they are or imperfect relative to other creaturely attributes, there is no way we could arrive at notions of the divine perfections by modifying the creaturely ones by degree; this is so because of the qualitative distinction described by CPP—the imperfect is seen to fall short of the perfect absolutely, i.e., insofar as it fails to be the same *kind* as the perfect. Though we cannot therefore *construct* ideas truly representing God's attributes by amplifying ideas of our own, we can use such amplification to represent to ourselves (conceive)

approximations of those perfections that we can otherwise only "reach" in thought (i.e., understand imperfectly). Just as the fact that we *know* that we can 'approach,' but cannot construct, a concept of a circle (or calculate its exact area) by amplifying the number of sides of a regular polygon betrays knowledge of the approximated nature (a circle), so our awareness that the amplification of our ideas of creaturely properties can give us only *approximations* of the divine perfections demonstrates a similar implicit understanding of these natures.

Ch. III. The Positive Relation Between the Perfect and the Imperfect

The notion of imperfection at issue within CPP is that of an absolute or qualitative difference; the imperfect is imperfect insofar as it fails to be the same kind as the perfect. The concept of the perfect is thus prior to the concept of the imperfect in the sense that apprehending something as not-x presupposes a notion of x. When applied to the case of creatures and God, the qualitative difference does not consist in creatures possessing features that God lacks. Rather, human beings fall short of God by virtue of 1) failing to possess correlates of all the divine properties 2) possessing correlates of that which exists in God eminently (e.g. extension); and 3) possessing correlates that are mere imitations of divine properties. Since they are qualitatively distinct from the divine attributes, the creaturely correlates in (3) are also imperfect in the sense indicated by CPP. Yet qualitative difference is obviously not a sufficient condition for one thing, or one property, to be an imperfect instance of another; a square, a cantaloupe and the Magna Carta all fall short of being triangles, but it doesn't follow that they can be correctly described as

"imperfect triangles." As the image-model metaphor suggests, there must be a resemblance relation between the imperfect and the perfect; an imperfect *x* is apprehended as not-*x*, but also as somehow *like x*. The third sense of creaturely imperfection—their possessing imitations of divine perfections—is also the source of some form of resemblance between the perfect and imperfect. The task for this chapter will be to explore various ways of making sense of this positive relation.

I. The Modal Relation and Resemblance

Robert Rubin has recently argued that a modal relation ought to be our model for understanding the conceptual and ontological relationship between finite and infinite substance.¹³⁸ Appealing to Descartes' efforts to define substantiality in terms of criteria of ontological and conceptual (in)dependence, he suggests that creatures and God are not "really distinct" but, like modes in comparison to finite substances, only "semidistinct."¹³⁹ For Descartes, claims Rubin, A and B are really distinct if each can exist without the other, while A is merely semidistinct from B if B can exist without A but not vice

¹³⁸ 2008, 62-88.

¹³⁹ 2008, 62.

versa. Interpreting the relation as one of semidistinctness has many advantages, claims Rubin. First, if the relationship between creatures and God resembles that which obtains between creatures and modes, then there is a "single axis running through [Descartes'] hierarchy."¹⁴⁰ Further, we can take Descartes' use of the term "substance" for both creatures and God as an invitation "to view God as standing to His ontological dependents (at least in some respects) as created substances stand to their properties or modes."¹⁴¹ And most importantly, we can see how the conceptual dependence isomorphic with the ontological dependence of semidistinctness may have "led [Descartes] to the conclusion that we cannot conceive of ourselves without conceiving of a primary substance from which we are semidistinct."¹⁴²

Understanding the relationship between finite and infinite substance in terms of the modal one of semidistinctness seems to provide a relatively simple account of the positive (resemblance) relation between them. If we consider the attribute of a created substance (e.g., extension) in isolation from its modes, Rubin suggests that this is simply the idea of boundless

¹⁴⁰ 2008, 67.

¹⁴¹ 2008, 67.

¹⁴² 2008, 70.

extension. When we predicate a mode of a created substance, however, we are introducing limits or bounds to this attribute—what Descartes will at one time describe as a “defect or limitation of perfection” (CSMII 114). Thus, for example, “to say of a table that it has the mode of being three feet long is to say it falls short of infinite extension in a certain way.” To conceive of a mode is thus to think of an attribute as being limited or determined in some way. In his own analysis of CPP, Stephen Menn has also suggested that this priority can best be understood through the analogy of spatial limitation insofar as we “conceive of a limited space by adding the ideas of limits to the idea of space as such, and space as such is infinite.”¹⁴³

Yet it seems that the modal relation of semidistinctness is able to secure the resemblance of the imperfect to the perfect only at the cost of eliding the qualitative distinction between the two. For Rubin, the table’s imperfection qua modified thing does not consist in its failing to be *extended* but in its failing to possess the attribute in a quantitatively unlimited fashion. Similarly, the finite space in Menn’s example still appears to be an instance of *space*. Notice also that the

¹⁴³ 1998, 284.

distinction between infinite and finite space consists in the fact that finite space is a *part* of space. It is clear that we cannot conceive of something as being a *part* of *x* without possessing the concept of *x*. Yet this is not the priority relation that Descartes describes holding between our concepts of God (infinite being) and creatures (finite being), for the perfection of creatures does not fall short of God's perfection by virtue of being a limited *part* of that perfection. Or to turn to the triangle example, an imperfect triangle is not imperfect by virtue of constituting a *part* of a perfect one, but by falling short of a numerically distinct perfection. Menn and Rubin's examples are in this sense better suited to Spinoza's pantheistic version of CPP, in which finite things are modes of infinite substance in something like the sense of parts.¹⁴⁴ For Spinoza, the modal distinction would seem to entail univocity, as creaturely properties are for him merely *quantitatively* distinct from God's.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Some scholars have, however, questioned whether Spinoza's substance/mode relation is really an endorsement of pantheism (as the whole/part analogy would indicate). Edwin Curley, for example, argued that the relation is simply that of causal dependence (1969, 4-28). Others such as Yitzhak Melamed have countered that Spinoza is indeed a pantheist, but that it is a mistake to treat the substance/mode relation as a whole/part relation (2013, 49-60).

¹⁴⁵ Adams argues that, for Spinoza, "thought and extension are predicated univocally of finite things and God. What they are is the same in finite things as it is in God, or at least in the infinite and eternal modes of God. The difference is just that the thought or the extension that is in a finite thing does not contain the complete system of

In contrast to Rubin's claim that creatures and God are not, for Descartes, really distinct, recent analyses of Descartes' theory of distinctions in the context of late scholastic thought give us good reason to believe that he viewed the separability of one thing from another (and, consequently, the ability to clearly and distinctly conceive of one thing apart from another) as merely a *sign* (sufficient condition) of the former's real distinction from the latter.¹⁴⁶ When Descartes, in the *Principles*, asserts that "we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other" (CSMI 213), it does not follow that the conceivability of two things apart from one another is a necessary condition of their being really distinct. That creatures cannot exist

thinking or extended being that is in God." In a footnote, however, Adams notes that, Spinoza denies univocity when we conceive of God's intellect as constituting the divine essence. In the *Ethics*, for example, he states that "God's intellect, in so far as it is conceived to constitute the divine essence, differs from our intellect both as to its essence and as to its existence, and cannot agree with it in anything except in name" (IP17S). A further complication is the fact that Spinoza does not apply the part/whole mode/substance analysis to divine attributes other than thought and extension. As Adams observes, divine attributes such as immutability or eternity are *propria* of God, "and Spinoza is not committed to finite things' having properties of the same nature with them" (101).

¹⁴⁶ As Marleen Rozemone (2011, 243) has argued, Eustachius of Saint Paul, as well as other scholastics, held that separability is not a necessary condition for a real distinction. One of the examples he gives is the distinction between God and creatures -there is no separability (creatures cannot exist without God) and yet there is a real distinction. Paul Hoffman (2002, 68) also argues that Both Suarez and Descartes recognize the capacity to exist apart as a 'sign' of a real distinction, not a necessary feature of it. See also Gonzalo Rodríguez Pereyra, 2008.

apart from God does not entail they are not really distinct from him, for one thing could be really distinct from another so long as the ontological dependence relation is merely causal. In the *Correspondence*, for example, Descartes can say that "when we call a created substance self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence which it needs in order to subsist" (CSMK 193). As Suarez would put it, creatures are really distinct from God not because they can exist apart from him (for they cannot), but because they can exist without being in a "real union" with him. Shape, on the other hand, fails to be really distinct from extended substance not because it merely cannot exist without it, but because it cannot exist without existing *in* the substance (as a mode of extension). Indeed, the need to account for the relationship between creatures and God seems to have been a primary motivation for the scholastic effort to show that a real distinction is compatible with ontological and conceptual dependence. Many thinkers affirmed that creatures could neither be nor be conceived (at least properly) apart from God; few would have done so, however, if the consequences were inevitably pantheistic.

The advantages Rubin claims of viewing the relation as one of semidistinctness are similarly questionable. It is

doubtful that Descartes would have taken the asymmetry of the ontological relations (God/creature; substance/mode) as a cause for concern, since he repeatedly emphasizes the ontological and conceptual *distance* between creatures and God. Indeed, given God's nature in comparison to our own, it would be odd if it were to turn out that the relation between the two were not *sui generis*. Nor should we take Descartes' willingness to call both creatures and God "substances" an indication that creatures stand to God as modes do to substances. God is a substance in the primary sense, and it is the extension of this designation to *creatures* that requires the explanation. We should therefore take it as evidence for the very opposite conclusion: namely, that Descartes is willing to extend the term "substance" to creatures because he does *not* want his readers to think that creatures stand to God as modes do to creaturely substances. Here his concern was probably less for the independence and identity of creatures than with the threat such modification would pose to the sovereignty of God.¹⁴⁷ God cannot be modified, for this would entail a

¹⁴⁷ Being a bearer of properties is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for being a substance since 1) God is identical with his attributes and 2) modes can have modifications of their own. Descartes' description of substance in terms of this traditional Aristotelian conception ought not to be taken as a definition of substance, but merely a statement of a necessary condition for *created* substance. See Rozemond, 245.

complexity, mutability, and limitation inconsistent with his absolute perfection.¹⁴⁸ In other words, applying the modal relation to creatures and God is inappropriate not because it would reduce creatures to mere modes, but because it would reduce God to a modifiable thing.

Descartes is able to preserve the ontological dependence of creatures on God without jeopardizing God's transcendence because a real distinction between creatures and God is fully compatible with such ontological dependence. His designating creatures "substances" should therefore be taken to express the view that such a real distinction does indeed obtain, despite creatures' ontological dependence on God.

Nor, finally, is Rubin correct in arguing that the conceptual dependence of the idea of the finite on the infinite is sufficiently similar to that obtaining between the idea of a mode and a created substance. The conceptual independence of the idea of a created substance (with respect to mode) does not resemble the conceptual independence of the idea of infinite substance (with

¹⁴⁸In the *Principles*, Descartes argues "we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God any variation is unintelligible" (CSM 211). The classic early-modern expression of such a critique can be found in Pierre Bayle's objections to Spinoza's thesis that created things are modes of God. Bayle, however, also focuses on the alleged consequence that God would possess contradictory properties and would be responsible for evil.

respect to finite substance). Rubin is right that we can conceive of a created substance without conceiving of any *particular* mode, just as we conceive of infinite substance without conceiving of any particular finite substance. In the *Rules*, for example, after Descartes asserts the conceptual dependence of modes,¹⁴⁹ he argues that, "though most people count them as contingent," the idea of my own existence presupposes that of God's. Yet he immediately qualifies this statement, noting that "very many necessary propositions, when converted, are contingent. Thus from the fact that I exist I may conclude with certainty that God exists, but from the fact that God exists I cannot legitimately assert that I too exist" (CSM 46). Propositions concerning the existence of a particular mode are similarly inconvertible: from the fact that a given substance exists, I cannot infer that a certain mode exists.

Yet while we can conceive of a created substance without conceiving of any *particular* mode, we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of a created substance without conceiving of it as being modified *in some way*. This dependence is an ontological feature of created substance—it cannot exist without being modified in some

¹⁴⁹ "[W]e cannot conceive of a shape which is completely lacking in extension, or a motion wholly lacking in duration" (CSM 46).

way. As Secada argues, the conceptual relation between a mode and a created substance is that of a determinate to its determinable: Determinable essences cannot exist without being determined in some way.¹⁵⁰ Just as I cannot conceive of something having figure without also having some kind of determinate shape, so I cannot conceive of the essential attribute of a created substance (extension or thought) as existing without existing in some determinate way (e.g., as having modes of thought or extension).¹⁵¹ Rubin cites the example of the idea of wax in the Second Meditation, noting that it is there conceived apart from everything semidistinct from it: “[The narrator] finds that it does not per se have any bounds to its extension; boundaries imply modes, which he has conceptually set aside.” Yet what the narrator has set aside here are the *particular* modes inhering in this wax. In the Fifth Replies, Descartes clarifies that “I did not abstract the concept of the wax from the concept of its accidents

¹⁵⁰ “Descartes understood inherence as determination, and accidents or modes as ways of being of the one essential attribute of the substance to which they belong. He conceived substances as existing determinable essences, and he took their non-essential real properties to be determinates of these essences: *the idea of a mode of a substance involves the idea of its essence as the idea of a determinate involves the idea of its determinable* (e.g., *as the idea of square involves the idea of figure*)” (2000, 14). As Eric Funkhouser argues, “An object instantiating a determinable must also instantiate some determinate under that determinable. Colored objects must be red or yellow or blue, etc. No object is merely colored *simpliciter*” (2006, 2).

¹⁵¹ Rodríguez Pereyra too notes that “substance needs modes to exist, but it does not need any particular modes” (2008, 81). See also Bernard Williams 1978, 125.

[modes]" (CSMII 248). As he argues in his *Conversation with Burman*, though he "conceded and stated that these accidents, such as hardness , cold, and so on, leave the wax, he also stated and expressly remarked that others always replace them, so that the wax is never without accidents."¹⁵² However, the idea of infinite substance is the idea of something that is unmodified and unmodifiable, and does not presuppose in any way the existence of finite substances. This conceptual independence reflects the traditional theistic belief that God could exist without creation; created substances, however, cannot exist without modes.

Rubin seems to be equating the infinity of (creaturely) attributes understood as *generality* with the infinity of (divine) attributes understood as absolute perfection (or reality). When we conceive of the created attribute of extension in general, we are conceiving of it with respect to the (infinite) range of its potential modifications. As Secada puts it, "the distinct and complete conception of a [finite] substance, which is just the conception of its essence, contains its possible modes or properties, in the same way in which a determinable

¹⁵² Cottingham 1976, 10.

contains its determinates."¹⁵³ Thus the process of conceiving of a particular created substance with a certain modification is an act of limitation in the sense of *specification*, not in the sense of limiting perfection. This is not similar to the process by which we derive a concept of created substance from the concept of divine substance. True, in his *Correspondence*, Descartes will argue that the "notion of intellectual nature in general [... is] the idea which, if considered without limitation, represents God, and if limited, is the idea of an angel or a human soul" (CSMK 55). But "general" here is not equivalent to "unspecified" in the sense of a determinable, and the act of limitation is not that of conceiving of it as determined. Rather, "general" should here be read as "absolute," the limitation of which is not specification but qualification. God's attributes are not and cannot be determinables, for they already exist 'in' him in a determinate fashion. The act of partial negation is not a process of determining a determinable, i.e., specifying which of the range of potential determinations actually apply, but of deriving, from the concept of one (divine) *determinate* property, the concept of a (creaturely)

¹⁵³ 2000, 193.

determinable one—a process, as we shall later propose, of analogical derivation.

II. The Image-Model Metaphor and Resemblance

We have seen that the image-model metaphor is particularly suited to capturing the negative relation between the perfect and the imperfect. Since images, qua *images*, fail to be the same kinds of things as their models, this metaphor suggests that the imperfect resembles the perfect while remaining qualitatively distinct from it.¹⁵⁴ But can the image-model metaphor tell us something about the *positive* (resemblance) relation between the perfect and imperfect? When Descartes, in his *Conversation with Burman*, defends his use of the “image and likeness” analogy, he argues that creatures must in some sense resemble God since he created them. Whereas a house need not resemble its builder since the builder’s activity is merely applying “active forces to what is passive”—and hence is one of many necessary causal antecedents—God is the

¹⁵⁴ However, some images can be the same kind as their models: the drawing of another drawing would be a member of the same kind (i.e., drawings).

total cause, the cause of being itself. Anything produced by this cause must necessarily be like it. For since the cause is itself being and substance, and it brings something into being, i.e. out of nothing (a method of production which is the prerogative of God), what is produced must at the very least be being and substance. To this extent at least, it will be like God and bear his image.¹⁵⁵

Descartes subsequently states that the term "image" should not be taken in the "ordinary sense of an effigy or picture of something, but in the broader sense of something having some resemblance with something else." Yet what is the nature of this resemblance? On this point Descartes is silent.

In his own effort to explain the relationship between Forms and particulars in light of the image-model analogy, Patterson provides an interesting (though ultimately unsatisfying) way of understanding how a grasp of divine perfections is necessary for the comprehension and evaluation of creaturely perfections. Knowledge of a Form, he claims, enables us to identify its participant and gauge its relative excellence in the same sense that knowledge of

¹⁵⁵ Cottingham 1976: 16. Though Descartes seems to attribute the status of "total cause" to God alone, there is perhaps a sense in which a finite substance could be considered the total cause of its modes. An idea, considered as an act of the mind (ideaM), derives its existence and reality (what little formal reality it has) from the substance of which it is a mode (a thinking thing). Just as God contains, formally or eminently, everything found in creatures and moreover acts as a preserving cause of them, so perhaps a finite intellect could be said to contain all the formal reality of its modes and acts as a preserving cause of them. The crucial difference, however, would remain: modes inhere in substances (via a real union) while creatures remain really distinct from God.

a painting's model or subject enables us to recognize the painting as being *of* that subject as well as the excellence (understood here as accuracy or correctness) of the painting.¹⁵⁶ Patterson, however, fails to provide an adequate explanation of the positive relationship (likeness) between a participant and its Form that makes this evaluation possible. A given particular is what it is by virtue of its participation in a given Form, just as a given image is what it is (a picture of a horse) by virtue of what it is an image *of* (a horse). But what justifies our description of something as a "horse" and thus a participant in the Form of horse? How would knowledge of the Form of horse enable us to correctly identify two things as horses and correctly exclude a third thing as not a horse? Patterson notes that there is a sense in which an image can correctly be said to be *of* a given model by reference to something extraneous to features of both the image and model. It is in this sense that a child's finger painting of Napoleon could be said to be an image *of* Napoleon even though it looks nothing like him, for here the criterion might be artistic intention. A similar extraneous criterion could be cited in cases of photographs and reflections—there a given thing is an image of a given

¹⁵⁶ 1985, 110-14

model insofar as it bears a certain causal relation to it. Patterson finds that such criteria are, however, inapplicable to particulars and Forms.¹⁵⁷

A more promising sense in which an image can be said to be *of* a given model is one that appeals to some sort of qualitative resemblance. A given image is an image of a particular model by virtue of resembling that model's qualities. In this sense the child's finger painting could be said to be an image of a clown if it (whatever the child's intentions) indeed resembles such a thing. Yet an image and its model cannot resemble one another by virtue of sharing the quality definitive of the model. An image possessing 60% of the features of a horse, Patterson explains, is not a 60% horse—it is not a horse at all.¹⁵⁸ Referring to Austin's example of a decoy duck, however, Patterson introduces an alternative form of resemblance according to which "imaging—and by analogy, participation—must involve resemblance in some respects other than F being image and model. A decoy duck must be similar to real ducks in some relevant respects if it is to be a decoy duck; imitation leather must have something in common with real leather, and so on. Likewise, one might argue, there

¹⁵⁷ Inapplicable because Forms are causally inert and do not possess intentions.

¹⁵⁸ 1985, 59.

must be some relevant similarity between sensible and intelligible F."¹⁵⁹ According to this sense of resemblance, a decoy duck could be said to resemble a real duck insofar as it shares with it qualities such as shape and color. Yet Patterson dismisses this form of resemblance too: "One finds no evidence whatever that sensible Fs are in general supposed to resemble the Form of F in (relevant) respects other than F." The principal barrier to this interpretation, he explains, is that Forms do not possess phenomenal properties.

Patterson ultimately concludes that the relevant model for the positive relation of images to their models lies not in their qualitative resemblance but in a resemblance defined as accuracy or truthfulness, i.e., "the quality of the information conveyed by the image."¹⁶⁰ This notion of correctness, he says, has a "liberating effect on the study of representation, freeing it from unreflective servitude to similarity." But how does an image, qua image, convey information? Signs can convey information by virtue of convention; and perhaps various psychological regularities could explain why a given image inspires, in the minds of viewers, thought of something qualitatively distinct from the image. Yet it is difficult to understand how images

¹⁵⁹ 1985, 60.

¹⁶⁰ 1985, 113.

could convey information by virtue of something *intrinsic* to their nature without in some way resembling that which they represent. Indeed, it is the model of a symbol, rather than a sign, that seems to be better suited to Patterson's criterion. Unlike a sign, a symbol conveys information about its model by *participating* in that which it represents, i.e., by resembling it. So, for example, the spoken word "buzz" actually imitates the very sound to which it refers. If it is as symbols that particulars convey information about the Forms in which they participate, then it is indeed the qualitative resemblance of these particulars to their Forms that determines their accuracy.

Patterson's suggestion that Forms are like models in the sense that they are used to determine the existence and accuracy of their participants is, however, applicable to Descartes' account. Carol Rovane, for example, argues that the ideas of perfection or infinitude "are not simply standards against which we can make sense of their complete absence or negation—they are standards against which we can make comparative judgments concerning one thing being more perfect or greater than another."¹⁶¹ Yet it doesn't seem that extraneous criteria such as divine intention and

¹⁶¹ 1994, 96.

divine causality could explain these abilities. We do not, obviously, have direct knowledge of God's intentions, and so it cannot be by reference to these that we justify our description of a given attribute as, for example, imperfect goodness. Nor is knowing merely that God is the cause of these attributes sufficient for distinguishing them and gauging their relative perfection.

Yet there is a deeper problem with such extrinsic criteria, for even if they could explain our ability to identify and measure various instances of the imperfect, they seem to establish only an equivocal relation between terms. Urine with certain characteristics might be designated "healthy" because it is a unique effect, and hence a sign, of a healthy physiology, but there is no sense in which the characteristics of healthy urine resemble those of a healthy body. Likewise, if a creature is called "good" merely because it is caused by something good (God), it doesn't follow that there is anything in the creature resembling those characteristics that make God good. The same goes for intention. A portrait intended to depict Napoleon may look nothing like the man himself. Of course, God's perfection entails that none of his intentions will be frustrated, but we wouldn't want to say that creatures are "good" merely because He caused or

intended it. Indeed, such a reading would be inconsistent with Descartes' claim that certain creaturely attributes are contained formally within God. Moreover, this reading would attribute to Descartes a radical position quite at odds with traditional theism. Though he is perfectly willing to say that creaturely reality and goodness falls short of God's absolutely, there is little indication that he believed creation is not intrinsically real or good in *some* sense—after all, God created it.

Though Patterson dismissed the option of resemblance by partial qualitative identity for the relation of Forms and particulars, perhaps this form of resemblance could apply to Descartes' account. According to this reading, a decoy duck could be like a duck insofar as its general shape and color (or aspects thereof) are qualitatively *identical* to the shape and color of the real thing. Similarly, one might argue that the imperfect resembles the perfect by virtue of sharing a constituent *part* of the property possessed by (and definitive of) the perfect thing. So, the argument continues, while a thing possessing the imperfect property can't be said to possess a limited *degree* of the perfect property, it could be said to possess (either completely or by degree) a more basic constituent *feature* of the perfect property.

Yet such partial qualitative identity cannot explain the resemblance relation entailed by Cartesian CPP. First, such an account would entail that creatures and God actually share some qualities, but nowhere does Descartes suggest that this might be so. Indeed, his claim that "no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures" is unqualified, and would lose much of its force if it were. Further, we have seen that Descartes, in clarifying his own use of the image-model metaphor, does not say that images imitate a model by virtue of being identical with them in some respect(s). Such a claim would leave him open to the very anthropomorphism critique to which he was responding. Rather, he states that images resemble a model because they "imitate it in some respects." This is not the response one would expect if Descartes believed that imitation were reducible to qualitative identity in some (more basic) respect(s).

It is true that, despite God's metaphysical simplicity, we must, due to the limitations of our own minds in comparison to his immensity, conceive of him in terms of multiple perfections. God is powerful *and* good *and* loving etc. Each of these attributes is taken as a primary attribute and hence as expressing his essence. One might then argue that if we can conceive of the divine essence in

terms of a diversity of attributes, perhaps we can also conceive of each attribute in terms of diverse parts. One might then look to these constituents as a basis for univocity. But if Descartes rejected the univocity of perfections on the basis of their real identity with God's essence (and the other attributes), the same reasoning would seem to apply to any conceptual constituents of these perfections. So even if we could conceive of God's attributes as though they were complex, the conceptual constituents could not provide a basis for univocal predication. Nor are Descartes' claims about God's incomprehensibility consistent with the view that while God's perfections are globally incomprehensible, some of their constituents are perfectly comprehensible. Since only the finite is comprehensible, such a view would entail that God is, in some respects, finite. So if we assume, as Patterson does, that qualitative resemblance requires some form of qualitative identity, then it is impossible to treat Descartes' account of the positive relation between the perfect and the imperfect as one of qualitative resemblance.

III. Adams on Leibniz and Resemblance by Comparative Properties

We have seen that the chief problem for understanding the positive relation between the perfect and imperfect in Descartes' account is that of explaining how creaturely properties could be said to resemble divine ones without presupposing some form of univocity. In his analysis of the priority of the perfect in continental rationalism, Adams addresses a related problem in explaining how creaturely predicates could be derived from divine ones in Leibniz's metaphysics.¹⁶² He chooses to focus on Leibniz rather than Descartes because the latter's system does not allow for a comprehensive "top-down" account of the derivation of creaturely perfections from divine ones: unlike Spinoza and Leibniz, Descartes did not hold that all creaturely attributes are contained formally within God. Extension, at least in its creaturely form, is incompatible with divine perfection. Since Leibniz denied the reality of extension, and Spinoza was willing to predicate it of God provided it be understood as indivisible, both thinkers could provide a comprehensive derivation. Though Spinoza's version is the simplest, it is idiosyncratic since he substitutes for what

¹⁶² See 2007, 102-116; and 1994, 115-19.

Adams calls the Cartesian "exemplar/imitation relation" the relation of substance to mode. For Spinoza, says Adams, thought and extension can be predicated univocally of finite creatures and God since "the difference is just that the thought or the extension that is in a finite thing does not contain the complete system of thinking or extended being that is in God."¹⁶³ This sort of derivation, however, will not do for either Leibniz or Descartes.

Adams explains that, like Descartes, Leibniz believed that divine perfections must be qualitatively distinct from creaturely ones. Leibniz claims that God, as the "subject of all perfections," contains "every simple quality" that is "positive and absolute" insofar as it "expresses without any limits whatever it expresses."¹⁶⁴ Leibniz's notion of the divine perfections is thus similar to Descartes' account of actually infinite properties.¹⁶⁵ For both thinkers, concepts of the divine properties are prior to creaturely ones because creaturely perfections are limitations or partial-negations of divine attributes that

¹⁶³ 2007, 100-01.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, in the *New Essays*, Theophilus, speaking for Leibniz: "The true infinite, strictly speaking, is only in the absolute, which precedes all composition and is not formed by that addition of parts" (1989, 157).

possess their reality "without any limits."¹⁶⁶ Further, according to Adams, Leibniz held that "all properties or concepts are either simple or constructed from simple predicates by logical operations such as conjunction and negation"¹⁶⁷ and that "all the simple predicates [...] are among the attributes of God." Thus the concepts of creaturely perfections "must all be composed, by logical operations including various degrees of limitation or partial negation, from the simple perfections of God."¹⁶⁸ Adams observes that the primary obstacle to explaining how concepts of creaturely perfections could be thus derived from divine ones is that the conceptual simplicity of divine perfections seems to forestall any partial negation of them:

On a Leibnizian account the perfection of power [for example] should be partly denied and partly affirmed of finite things. But how can an absolutely simple property be partly denied of anything. What part of it is to be denied, and what part affirmed, given that it has no parts at all? If a simple property is to be

¹⁶⁶ "[T]he genuine infinite is not a 'modification': it is the absolute; and indeed it is precisely by modifying it that one limits oneself and forms a finite."

¹⁶⁷ Though Adams does not mention it, Leibniz's account of deriving composite ideas from simple ones resembles Descartes methodological analysis in the *Rules*, where he argues that all of our concepts are composed from ideas of "simple natures" (CSMI 22). Of course, for Descartes, these simple natures will include non-divine properties such as extension.

¹⁶⁸ "The idea of the absolute is internal to us, as is that of being: these absolutes are nothing but the attributes of God; and they may be said to be as much the source of ideas as God himself is the principle of beings."

affirmed or denied of something, it would seem that it must be affirmed or denied as a whole. But can a property be partly affirmed or denied as a whole?¹⁶⁹

The Cartesian account seems to run into a similar problem. Descartes invokes partial negation to explain how we can derive a creaturely property that is neither the same, nor simply a negation of, a divine one. Finite being, for example, is neither being itself, nor the negation of being (non-being). Yet if a creaturely perfection cannot resemble a divine one by virtue of *partial* qualitative identity, it is difficult to understand how such partial negation is supposed to work. Since neither Leibniz nor Descartes ever provide an explanation, one might suspect it was a mystery to them as well.

Adams does, however, provide an interesting, though ultimately inadequate, account of how a simple property could be partially negated. In response to the above question as to whether a property can be partly affirmed or denied as a whole, he suggests that we regularly do this with respect to *comparative* properties. So, for example, "I can and do say that bananas are less sweet than pineapples without presupposing any analysis of sweetness into parts. 'Less sweet' functions here as a partial negation, one which implies 'not as sweet as the comparison case' but

¹⁶⁹ 2007, 107.

does not imply 'not sweet at all.'" He explains that if God has the simple perfection of power (P), a complex concept of a creaturely perfection could be derived by adding "the limiting or partly negative property-forming operator *the one billionth degree of*."¹⁷⁰ He is quick to note, however, that the creature cannot be said to possess P. Such a conclusion would obviously violate Leibniz's denial of univocity. Instead of speaking of creatures having "degrees" of P, therefore, he suggests we should "speak only of degrees of approximation to P."¹⁷¹ Such an account, it appears, could work for Descartes as well.

Adams acknowledges, however, that this analysis of "partial negation" will hold only so long as the property in question is a "scalar magnitude", i.e., a property "that varies primitively, in intensity or strength."¹⁷² One shade of a color, he notes, can differ from another without supervening on more basic qualitative differences. If the comparative property is not such a scalar magnitude, it must supervene on non-comparative properties. For Leibniz, however, "there is no provision for a positive, non-comparative property to be possessed by the creature as part of the basis for its possessing the positive

¹⁷⁰ 2007, 108.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁷² Ibid.

comparative property."¹⁷³ Thus Adams' account requires us to assume that the property in question cannot be analyzed in terms of non-comparative properties.

Yet he thinks there are three problems with such a premise: First, it is difficult to understand how the concept of a given quality could be derived from the purely quantitative notion of a given degree of approximation. Knowing that a given shade of purplish-red is "217 thousandths" of the way from pure red to pure purple, will not enable us to understand its phenomenal quality. Such a derivation "involves substituting largely structural content for purely qualitative content, and the positive, purely qualitative content cannot be given in that way."¹⁷⁴ Second, Adams does not think it is plausible that creaturely attributes such as knowledge or power could be understood as degrees of a scalar magnitude, for "it seems that degrees of knowledge and power do supervene on facts—quite complex and not obviously comparative facts—about what their possessor knows and can do, and how."¹⁷⁵ Third, even Leibniz himself acknowledges that we don't fully understand the simple perfections of God or how we derive creaturely properties from them. Yet how can we then

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 110.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 111.

maintain that creaturely properties could be constructed from divine ones if we "don't know how, nor from what properties?"¹⁷⁶

Adams suggests that if we wish to preserve a top-down account of at least *some* of the properties of creatures, we should do away with the condition that the qualities be simple and opt for an "account in which the key relationship is the more or less holistic one of resembling, rather than the more analytical one of being constructed out of"—a relationship that he thinks is more in line with the Platonic tradition.¹⁷⁷ Divine knowledge, for example, would then be viewed not as "a constituent from which less perfect cases are constructed" but rather "an archetype which they imperfectly resemble." Human knowledge could still be seen as supervening on more basic properties that creatures possess fully. Adams argues that we do something like this when we attribute cognitive states such as belief or purpose to dogs by using human beliefs and purposes as models. Doing so enables us to understand dog cognition better than "if (*per impossibile*) we allowed in our minds only the sort of beliefs and purposes that dogs have."¹⁷⁸ Similarly, even though we don't

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

understand what perfect knowledge is like, "the one who had divinely perfect knowledge would understand it, and would understand better than we do in what ways we do and do not know."¹⁷⁹

The problem with Adams' proposal, however, is that it fails to explain the nature of this "holistic" sense of resembling. As we have argued above, explaining how a given divine property could be partly denied and partly affirmed of a creature is a problem not only for the assumption that divine attributes are *simple*, but equally so for the premise that nothing can be predicated *univocally* of creatures and God. Even if we jettison the assumption of simplicity, we still have to explain in what sense human knowledge could be said to resemble its divine correlate without in any way sharing features of it. The notion of a dog's purpose, for example, surely resembles that of a human's by virtue of partial univocity: though a human action, unlike a dog's, is usually deemed purposeful only if the end in question is something the person has cognitive access to as a goal or reason for action, this sort of purpose shares with the canine version the fact that the intelligibility of each requires reference to a certain end. As I will argue in later chapters, the notion

¹⁷⁹ 2007, 115.

of a primitive form of resemblance is as crucial for making sense of likeness in the absence of univocity as it is for explaining how a simple property could be partially negated.

IV. Denial of Univocity Does Not Entail Equivocity

In the conclusion of his analysis of Descartes' account of the priority of the perfect, Adams wonders how the "denial of univocity is supposed to be consistent (as Descartes must have supposed it to be) with the claim that some attributes of finite things are contained formally (though without their limits) in the idea of God."¹⁸⁰ If denying univocity entails endorsing equivocity, then it is indeed difficult to understand how Descartes could assume that creatures resemble God. It is doubtful that Descartes would have viewed this claim as paradoxical on its face, however, for one of the purported achievements of the scholastic tradition in which he was educated was the explanation of how the absence of univocity could be consistent with the claim that creatures are in some sense images of God. We are referring, of course, to the so-called doctrine of analogy—"so-called" because, as we will

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 98.

see in the next chapter, it was less a single cohesive doctrine than a general schema that scholastic thinkers adapted in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes.

Generally speaking, analogy was viewed as a mean between univocity and equivocality in that it ostensibly showed how a term could have different, though related, senses. While "animal" is predicated univocally of both a dog and a man because it has the same meaning in both uses, the term "bank" is used equivocally when it is predicated of both the shore of a river and a lending institution since the meanings of the two uses are completely distinct. Drawing on Aristotle and commentaries on his work, however, many medieval and scholastic thinkers sought to carve out space between univocation and equivocation. A classic example, derived from Aristotle, is the related significance of the term "healthy" when predicated of, for example, the body and things that are conducive to the body's health (e.g. diet). Though the term "healthy" does not have the same significance when it is used to describe both an organism's physiology and a dietary regimen, the meanings of the two uses were considered to be related in way that distinguished their usage from pure equivocation. In this case, a healthy diet is one that is conducive to a healthy body.

This example and similar ones illustrated a broad notion of analogy that was inapplicable, however, to cases where the desired relation was one of ontological resemblance. Though a healthy diet might be conducive to a healthy body, and although one cannot really understand why a given diet would be healthy without knowledge of bodily health, the features of such a diet in no way resemble the features of a healthy body. When perfections such as "goodness" or "power" are predicated of God, however, the claim is not that God merely bears some relation (e.g., causal) to creaturely goodness or power or vice versa (though this could be *part* of its meaning); rather, it was held that there is something *intrinsic* to God's nature that the qualities of creaturely goodness and power can be said to resemble. Aquinas, as well as later scholastics, grounded this resemblance in terms of the ontological relation of participation: creatures are like God to the extent that they participate in him.

A crucial presupposition of such analogical resemblance is that it cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of any form of qualitative identity that would allow for univocal predication. From a theological perspective, many philosophers and theologians held that any form of real community between creatures and God enabling univocal

predication would threaten God's transcendence and was incompatible with divine simplicity. From a strictly metaphysical perspective, the special case of the predicate "being" seemed to require a theory of irreducible or primitive analogical resemblance. Aristotle had argued that being cannot be a genus since the differentiae restricting being to various species would also have to be instances of being. Since we cannot isolate a univocal core of the meaning of "being" predicated of qualities and substances, the features that distinguish the being of qualities from the being of substances must be the same as those that ground their resemblance.¹⁸¹

Though Descartes never endorses a theory of analogy, we noted that he does explicitly *employ* analogy in the Objections and Replies to explain the sense in which God can be said to be self-caused. He argues, for example, that "God stands toward himself in a relation *analogous* to that of an efficient cause" (CSMII 170). It is natural that Descartes would invoke analogy in his account of God's self-sustaining (i.e. independent) existence, for he had originally denied that the term "substance" applies univocally to creatures and God (in part) *because* of the self-sustaining nature of divine existence. In this case,

¹⁸¹ See Aersten 2012, 61-2. For a detailed analysis see Wilson 2000, 136-43.

at least, it is clear that the denial of univocity is meant to entail analogy, not equivocity. When, in a later chapter, we explore Descartes' use of analogy in detail, we will find that he argues that an equivocal notion of existence would be inconsistent with his second causal proof for God.

Despite the fact that Descartes explicitly relies upon a theory of analogy in his account of divine existence, there are a number of reasons why he may have decided to forego providing an account and defense of analogy in general. First, he was notoriously cagey about his philosophical influences, and he may have wished to avoid linking his own metaphysical ontology to such a hoary scholastic doctrine; alternatively, he may have viewed an implicit assumption of analogical resemblance to be relatively uncontroversial and avoided invoking it simply because he didn't think it needed to be explained or defended;¹⁸² on the other hand, since he was undoubtedly acquainted with the endless scholastic disputes concerning the nature and validity of analogy, perhaps he simply felt his energies would be better spent elsewhere. It is of

¹⁸² There is some evidence of this view in the Fourth Replies. After Descartes explains how we derive an analogically common notion of cause "common to both an efficient and a formal cause" of existence, he adds that he did not "explain this point in my Meditations, but left it out, assuming it was self-evident" (CSMII 167).

course true that Descartes presented his philosophy as a repudiation and correction of much of scholastic thought. Yet as his causal principle suggests, he was not averse to drawing from scholastic thought when it served his broader critical purposes.

Perhaps, however, Descartes avoids discussion of analogy because he saw that his system would require a version of analogy strikingly different from scholastic ones. The traditional account, which we might (following Adams) call a "bottom-up" approach to transcendental analogy, begins with concepts of *creaturely* attributes and then derives concepts of analogous *divine* attributes by modifying (e.g., qualifying or amplifying) the former. Yet as we saw in the previous chapter, this is precisely the sort of process that Descartes argued against in his replies to Gassendi and others.¹⁸³ We may represent to ourselves (conceive) divine perfections by amplifying creaturely ones, but Descartes believes that this amplification is guided by an implicit awareness of the perfection approximated. Instead, Descartes would have to endorse a "top-down" approach to analogy, one that begins

¹⁸³ Gassendi had proposed such a bottom-up account of analogy in the Fifth Objections, where he asserts that "it is more than enough if, on the analogy of our human attributes, we can derive and construct an idea of some sort for our own use—an idea which does not transcend our human grasp and which contains no reality except what we perceive in other things" (CSMII 200-01).

with concepts of *divine* attributes and derives concepts of analogous *creaturely* ones by modifying (i.e., via partial negation) the former. Analogy is not here used to explain how we conceive of God's attributes but how we conceive of those creaturely attributes that imitate the divine ones (i.e., the pure perfections and transcendentals). Since this approach to analogy appears to have been without precedent in scholastic thought, perhaps Descartes chose not to call attention to it out of fear that it would draw controversy. Indeed, in his defense of the analogy of self-causation, he affirms that he is "extremely anxious to prevent anything at all being found in [his] writings which could justifiably give offence to theologians" (CSMII 171). Descartes may have therefore believed that he would have had little to gain—and much to lose—if he were to provide an explicit account and defense of the particular theory of analogy that his system entails.

Nor is there reason to believe that Descartes' ontological innovations are somehow incompatible with a theory of theological analogy. Marjorie Grene famously wrote that, in transforming the medieval many-leveled hierarchy of degrees of reality into an austere three-leveled universe of infinite substance, finite substance and modes, Descartes thereby "cleaned out the lumber room

of scholastic thought so thoroughly as to leave what seems a barely habitable shelter."¹⁸⁴ Yet it is curious that the structure left standing corresponds to the basic framework of scholastic predicational (or "categorical") and transcendental (or "theological") analogy. While transcendental analogy had traditionally been invoked to explain the relationship between our concepts of created substances and God, predicational analogy was used to explain the same with respect to accidents and created substances. For Descartes, however, what had traditionally been the field of predicational analogy *is* altered: he reduced accidents to modes of mental and physical substance, and since modes—as even the scholastics held—are not truly *res*, he consequently denied the conceptual and ontological separability of those qualities traditionally designated accidents.¹⁸⁵ It is not clear whether Descartes could use the same model of analogy to explain, on the one hand, the relations between the meanings of "being" as it is predicated of both finite and infinite substances and, on other hand, the relation of the meanings of "being" as it is predicated of finite substances and their modes. Since modes can exist only by virtue of a real union with

¹⁸⁴ 1985, 104.

¹⁸⁵ Accidents are modes of the principal attribute (extension or thought), which is itself really identical with substance. Though modes are not *res*, they are not nothing (they have some 'degree' of reality).

the substance of which they are modes, one could argue that they have no being that is properly their own.¹⁸⁶ To speak of the being of a given substance's mode is, perhaps, to speak elliptically of the being of the substance in which it inheres.¹⁸⁷

Yet Descartes did not, like Spinoza after him, similarly transform the relationship between creatures and God. Despite Rubin's claims otherwise, he never suggests that the ontological and conceptual dependence of created substances on God resembles that of modes on created substances.¹⁸⁸ Kenny expresses the distinction as that of "logical" versus causal dependence:

The way in which modes depend on substance is not the same as that in which finite substances depend on the infinite substance. Modes are logically dependent on substance; they 'inhere in it as subject.' Statements with modes for their subjects must be translatable into statements with substances for their subjects, as statements about the Cheshire Cat's smile must be

¹⁸⁶ The ontological situation is, perhaps, a bit more complicated than this. Given the narrator's assertion that "the mode of being by which a thing exists objectively or representatively in the intellect by way of an idea, imperfect though it may be, is certainly not nothing, and so it cannot come from nothing" (CSM II, 29; AT VII, 41), it appears that Descartes would also need to explain the sense in which "being" could be predicated of ideas considered in terms of their *objective* existence.

¹⁸⁷ As we shall see in the next chapter, perhaps he could use an analogy of attribution for predicational analogy, for it does not presuppose an ontological resemblance between discrete entities but merely a definitional priority of the primary usage to a secondary one. "Being" is predicated of modes only by extrinsic denomination since they, unlike accidents, have no inherent being.

¹⁸⁸ Woolhouse agrees: "There is no evidence that he confusedly thought that the dependence of created substances on God was of the same kind as that of modes on substances" (1993, 17).

translatable into statements about the Cheshire Cat. Created substances are not logically, but causally, dependent on God. They do not inhere in God as subject, but are effects of God as creator.¹⁸⁹

Since the ontological relation between creatures and God is causal, statements about creatures are not translatable into statements about God. As we stressed earlier, it is likely that Descartes viewed a real distinction between creatures and God as a necessary condition for securing divine perfection. Since in this sense Descartes' account does not differ from the traditional scholastic position that creatures are really distinct from God, there is no obvious reason why a traditional theory of transcendental analogy could not apply.

If Descartes did implicitly endorse a version of transcendental analogy, he could be understood to hold that a creaturely property can be said to exist "formally" in God insofar as an analogically similar correlate does.¹⁹⁰ As he suggests in his response to Mersenne's amplification

¹⁸⁹ 1968, 134.

¹⁹⁰ A theory of analogical resemblance may provide Descartes with a way to answer Spinoza's argument for substance monism. Descartes can agree that, in a sense, God really does possess every attribute. Granted, he does not possess the creaturely imitations of these attributes, but he possesses all of the positive reality they do (and more). What differentiates creaturely attributes from God's is not a positive reality but nothingness or non-being. Thus Descartes can assert that creatures do not share God's attributes (since they possess only imperfect versions of them) but maintain that it does not follow that God thereby lacks some reality or perfection since there is nothing 'in' these creaturely versions that cannot be found in God's more perfect qualitatively distinct attributes.

argument, we “recognize” that certain “indefinite particulars of which we have an idea” are “contained formally in the idea of God” because we apprehend their analogical resemblance to the infinite (true) versions of these properties (CSMII 99). Beyssade, for example, seems to support this reading. While Descartes concludes that God’s simplicity precludes any univocity, Beyssade notes that the divine perfections “are nonetheless conceivable, for their relation to our own perfections precludes our speaking of a simple equivocity. What we have here is analogy in the most traditional sense.”¹⁹¹

Such a reading also seems to enable us to understand how Descartes’ reference to “degrees” of reality and being could be compatible with his explicit rejection of univocity. Though Aristotle, as we will see in the next chapter, suggested that comparisons of “more and less” are quantitative and hence involve univocal predication, Aquinas detailed two other modes of comparison according to “more and less” that are qualitative and hence *analogical* in nature. In *The Power of God*, Aquinas states the objection that “more and less do not differentiate species” and hence when we say that God is better than creatures, we are assuming that “we can univocally predicate good of God

¹⁹¹ 1992, 91.

and a creature."¹⁹² To this he responds that comparisons of "more and less" can also be analogical insofar as "one thing is shared, and another thing expressed essentially, as we might say that goodness is better than good" and "insofar as something the same belongs to one in a more eminent way than to another, as heat belongs to the sun in a more eminent way than to fire, and these two ways prevent the unity of a species and univocal predication. And we accordingly predicate something more and less of God and a creature [...]."¹⁹³

Thus to say that God is better (or possesses "more" goodness) than creatures, need not entail that God merely has a higher degree of a quality (goodness) that he shares with creatures. Similarly, for Descartes, the reality of things can "admit of more and less" without presupposing that "real" or "being" can be predicated of things univocally. To use Adams' language, lesser "degrees" of being or reality are, in truth, *approximations* to being or reality, not lesser *instances* of them. Descartes' 1641 letter to Hyperaspistes, which Broughton had dismissed as expressing merely an "abstract and contentious metaphysical doctrine," emphasizes this very point: "What makes the infinite different from the finite is something real and

¹⁹² 2012, 215.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

positive; but the limitation which makes the finite different from the infinite is non-being or the negation of being." Created being is not being that is imperfect, but imperfectly being.¹⁹⁴ "Being" is partially affirmed and partially denied as a whole of creatures insofar as they are said to be neither being (infinite being) nor the complete absence of being (nothingness), but something "intermediate between God and nothingness" (CSMII 38). In this way, the new paradox of partial negation is the old paradox of analogical resemblance. Only God is truly real, truly being—everything else can be said to be "real" or a "being" in some related yet qualitatively distinct way, i.e., *analogically*.

Yet some scholars have resisted attributing a doctrine of analogy to Descartes. Robert Ariew notes that since Descartes sided with the Scotists on a number of issues, "it could be argued that Descartes agrees [...] that the

¹⁹⁴ Simon provides an eloquent description of this paradoxical notion: "Take the division of being into infinite and finite: to obtain the differentiating factor of the infinite, *nothing is needed except an unqualified assertion of being—an assertion that is not held in check by any negation*. But in order to obtain the differential factor of the finite, being has to elicit a limitation of itself. It cannot be said that being is indifferent to infinity and limitation as triangle is indifferent to the particularities of its species. Infinite being, never-ending being, expresses *being* infinitely more genuinely and faithfully than being limited, and circumscribed by an area of nonbeing. In comparison with the infinite being, things finite disclose mostly their kinship with nothingness. That the limitation of being is itself a way of being, derived from being and from nothing else, is a paradox indeed. But let us be aware that a similar paradox is involved, more or less noticeably, in every analogy of proper proportionality" (1999, 151) (emphasis mine).

concept of being may hold univocally between God and creatures."¹⁹⁵ In a note to this suggestion, however, he backtracks, adding that "as much as I would like to push Descartes into the Scotist camp on this issue [...] Descartes officially denies univocal predication with respect to substance." Other scholars have argued that Descartes must have embraced some form of equivocity. Jorge Secada, for example, argues that since Descartes never states that the term "substance" is applied analogically, "he must, then, be read as stating that it is applied equivocally to God and creatures."¹⁹⁶ Secada therefore thinks that Descartes' denial of univocity is at odds with his "insistence that God is properly substance, while creatures are so only imperfectly and qualifiedly."¹⁹⁷ The same logic would suggest that Descartes thinks other attributes can be predicated only equivocally of creatures and God.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Ariew 1999: 55.

¹⁹⁶ The same argument could also be used against Secada's reading: because Descartes never says the term "substance" is used equivocally, it must therefore be used analogically. Oddly enough, Secada seems to think that Descartes, in denying univocity and thereby implicitly endorsing equivocity, "is explicitly invoking scholastic doctrine" (Gaukroger 2006, 77). This would be true only if we identify scholastic doctrine with Scotistic accounts that assume that the only alternative to (logical) univocity is equivocity—but this, of course, was in direct opposition to the prevailing Thomistic view that analogy was also consistent with the absence of univocity.

¹⁹⁷ Secada 2000, 85. Yet Secada himself notes that if Descartes did endorse equivocity, then it would be "directly, even if covertly, at odds with Suarez's [analogical] account."

¹⁹⁸ Schectman too seems to think that equivocity follows from Descartes' denial of univocity. See 2011, 27-33.

Attributing equivocality to Descartes, however, leaves us saddled with the problems Adams noted: it renders vacuous all the "image and likeness" language; it fails to do justice to the distinction between God's formal versus his eminent containment of creaturely properties; it cannot explain how apprehension of creaturely perfections would trigger innate concepts of divine correlates nor why possessing an idea of a divine perfection could enable us to amplify a creaturely one; it cannot explain Descartes' endorsement of partial negation, i.e., his claim that, in order to form the idea of a finite being, he need only "take something away" from the idea of infinite being; and it is inconsistent with Descartes' explicit appeals to analogy in his account of divine independence. Further, the equivocality reading is historically unmotivated. In Descartes' own day, and for centuries prior, philosophers and theologians had appealed to analogy to find a middle way between univocal and equivocal predication. Tad Schmaltz, who attributes a doctrine of analogy to Descartes, appeals to the historical context as well, noting that "most scholastics who denied univocal predication followed Thomas Aquinas in affirming an analogical predication of terms that apply primarily to God

and only derivatively to creatures."¹⁹⁹ With the exception of Eustachius a Sancto Paulo (who advocated a theory of univocity), the scholastic authors Descartes had studied at La Flèche (the Coimbrans, Toletus, and Rubius) espoused broadly Thomistic views.²⁰⁰ In the absence of direct evidence to the contrary, both the historical context and the coherence of his own philosophical system suggest that Descartes' denials of univocity should be read as an endorsement of some form of analogy.

¹⁹⁹ 2000, 90.

²⁰⁰ Ariew 1999, 26.

Ch. IV. CPP and Analogy

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a brief account of the theory of analogy as it appears in Aristotle and Aquinas. This will allow us, in later chapters, to determine what a top-down account of analogy would look like, to gauge the strength and weaknesses of the top-down account in comparison with the traditional bottom-up approach (especially with regard to criticisms leveled by advocates of univocity such as Scotus), and determine how analogy can invoke a primitive form of qualitative resemblance. Though we are not completely done discussing Descartes, the concern now is not Descartes as such but how the relationship between the perfect and imperfect within CPP can be analyzed in terms of analogy. This more general approach will enable us, in the final chapters, to assess the broader significance of CPP within contemporary philosophy of religion.

Analogy was invoked to address a variety of problems in medieval and scholastic thought.²⁰¹ Logicians sought to distinguish and clarify the general usage of terms, especially in cases such as "healthy" (above) where the terms appear to have related yet distinct meanings.

²⁰¹ I am here paraphrasing Ashworth 2013.

Metaphysicians used analogy to explain the meanings of terms predicated across the Aristotelian categories (the transcendental terms "being" "one" "true" and "good"). They were concerned to show, for example, how the meaning of "being" predicated of substance is related to the meaning of "being" predicated of accidents. And theologians used analogy to explain how terms expressing pure perfections (e.g. "wise") could be justifiably predicated of both God and creatures. It is this latter application of analogy that is of interest to us.

Further, in addition to terms, concepts and things were also described as "analogous." This reflected a traditional assumption about the relationship between language, concepts, and reality. As James Ross explains, in the classical theory of analogy, "the meaning of a word was thought to be a concept derived by abstraction from perceptual experience of things (including oneself), so that conceptual differences, and therefore word-meaning differences (for example 'sees' applied to a ship's lookout and to a bird), were thought to track the real difference between intelligent sight and animal perception."²⁰² Analogy among terms could thus be expressed in terms of an analogy among concepts that, in turn, reflect an analogy in things.

²⁰² Ross 1998, 119.

Indeed, after the 14th century, discussions of analogy chiefly concerned the relationships between concepts. One of Ross's criticisms of the traditional theory is its assumption that the meanings of terms are concepts and hence private or subjective, and he has thus offered an alternative account that avoids reference to them.²⁰³ However, since CPP is a theory about the relationship between concepts (particularly, their order of derivation and resemblance), we are interested in the traditional theory of analogy primarily to the extent that it applies to concepts and, to a lesser extent, the ontological relationship between things. The pertinent question is not "What does the term 'good' mean when applied to God" but "How are we conceiving of God when we describe him as 'good'"? While the former may indeed be a question of the extramental meaning of the term "good," the latter concerns the concept of goodness we employ when using the term.

The distinction between the public, extramental meanings of terms and the concepts we employ in using and understanding language will be especially relevant in our discussion of Aquinas's theory of analogy. He argues that, even though our concepts of divine attributes are derived from concepts of creaturely ones, creaturely perfections

²⁰³ See Ross 1981.

nevertheless must be *defined* in terms of divine ones since creatures possess in a limited fashion the perfections that God possesses absolutely. The meaning of terms is to be cashed out not in terms of our concepts of things but in terms of those things themselves. "Good" is primarily used of God and derivatively of creatures because God possesses this perfection by identity and fully whereas creatures merely participate in it. Since Aquinas describes both the conceptual and the definitional order in terms of semantic priority, his account has led to some confusion. However, since the form of semantic priority that concerns us is that involving the derivation of concepts rather than the definition of terms, Aquinas's account of semantic priority in terms of definitional priority will be largely irrelevant.

As the earlier example of "healthy" suggests, while analogy does not presuppose a theory of ontological resemblance, transcendental analogy does. The traditional problem of religious language concerns the legitimacy of extending terms that originally designated creaturely attributes to an infinite and simple being of whom we have no direct experience. Using these terms literally of God is legitimate only if there is some ontological resemblance between the creaturely attribute the standard use of the

term designates and the divine nature to which it is extended. When we describe urine or a diet as literally "healthy," we are not claiming that there is something in the urine or the food that resembles those characteristics definitive of bodily health. Yet when we make literal claims about the nature of God—e.g., that God is "good" or "wise"—we are affirming that there is something in God that the creaturely qualities of goodness and wisdom originally designated by these terms resemble. Many theologians held that the status of theology as a science would be in jeopardy if such predications of God were not literally true. After all, inferences made from the nature of creatures to the nature of God—e.g., every being is good; God is a being; therefore God is good—would be invalid if the predicates were used equivocally. That such ascriptions could be literally true without presupposing the sort of qualitative identity required by univocal predication is the promise and challenge of transcendental analogy.

I. Aristotle and Analogy

Given the indebtedness of scholastic thought to Aristotle, it is unsurprising that the two most popular forms of transcendental analogy in the scholastic era—

analogy of proportionality and analogy of attribution—can be found in his works.²⁰⁴ In his biology, Aristotle used the term “analogy” to describe the indirect comparison of similarities across kinds, a version of the analogy of proportionality. There he distinguishes similarity by comparative degree (differing “by the more and the less”) from analogical similarity. Things that differ by the more and the less belong to a similar species or genus and their features can be distinguished solely by comparatives. A given bird’s beak, for example, can be distinguished from another bird’s by citing its length or sharpness. Or, to use an example with which we are already familiar, an imperfect apple could be distinguished from a perfect one by citing its relative lack of sweetness or crispness.

Yet Aristotle also wanted to be able to make comparisons in cases of non-generic or remote likeness, cases where there were no obvious morphological similarities. These comparisons were made by employing a four-part formula first developed by Presocratic thinkers for use in mathematics and later applied to non-mathematical topics by Plato, roughly expressed as “A is to B as C is to D.” Aristotle explains that such a four-part formula describing a similarity of relations is called for

²⁰⁴ See Hesse 1965; Wilson 2000; White 2010, 27-72; Hochschild 2010, 4-10.

when "we may have to do with animals whose parts are neither identical in form nor yet identical apart from differing by the more or the less: but they are the same only by analogy, as, for instance, bone is only analogous to fish-bone, nail to hoof, hand to claw, and scale to feather; for what the feather is in a bird, the scale is in a fish."²⁰⁵ While the resemblance between feathers and scales is too slight to be captured in terms of comparatives alone, their similarity can be expressed by noting the relations they bear to their respective subjects. Just as feathers protect a bird's body and aid in its characteristic locomotion (flight), so scales protect a fish's body and aid in its characteristic locomotion (swimming).²⁰⁶

Though transcendental analogy was occasionally expressed in terms of proportionality in the scholastic

²⁰⁵ Quotation from White 2010, 31.

²⁰⁶ Sometimes Aristotle uses the analogy of proportionality to express what appears to be a direct (non-relational) similarity between two things. He says, for example, that both bone and fish-bone share an "osseous nature." And though he describes a proportional resemblance between windlessness in the air and calm in the sea, he nevertheless affirms they are both forms of rest. This has given some scholars the impression that the four-part formula identifying a relational similarity is but a roundabout way of identifying a direct similarity in nature between two things. Perhaps the Aristotelian notion of "function" in biology can explain why this might be so, for he identified the nature of a faculty with its function and the function with the faculty's relation to the subject (more specifically its *telos*). If the nature of a faculty is its function and its function is its relation to the subject, identifying a relational similarity seems to be an indirect way of expressing a similarity in nature. The extent to which analogy of proportionality is able to express direct similarity is a matter of both scholastic and contemporary debate.

era, it was not the most popular form of analogy. Rather, analogy of attribution was the preferred model for religious language.²⁰⁷ Like proportionality, it too can be traced back to Aristotelian philosophy, but in this case to Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics. While Aristotle does not use the term "analogy" in these contexts, later thinkers would incorporate his analysis into the medieval and scholastic doctrine. In his metaphysics, Aristotle attempted to explain in what sense it was legitimate to apply the same terms to entities that belonged to distinct metaphysical categories and hence lacked any qualitative identity. The problem is, as we have noted, particularly acute in the case of "being" since he held that it cannot designate a genus capturing various specific ways of being. Aristotle's solution is what is known as *pros hen* equivocation or "focal meaning," a model in which a variety of secondary uses of a term are explained in terms of a single primary use.²⁰⁸ The classic example is the various applications of the term "healthy" and their relation to bodily health. He argues that "just as everything which is 'healthy' has reference to health, one thing in that it preserves health, another in that it produces it, another

²⁰⁷ Ashworth 2013.

²⁰⁸ The term "focal meaning" was coined by G.E.L. Owen. See Wilson 2000, 116-74.

in that it is a symptom of health, another because it is capable of it," likewise all things are said to "be" by reference to "one starting point"—the being of substance.²⁰⁹

The characteristic feature of analogy of attribution is the definitional priority of the primary usage of a term to that of a secondary, a feature that Aquinas will incorporate into his own account of transcendental analogy. Healthy food, for example, must be defined with reference to that which makes a body healthy. What distinguishes analogy of attribution from pure equivocation is the fact that there is some relation between the two uses. Yet as we have mentioned, analogy of attribution does not presuppose any form of ontological likeness. Joshua P. Hochschild consequently calls this form of analogy "associated meaning," claiming that it is "not so much a matter of how things are related, but of how words are used."²¹⁰ Later scholastics such as Cajetan, will argue that in cases of analogy of attribution such as "healthy," the term is extended beyond its primary usage merely by "extrinsic denomination" since to describe urine or food as "healthy" is not to predicate of these things the quality the term designates in its primary application.²¹¹ To describe food

²⁰⁹ Quotation from White 2010, 73-4.

²¹⁰ 2010, 2.

²¹¹ Cajetan 1953, 15-23.

as "healthy" is to name it according to something that is extrinsic to it, i.e., a particular causal *relation* it bears to those bodily qualities we describe as "healthy." If the term "healthy" were extended to food by "intrinsic denomination," however, we would be affirming that there is something *like* the quality of bodily health within the food as such. Though scholastic thinkers will apply analogy of attribution to the relationship between divine and creaturely predicates, they will usually do so with the assumption that there nevertheless is also some ontological resemblance underscoring the usage.

Aristotle's account of how comparisons can be made across kinds has obvious significance for religious language. As Roger M. White observes, "With analogy, we can compare things that are different in kind, no matter how strictly we interpret the idea of "different in kind," without violating the fact that they are different in kind. It is precisely because of this that we can find in Aristotle's use of analogy an initial indication of how it is that, when we move beyond Aristotle, analogy seems to offer a way of comparing God and humanity without violating the infinite difference between them."²¹² Indeed, Aquinas will explicitly adapt Aristotle's models of analogy to

²¹² White 2000, 51.

religious language. Like Descartes, he appeals to divine simplicity to explain why univocal predication of God and creatures is impossible. Unlike Descartes, however, he *explicitly* denies that divine names are purely equivocal, for he argues that would undermine our ability to speak intelligibly of God.²¹³ He appeals to analogy to resolve this paradox.

II. Aquinas and Analogy

Though Aquinas's treatment of transcendental analogy would be a model for later scholastic accounts, he never offered a systematic account of analogy in general.²¹⁴ Moreover, it is difficult to gauge the significance of many of his discussions of analogy, for he appeals to it to address a variety of philosophical and theological concerns. Like Aristotle, Aquinas appears to employ a general notion of analogy that includes cases of both

²¹³ For example, In the *Summa Theologiae*, to the question "Is what is said of God and creatures univocally predicated of them?" Aquinas responds by saying that if the names of God and creatures were "completely equivocal [...] then it would follow that from creatures nothing can be known of God. Thus names are predicated analogically" (*ST* . I.13.5).

²¹⁴ As Hochschild puts it, "there is no ex professo teaching on analogy in Aquinas's corpus [...] the mentions of analogy are occasional and ad hoc. There is no dedicated treatise or section of a treatise, no systematically elaborated doctrine of analogy" (2010, 10).

intrinsic and extrinsic denomination.²¹⁵ And though he prefers analogy of attribution to proportionality as a model for transcendental analogy in his mature works, it is not clear to what extent this represents a doctrinal change rather than a mere shift in emphasis.²¹⁶ It is unsurprising, therefore, that there is a historical and ongoing interpretive dispute regarding Aquinas's theory of analogy.²¹⁷ For our purposes, however, the most important

²¹⁵ Mondin, for example, notes that "Aquinas uses 'analogy' to mean direct similarity, similarity of proportions, reasoning by resemblance, proportionate distribution, right degree of being, metaphor, simile and several modes of predication" but that "for both Aquinas and Aristotle analogy is first of all a logical category concerning the meaning of names." 5-7. Alston too cautions that Aquinas's logical notion of analogy doesn't presuppose any form of ontological likeness: "We must be careful not to read Thomas on analogy in terms of some likeness or similarity between things. Analogically related uses of terms, or the things they are applied to in these uses, need not be markedly similar to each other. Similarity is only one of the relations that can tie together analogically related senses." 152. White agrees: "Among mediaeval theologians '*analogia*' became a generic term, covering all cases where a word was used in many different ways, but where it was not by chance that the same word was used" (2010, 73).

²¹⁶ He appears to favor analogy of attribution in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. Ashworth (2013) suggests he abandoned analogy of proportionality (as advocated in *De veritate*) because "the problem of divine names arises precisely because the relationship of God to his properties is so radically different from our relation to our properties." Montanges (2004, 74) suggests that he initially prefers analogy of proportionality because it does not assume a direct likeness between God and creatures but rather a resemblance in terms of their relations to their qualities and so seems to safeguard divine transcendence. Yet proportionality seems to preserve transcendence at the risk of entailing equivocity. Yet, in *De Nominum Analogia*, Cajetan argues that analogy of attribution is always extrinsic and hence it is the analogy of proportionality in Aquinas that justifies extending predicates to God. Hochschild (2010, 19-29) argues that it is a mistake, however, to read *De Nominum Analogia* as an interpretation of Aquinas.

²¹⁷ Topics of dispute include: the status of analogy of proportionality vis à vis analogy of attribution in Aquinas's works; whether and how his views on analogy developed throughout his works; whether analogy should be understood exclusively as a matter of logic rather than metaphysics; and the role of judgment in analogy.

features of Aquinas's treatment of transcendental analogy are the following: a) his appealing to Platonic principles of exemplarism, participation, and causal transmission to explain the ontological resemblance between creatures and God; b) his insistence that, since God possesses the perfection in question fully and by identity whereas creatures possess the perfection only by participation, a given term applied to God has definitional priority over its creaturely analogate; and c) his providing a paradigmatic example of a traditional bottom-up derivation of analogical concepts of the divine nature.

A) Ontological Resemblance:

Aquinas explicitly denies that transcendental analogy of attribution entails an extrinsic denomination of the sort suggested by examples like "healthy" or "medical." Rather, he argues that it is in virtue of a real ontological similarity that predicates are legitimately extended from creatures to God. Montagnes has thus argued that one of Aquinas's most important innovations with respect to the Aristotelian theory of analogy is his insistence that, between the primary and secondary analogates, there exists "a real community of being, and a

communication of being by the causality of the first being.”²¹⁸ The analogy of attribution is for Aquinas an analogy of *intrinsic* attribution. God can be said to be “good” not merely because he is the cause of creaturely goodness, but because he and he alone is fully good—in fact, he is Goodness itself—and creatures are good in only a derivative sense.²¹⁹ Though the fact that God is the cause of creaturely goodness explains why God himself must be good, it is this latter intrinsic feature of God rather than his causal relation to creatures that justifies the ascription.²²⁰ In his own analysis of Aquinas’s doctrine of analogy, Mondin emphasizes this point:

intrinsic attribution requires a real similarity between analogates and that this similarity is based on a relation of efficient causality. For example, there is analogy between the Venetian painting and Titian, because Titian is the author of the painting. But efficient causality of itself alone does not guarantee a similarity between cause and effect...we may know that an omelet has been prepared by the Chinese Chiang, but this fact gives us no assurance that the omelet is Chinese. [...] the possibility of analogy of

²¹⁸ 2004, 31.

²¹⁹ *ST I. 13. 2.* “‘God is good’ therefore does not mean the same as ‘God is the cause of goodness’ or ‘God is not evil’; it means that what we call ‘goodness’ in creatures pre-exists in God in a higher way.”

²²⁰ As Alston puts it, “in deriving the sense of the predicate in application to God from its sense in application to creatures we are exploiting the causal dependence of the prior analogate on the posterior one (in the order of meaning derivation), but we are doing so in awareness of the fact that by virtue of this causal dependence there is, and must be, a commonality in intrinsic form, though possessed in more and less perfect ways.” (157)

intrinsic attribution rests, then, on the validity of the principle of likeness between cause and effect.²²¹

Though indebted to Aristotle for the model of attribution, Aquinas frequently appeals to Platonic and Neo-Platonic principles of exemplarity, participation and causal transmission to explain the likeness between creatures and God.²²² As we have discussed at length, Descartes had appealed to similar principles in his own discussion of the resemblance relation between creatures and God. All three principles emphasize an unequal relation of two things to a given perfection. While creatures perfectly imitate the ideas God has of them ("intellectual exemplarism") they only imperfectly imitate God's attributes (so-called "natural exemplarism").²²³ Creatures are good, but only insofar as they *imitate* divine goodness, only insofar as they receive from God a limited version of that perfection that exists in him in an unlimited fashion.²²⁴ Participation

²²¹ Mondin 1963, 67.

²²² Rolnick observes that "The analogy of participation turns out to be used more abundantly (126 times) than any other kind of analogy in the Thomistic corpus. Furthermore, it is employed over the entire span of Aquinas' writings, with increasing emphasis in the later works. Participation analogies are closely linked to exemplarity analogies and analogies of causal proportion; indeed, in Aquinas' later works, exemplarity and causal proportion seem to be subsumed in participation analogies" (1993, 46).

²²³ See Doolan 2008, 148-152.

²²⁴ However, Rolnick notes that for Aquinas "creaturely participation is not in the divine esse, but in the esse received from God, an affirmation which is consistent with creation ex nihilo. Allowing a direct participation in the divine Ipsum Esse Subsistens might generate a pantheistic account of creation, essentialism, or something like

implies a similar relation. In his *Commentary on Boethius*, Aquinas argues that "to participate is to receive as it were a part; and therefore when anything receives in a particular manner that which belongs to another in a universal [or total] manner, it is said to participate it." Creatures are thus said to participate in the divine perfections to the extent that they fail to possess them in an unqualified manner. It is easy here to see in the case of exemplarism and participation a Christianized Platonism, the identification of God with the form of the Good in which every other "good" thing participates.²²⁵

In his more mature works, however, Aquinas tends to argue for resemblance by appealing to the principle that every agent produces something like itself. Since God is simple and infinite, however, Aquinas designates him an "equivocal" or "analogical" cause rather than a "univocal" cause since the perfections of his effects must fall short absolutely of his own: "Every effect of a univocal agent is adequate to the agent's power: and no creature, being finite, can be adequate to the power of the first agent which is infinite. Wherefore it is impossible for a

Scotus' assessment of being as a univocal core common to God and humankind. Instead, Aquinas keeps the infinite God and finite creature distinct while providing an account of their similarity through the divine being as cause of all other being."

²²⁵ See Quinn 1996, 19-25.

creature to receive a likeness to God univocally."²²⁶

Nevertheless, some resemblance must hold. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, he uses the example of the sun to illustrate this point:

[T]he heat generated by the Sun must bear some likeness to the active power of the Sun, through which heat is caused in this sublunary world, and because of this effect the Sun is said to be hot, even though not in one and the same way. And so the Sun is said to be somewhat like those things in which it produces its effects as an efficient cause. Yet the Sun is also unlike all these things in so far as such effects do not possess heat and the like in the same way as they are found in the Sun. So, too, God gave things all their perfections and thereby is both like and unlike all of them.²²⁷

The heat the sun generates in a stone must resemble, in some way, a property of the sun itself. Knowing the nature of an effect thus enables us to make inferences about the nature of the cause. Since God is the first cause, we can draw conclusions about his nature based upon the nature of creation. Of course, knowing that a given property is possessed by a creature does not alone justify the inference that God possesses an analogically similar property. Only those properties that are co-extensive with being (the transcendentals) and that do not entail some

²²⁶ Quotation taken from White 2010, 86.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 84.

form of imperfection (the pure perfections) can be predicated of God in a literal fashion.

The general theory of CPP does not, however, presuppose a causal relation between the perfect and the imperfect. An imperfect circle's resemblance to a perfect one is not explained by the former being an effect of the latter. Of course, when it comes to the relation between creatures and God, such a causal relation will obtain. Nevertheless, what justifies the extension of a predicate from the perfect to the imperfect will be some form of resemblance between the two. On this point, Aquinas's insistence that the transcendental analogy of attribution is an *intrinsic* analogy, i.e. founded upon the ontological resemblance between the analogates, holds for analogy within CPP as well. But what is the nature of this ontological resemblance? Is it reducible to some form of qualitative identity and hence amenable to some form of univocal predication? The question can also be framed in terms of the concepts purportedly analogical predicates express: how can the content of one concept be similar to the content of another without there being some sort of overlap between the two?²²⁸

²²⁸ As we shall see, for Scotus these questions are separable: conceptual univocity is in fact compatible with ontological diversity (i.e. the complete absence of any qualitative identity).

In his own effort at rehabilitating Aquinas's theory of transcendental analogy, Alston argues that, even though the proper meanings of analogical terms predicated of God and creatures are not univocal, we can generate a more generic meaning that encapsulates both uses by abstracting from the differences between the meanings.²²⁹ He claims that there is some basis in Aquinas's theory of abstraction for such an account. Aquinas, for example, thinks that we can "form a very general concept of corporeity that abstracts from the difference between corruptible and incorruptible bodies, and hence can be predicated univocally of both." Alston therefore wonders why we shouldn't be able to "form a concept of willing, knowing, forgiving, or loving that abstracts from the differences in the ways in which these forms are realized in God and creatures, and hence that can be predicated univocally of both?"²³⁰

Alston's account of analogy as partial univocity may have merit as a theory of religious language. Such an account is certainly easier to understand than traditional analogous predication. Yet, from the perspective of the traditional theory, what Alston is proposing is no longer a doctrine of analogy. The consensus interpretation of scholastic accounts of transcendental analogy is that at

²²⁹ Alston 1993.

²³⁰ Ibid., 175

both the ontological and the conceptual level the resemblance is primitive and hence irreducible to any form of qualitative identity or conceptual overlap allowing for univocal predication.²³¹ In the case of the relationship between God and creatures, any sort of qualitative identity would seem to be a violation of divine transcendence, and indeed impossible given divine simplicity.²³² Like Alston, other contemporary philosophers of religion in the analytic

²³¹Burrell, for example, argues that "the most promising of the traditional statements on 'analogy' emphatically deny the presence of a single common property, for the usage they sought to explain could not be restricted by a 'something common' clause. We need not imply that God and Socrates share any features when we call them both just. If we could find anything identifiably common, analogy would prove superfluous" (1973, 19). Yves R. Simon argues that treating analogy as though it were analyzable in terms of some sort of overlap in meanings is to commit a "beginner's" mistake: "In the beginner's understanding, to say that a term is not purely equivocal but analogical is the same as to say that, in spite of all, the meanings do have in common some feature, albeit a very thin one, which survives the differences and makes it possible for a term, whose unity is but one of analogy, to play the role of syllogistic term" (1960, 6). Even Alston acknowledges that "the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition has been committed to the theses that certain predications are essentially or irretrievably analogical, in that we are incapable of getting below the proportional similarity so as to specify features that are wholly in common. The favorite examples for this are the 'transcendentals', terms that apply across the Aristotelian categories. Thus it is frequently said that 'being' is said analogically of substance, quality, quantity, relations, and so on. A substance and a quality each *is* in a way appropriate to its category, but there is no way of specifying a neutral sense of being, such that a term for that sense is univocally predicable of things in any category. Needless to say, this is all highly controversial" (1993, 153).

²³² Aquinas notes that divine simplicity also renders the subject-predicate grammatical form (*modi significandi*) of creaturely predication inadequate for literal predication of God. I agree with Alston, however, that this issue is actually extraneous to the issue of analogy: "The inaptness of our *modi significandi* for theological application is not going to affect inferences insofar as they depend on the meanings of the terms employed, for the mode of signification is distinguished from that. Thus, to the extent that implications of divine knowledge or will or goodness depend on the specific content of those concepts, it will not matter that our grammatical forms are ill-suited to talk about God. Any trouble here will come from differences in the *res significata*" (1993, 168).

tradition have criticized traditional accounts of analogy for assuming that such a primitive resemblance relation holds between analogates.²³³ It is argued that similarity in meaning must either be explicated in terms of partial univocity or be dismissed as equivocation. The notion that two properties might be similar without thereby being the same in some respect, or that concepts of similar properties might not share content, is rejected more or less outright. For better or worse, however, this is precisely the sort of resemblance that intrinsic analogies assume.

²³³ "Among analytic philosophers, the standard objections to the Thomistic theory of analogy are generally variations on a theme, clustered around a rejection of the notion of intrinsically analogous concepts. Similarity in meaning, it is argued, requires at least partial sameness in meaning and hence an element of univocity in the terms we use to describe both God and human beings. As such, there can be no intrinsically analogical terms; any proposed examples of such terms can always be analyzed in such a way that their meaning is partly univocal and partly equivocal, so that the appearance of irreducible analogy is eliminated. Thus, the analytic philosopher proposes a dilemma for the Thomist: either the terms used of God and of creatures are at least partly univocal, so that there is enough commonality of meaning to constitute them as related in meaning, or they are not, in which case they share no common meaning and are thus purely equivocal" (Duncan 2006, 72). Interpreting analogy as a form of partial univocity is not unique to so-called "analytic" philosophers. For example, the philosopher of religion, Ronald Nash, has argued that, in Aquinas' thought, "the very thing that keeps an analogy from being equivocation is the presence of some univocal element. [...] If someone says that a bird's nest is analogous to a beehive, there must be something that the nest and the hive have in common" (1999, 178-9).

B) Definitional Priority of the Primary Analogate

We have noted that in extrinsic analogy of attribution, the term as it is applied to the primary analogate has definitional priority to the term as it is applied to the secondary. We cannot provide a proper account of what "healthy" predicated of food means without including in its definition the meaning of "healthy" predicated of the body. Food is "healthy" insofar as it is a contributing cause of the condition constitutive of bodily health. Does a similar definitional priority apply to transcendental analogy of attribution as well? Certainly the definition of divine goodness need not make any reference to creaturely goodness, for God is not designated "good" merely because he is the paradigm for or cause of creaturely goodness.

Yet Aquinas nevertheless insists that there is a definitional priority in transcendental analogy of attribution. Theological reflection leads us to conclude that we must define creaturely goodness in terms of that goodness in which it participates. As Mondin puts it "the primary analogate possesses [the perfection] essentially, absolutely, and therefore by identity and not by participation. Only the secondary analogate is not

identical with the analogous perfection but has a limited degree of it and is, therefore, said to participate in it."²³⁴ In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that this unequal relation of creatures and God to a given perfection means that, from an ontological perspective, it is the term as it is used of creatures that is the "extended or analogical use":

Whenever a word is used analogically of many things, it is used because of some order or relation to some central thing. In order to explain an extended or analogical use of a word it is necessary to mention this central thing. The primary application of the word is to the central thing that has to be understood first; other applications will be more or less secondary in so far as they approximate to this use. [...] When we say He is good or wise we do not simply mean that he causes wisdom or goodness, but that he possesss these perfections transcendently. *We conclude, therefore, that from the point of view of what the word means it is used primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for what the word means—the perfection it signifies—flows from God to the creature.*²³⁵

Since human goodness and wisdom is merely a likeness of divine goodness and wisdom, the divine qualities are the primary senses of "good" and wise."

As we suggested in the introduction, Aquinas's account of semantic-cum-definitional priority ought to be understood as a claim regarding the analogy of terms rather

²³⁴1963, 65.

²³⁵ Quotation from White 2010, 89. Emphasis mine.

than the analogy of concepts. Though Aquinas holds that analogical concepts of divine qualities are derived from concepts of creaturely ones, he does not believe that we ought to define divine "goodness" or "wisdom" in terms of creaturely "goodness" or "wisdom." Rather, given the ontological fact that creaturely qualities are mere participations of divine ones, he thinks we ought to define the latter in terms of the former. Consider the example of a fake duck discussed earlier. A child's only familiarity with ducks might be with decoys. As far as the child knows, the primary sense of "duck" applies to these decoys. Yet when the child learns what a real duck is, he understands that the term "duck" is used only derivatively of the decoys. He learns that a decoy can be said to be a "duck" only insofar as it is an imitation of one, and that one cannot understand the derivative sense in which the decoy is a duck unless one understands the standard sense of "duck." Likewise, "good" and "wise" may initially appear to apply primarily to creatures since our initial concepts of goodness and wisdom are derived from experience of them. Yet when we come to understand (however inadequately) the supereminent version of these qualities within God, we may then view the creaturely qualities as imperfect instances of the real thing. Consequently, we may define terms

designating these creaturely qualities in terms of the divine qualities they imitate.

A similar train of thought has appealed to contemporary thinkers. Charles Hartshorne, for example, notes that there is a sense in which the divine meanings of terms can have priority over their creaturely applications, even though our concepts of God are derived from concepts of creatures (in this case concepts of our own cognitive abilities):

I have [...] sometimes argued that, unless we have in our own natures instantiation of concepts (say that of decision-making) which we use to conceive God, we could not have these concepts [of God]. But I have also sometimes argued that we can conceive our own form of knowing, say, by introducing qualifications into what we know of divine cognition. God knows—period; we—partially, uncertainly, vaguely; and much of what we can hardly avoid taking as knowledge is erroneous belief. The appearance of contradiction here has sometimes occurred to me.²³⁶

Aquinas, as we have seen, seems to go even further, arguing that since the terms designating divine perfections have definitional priority over their application to creatures, there is a sense in which terms predicated of God have a *semantic* priority to their application to creatures. Lyttkens, as well as other commentators, have taken this claim to be a consequence of Aquinas's Platonic and

²³⁶ Quotation from Dombrowski 1996, 162.

Neoplatonic influences. Roger White agrees, and argues further that Aquinas's insistence on the semantic priority of the divine predicates over creaturely ones is his "most important contribution to the theory of religious language."²³⁷ White argues that if we give semantic priority to terms as they are used of creatures, we thereby run the anthropomorphic risk of measuring God according to the human. He notes that Aquinas portrays the image-model relation as asymmetric, for "just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him" so we cannot say that God is like a creature.²³⁸ If we use terms designating pure perfections and transcendentals as if they designated God's nature primarily and only secondarily and imperfectly the attributes of creatures, we can avoid the anthropomorphic tendency to understand God in terms of creatures.

Nevertheless, this definitional priority provides only a superficial barrier to anthropomorphism. Though we may *define* creaturely attributes in terms of divine attributes, Aquinas's account suggests that we *conceive* of God via concepts derived from our experience with creatures. Indeed, White provides an interesting, though ultimately mistaken, account of how this definitional priority is

²³⁷ 2010, 98.

²³⁸ SCG I.29.139. Quoted from White 99.

reflected in Plato's account of reflection in the *Phaedo*. Understanding how Aquinas's account diverges from the Platonic one will help us to distinguish definitional priority from the issue of concept-derivation. Noting that Aquinas must respond to the commonsense objection that our initial acquaintance is with creaturely attributes and that the meanings of terms such as "good" or "wise" are, for us, in initially creaturely in nature, White suggests that Aquinas could appeal to Plato's account of geometrical notions in the *Phaedo* in support of this notion of semantic-cum-definitional priority. "Plato's basic point," he says, is that geometrical terms such as "equal in length" are never "perfectly exemplified in experience" but describe "an ideal, or standard, to which empirical phenomena approach to a greater or lesser extent." Nevertheless, when

we first learn the meanings of these geometrical terms, we inevitably start with their empirical employment, talking of square buildings or round cushions. But part of what we learn, when we learn to apply those words empirically, is that we can make sense of the idea that to a greater or lesser extent they fall short of perfect squareness or roundness, and that what we mean in calling things square or round is that they approximate to an ideal of squareness or roundness. Even though it is only by subsequent reflection on our everyday practice of classifying everyday objects as square and round that we arrive at the geometer's conception of squareness

and roundness, it is the geometer's conception that explains our everyday practice and not vice versa.²³⁹

The same relation holds for predicates applied first to creatures and only subsequently to God, for this "is no barrier to saying that the primary application of such words is to God, as setting the standard by which all earthly goodnesses, wisdoms and justices are to be measured and judged."²⁴⁰ White fails, however, to recognize that this example from Plato indicates an epistemological priority that is absent in Aquinas's account. The standard reading of Platonic recollection holds that our initial use of geometrical terms -"talking of square buildings or round cushions" -is guided by a *prior awareness* of the ideal standards to which these empirical objects approximate. For Plato, the geometer's concepts "explain[] our everyday practice" in the robust sense that an implicit awareness of them informs our everyday judgments or classifications; subsequent reflection on this activity is a way of making explicit what had hitherto been a latent yet cognitively active item of knowledge. We had noted that Descartes and Cudworth provide a similar account: prior to an explicit awareness of the imperfection of sensed triangles in comparison to the perfection of the geometer's notion, we

²³⁹ 2010, 89-90.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

unknowingly draw on an innate idea of a perfect triangle in our everyday classifications.

But this cannot be the sense in which concepts "explain" our practices in White's example, for there we can be said to possess the geometer's concept only *after* reflection on our everyday practices. As an empiricist, Aquinas would not agree that our initial capacity to recognize creaturely instances of goodness is guided by a concept of ideal (divine) goodness. Rather, our ability to classify various creatures as "good" is to be explained solely by an abstracted notion of creaturely goodness, and it is by manipulating *this* notion that we arrive, for the first time, at a concept of divine goodness. After all, if we did not really possess concepts of creaturely goodness or wisdom in this manner, how could we arrive at concepts of divine goodness or wisdom by manipulating these original notions? It is perhaps true that, once we have reached a concept of divine goodness by modifying a creaturely one, we may, as it were, 'return' to the creaturely concept and modify it in light of our concept of the divine; we may, in other words, recognize creaturely goodness as being merely an imitation or imperfect example of its divine correlate. Thus there might be a sense in which we can provide a proper definition of creaturely goodness only *after* we have

compared it to its divine case. Nevertheless, the meaning of "good" as it is predicated of God is obtained by manipulating a prior notion of creaturely goodness.

C) Direction of Analogical Derivation

What distinguishes traditional accounts of analogy such as Aquinas's from that required by CPP is thus the fundamental direction of the analogical derivation of concepts. Aquinas, along with most scholastic thinkers, held that our concepts of divine perfections are constructed out of our concepts of creaturely ones. This is what Adams had called the "bottom-up" approach to divine predicate formation. Even if God's perfections are definitionally prior to our own, our initial notions of goodness, for example, originate in our experience of instances of creaturely goodness. For Aquinas, the meaning of a word is a concept of the thing the word signifies. In order to extend "good" in a literal fashion to God, we need to possess a concept of divine goodness. We do this, according to Aquinas, by modifying our concept of creaturely goodness. "When we say that God is good [...] the meaning is, Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-

exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way."²⁴¹

The concept of divine goodness thus produced is not the same as the notion of creaturely goodness. Rather, it is the notion of a goodness existing in "a more excellent and higher way," and is thus only analogous to the creaturely concept.

Aquinas does not, however, believe that we can possess any quidditative knowledge of God (i.e. knowledge of God's nature). As is suggested by the vague intensifier "more excellent and higher," the concept of divine goodness is not adequate to the reality to which it refers in the way our concept of creaturely goodness is.²⁴² As Wippel puts it, "this name, like any other we may apply to him, leaves the thing signified as something which we do not comprehend and something which surpasses any meaning we may give to the

²⁴¹ *ST* 1.13.3

²⁴² Some interpreters have suggested that analogy in Aquinas must be understood in terms of a special role of the act of judgment. These interpreters will allow that the concepts we employ in speaking of God are inherently creaturely. What makes our language about God analogical rather than univocal, however, is not the nature of the concept of the divine we employ prior to judgment but a concept produced through the act of judgment itself. Rocca, for example, allows that "Aquinas does not hesitate to assert that the names we employ in divine predication are known to us only insofar as they are used of creatures. For some, such a claim would immediately raise the specter of cryptic univocity: for if the meanings are inherently creaturely, then are we not simply saying something creaturely of God whenever we predicate of God names taken from creatures? How could a divine name really mean anything different when predicated of God? [...] Aquinas' path around the obstacle of univocity is to recognize a judgment that both uses and produces concepts, all the while transcending them" (2004, 192). I do not, however, understand in what sense an act of judgment could either "produce" or "transcend" concepts.

name."²⁴³ Since this admittedly imperfect knowledge of God is derived from knowledge of creatures, however, Aquinas suggests that the meaning of terms designating creaturely attributes have a semantic priority over terms designating divine ones: "Since we arrive at the knowledge of God through things other than God, the reality referred to by the names predicated of God and other things exists by priority in God according to his own mode, but the meaning of the name belongs to God by posteriority, and thus God is said to be named from His effects."²⁴⁴

This claim (from the *Summa Contra Gentiles*) that the creaturely meanings of terms have semantic priority by virtue of their epistemological priority seems to be in direct conflict with the earlier quotation (from the later *Summa Theologiae*) in which Aquinas asserts that the divine predicates have semantic priority by virtue of their definitional priority. While White suggests that the later (*Summa Theologiae*) account represents a development of Aquinas's views, other interpreters have suggested that Aquinas is somewhat confused on this point.²⁴⁵ Lyttkens

²⁴³ 2000, 567.

²⁴⁴ SCG 1.34.298

²⁴⁵ Lyttkens argues that the ambiguity of semantic priority in Aquinas is a product of his effort to reconcile discordant elements of his system. From the philosophical perspective, says Lyttkens, Aquinas give semantic priority to terms used of creatures when he is "thinking logically," whereas he gives semantic priority to the terms used of God when he is "thinking ontologically" (1952, 369). From a historical

describes the confusion as follows: "The difficulty is that we are apparently moving in a circle. The concept is first stated analogously of God, who must be named from creation because we do not know what He is per se, and afterwards used to designate a likeness in creation to the divine. But if, logically, the concept is the first time characterized by its import in creation, and then stated of creation as a designation from God, the same is apparently stated of the same."²⁴⁶ The problem can be expressed in terms of the value the definitional priority of divine predicates are purported to have. Though we may define creaturely goodness in terms of divine goodness, we cannot *understand* what divine goodness is except by reference to the only form of goodness we have experienced—creaturely goodness.

In any case, the meanings of terms as they are applied to creatures are semantically prior to their meanings as they are applied to God in the sense that the latter are derived from the former. The kind of semantic priority identified with definitional priority is a secondary and relatively superficial sort when compared to this initial order of derivation. There is nothing 'in' the meaning of the divine sense of a term that is not obtained

perspective, the ambiguity can be attributed to his attempting to do justice to both Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of epistemology and ontology.

²⁴⁶ 1952, 368.

by modifying the original creaturely sense. Responding to the paradoxical passages like the one above that suggest that the meanings of divine terms are definitionally prior to creaturely ones, Alston argues that, "be that as it may, I am concerned here, as Aquinas is primarily concerned in these discussions, with semantic order, with what meanings are derivative from what others, with what meanings have to be explained in terms of what others. And on that point he is quite clear that the application to creatures is semantically prior."²⁴⁷ Even if a proper definition of "good" as it is applied to creatures requires us to make reference to the divine goodness of which it is merely a likeness, this definitional priority is to be distinguished from the more basic semantic priority of, as Alston puts it, "what meanings are derived from what others." It is this more basic semantic priority, rooted in the epistemological order, that distinguishes the geometrical example in the *Phaedo* from Aquinas's account. For Aquinas, there is no getting around the fact that we conceive of God in terms of concepts that are derived from experience with creatures.

Gyula Klima too takes the derivation of concepts of the divine attributes from concepts of creaturely ones to

²⁴⁷ 1993, 160.

constitute a defining feature of Aquinas's account of analogical derivation. In fact, he distinguishes Aquinas's account from the sort of 'top-down' account of analogical derivation required by CPP. He begins by noting that "since according to Aquinas we gain our primary concept of being from created substances, we need to understand divine being by analogically 'stretching' our mundane concept."²⁴⁸ Thus even though "the primary significate of the term "being" in the ontological order has to be divine being [...] this is cognized by us only secondarily, on the basis of a primary concept we first acquire from creaturely being." Klima adds, however, that

if we gained our primary concept of being directly from God, that is, if the *primum cognitum* of our minds were divine being, and not created being in general, then we could understand created being directly as a sort of diminished being, delimited and specified by the limited nature it realizes, and then the cognitive order would match the ontological order. However, since our mind is first confronted with the being of created substances, it has to arrive at the cognition of divine being in this more circuitous way, at least in accordance with Aquinas's doctrine.²⁴⁹

Here Klima is comparing Aquinas's account to the top-down account of analogy required by CPP, a form of analogy that (contra White) adheres more faithfully to the Platonic tradition. This sort of analogy is "top-down" in the strong

²⁴⁸ 2012, 384-5.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 385.

sense that concepts of certain creaturely attributes are obtained, not from experience, but by limiting or diminishing concepts of divine attributes, concepts that are not the product of modifying concepts of creaturely ones. Terms designating pure perfections and transcendentals are said primarily of God and secondarily of creatures not merely because the divine terms are ontologically and hence definitionally prior, but because our concepts of the creaturely versions of these attributes are derived from prior concepts of the divine attributes.²⁵⁰

²⁵⁰ As we indicated in the second chapter, Descartes would not deny Aquinas' claim that the way in which we represent to ourselves God's goodness, or any of his other perfections, is by 'stretching' (i.e., amplifying) our concepts of creaturely perfections. However, he would argue that in so doing we are guided by an innate understanding of these (qualitatively distinct) divine perfections.

Ch. V. Analogy and Abstraction by Confusion

The theory of CPP claims that we apprehend certain creaturely attributes as absolutely imperfect, i.e., falling short of the kind definitive of the perfect. Additionally, the theory assumes that the imperfect is apprehended as being in some sense *like* the perfect. Even though creaturely goodness, for example, is grasped as failing to be an instance of genuine goodness, it is nevertheless viewed as resembling or imitating it and hence worthy of the designation "goodness." In chapter III we introduced various ways of making sense of this relation and argued that Descartes, in his own version of CPP, may have been appealing to a theory of analogical resemblance. In the last chapter, we noted that the traditional theory of analogy treated resemblance as primitive in the sense that it cannot be explained by or reduced to any form of univocity. For many contemporary and historical critics of analogy, however, similarity in meaning presupposes partial sameness in meaning and qualitative resemblance presupposes qualitative identity. Hence, the "irreducible resemblance" of meanings of purportedly analogical terms can always be shown to rest on a latent partial univocity, and the primitive likeness of things can be reduced to some form of

qualitative identity. In this chapter, we will attempt to dispel some of the mystery surrounding the notion of primitive resemblance by exploring traditional scholastic accounts of how such resemblance can be cognized and by drawing parallels to more modern accounts of concept formation in cases of inexact similarity.

I. Abstraction by Confusion

The traditional theory of transcendental analogy invokes a resemblance or unity at both an ontological and a conceptual level. A single term used in different contexts is taken to signify, via concepts that resemble one another without sharing content, things that resemble one another without sharing a common nature or form. That the foundation of similarity between two things, or two concepts, could in some way be inextricably bound up with the foundation of their difference is indeed a paradox. Yet, as Yves R. Simon has observed, "the understanding of analogy begins when we realize that between likeness and difference there is, in analogy, such a link, such an essential relation of interdependence that if the differential is removed, the like is removed also and

nothing is left."²⁵¹ The scholastic critics of the traditional theory often attempted to undermine the notion of a primitive metaphysical resemblance by rejecting the unity of analogical concepts and therefore "denying the logical possibility of analogy."²⁵² The great scholastic critic of analogy, Duns Scotus, argued that only univocal concepts possess a unity of meaning such that they 1) can be employed as the middle term of a valid syllogism and 2) cannot be affirmed and denied of the same thing without contradiction.²⁵³ Though Aristotle and Aquinas had assumed that analogical concepts could be used in reasoning without committing the fallacy of equivocation, they had never explained precisely how this could be done.

Later scholastic advocates of analogy therefore attempted to show how analogical concepts could possess sufficient unity (or resemblance) to be employed in valid reasoning, a resemblance that was taken to reflect a primitive analogical resemblance of things. Oftentimes this was framed as a matter of identifying a single analogical concept capable of representing imperfectly or confusedly each of the analogous natures. This sort of solution, in

²⁵¹ 1955, 7.

²⁵² Hochschild 2010, 139.

²⁵³ Hochschild observes that even though Scotus' criticism concerns the logical nature of analogy, his "logical assumptions are just an attempt to shore up his denial of the metaphysical category of proportional unity" (2010, 39).

fact, can be traced back to the account of analogy at which Scotus' critique was primarily aimed—that of Henry of Ghent's. Though Ghent held that our analogous concepts of divine and creaturely being cannot be said to overlap in any way (indeed, as simple, they cannot), he nevertheless suggested that, due to their primitive similarity, we tend to confuse the two notions in thought, producing a single concept of the two analogous natures.²⁵⁴ Later scholastics attempted to respond to Scotus' criticism and open up a logical space for analogy by supplying a formal analysis of such abstraction by confusion. Cajetan, who favored a model of analogy of proportionality, argued that the natures of analogous things are proportionally similar such that the concepts of each bear a proportional similarity to one another.²⁵⁵ The proportional similarity of these concepts enables us to form a single concept that represents each of the analogous natures, a concept that can be employed in syllogistic reasoning. Yet since analogous natures are

²⁵⁴1998b, 302-3.

²⁵⁵ Even though analogy of proportionality is usually taken to express a resemblance of relations (A:B::C:D), for Cajetan, the analogy signifies not a relation but the "foundation of a relation." Here we see, as we did with Aristotle, how the four-part scheme of proportionality can be a roundabout way of describing a direct proportion between two things. Though Cajetan deviates from Aquinas in explicitly rejecting analogy of attribution, he accepts the bottom-up account of analogical concept derivation: "[W]hen men rose to a knowledge of the divine nature and saw the proportional similitude between us insofar as we are wise and God, they extended the name wisdom to signify in God that to which our wisdom is proportional" (1953, 73).

similar without possessing anything in common, this concept is neither a generic one derived by abstracting something they share, nor a notion of a mere arbitrary collection.²⁵⁶

Cajetan argues that while proportional natures are each represented by their own "perfect" concept, each perfect concept can represent other proportional natures confusedly or "imperfectly."²⁵⁷ Given two perfect concepts of proportional natures, we can form a sort of quasi-abstraction whereby we apprehend a single concept representing both natures imperfectly.²⁵⁸ This is not the abstraction of something common to each proportional

²⁵⁶ Cajetan: "Things which give rise to univocation are similar to one another in the sense that the foundation of similitude in one has exactly the same nature as the foundation of similitude in the other. Thus the notion of one contains in itself nothing which the notion of the other does not contain. In this way, the foundation of univocal similitude in both extremes abstracts equally from the extremes themselves. On the other hand, things which give rise to analogy are similar in the sense that the foundation of similitude in one is absolutely different in nature from the foundation of similitude in the other. Thus the notion of one thing does not contain in itself what the notion of the other contains. For this reason the foundation of analogous similitude in either of the extremes is not to be abstracted from the extremes themselves but the foundations of similitude remain distinct, although they are similar according to proportion, and because of this they are said to be the same proportionally or analogically" (1953, 30-1).

²⁵⁷ So, Cajetan argues that "every concept of a creature is a concept of God, just as every creature is a kind of likeness of God" 1953, 80.

²⁵⁸ Hochschild notes an interesting ambiguity here: "[I]s what we call the imperfect concept *another* concept in addition to the distinct perfect concepts? Or is what we call the imperfect concept really just (any) one of the (many) perfect concepts, *considered insofar as it* imperfectly represents the other analogates of which it is not a perfect concept?" He suggests that there is evidence for both, but argues that "the two alternatives may not be so different: the many imperfect concepts implied by the latter alternative—each a perfect concept of a distinct analogate, imperfectly representing other analogates—may be regarded as *proportionally* one imperfect concept—insofar as they all represent all analogates imperfectly—as implied by the former alternative" (2010, 147-8).

nature, says Hochschild, but "a kind of abstraction by *confusion*: the diverse proper analogues are considered as similar, and their diversity is ignored or 'confused.' What is confused (blurred, or made indistinct) is the distinction between the proportionally similar *rationes*, so that what is considered is their proportional similarity."²⁵⁹ Even though there is not some commonly abstractable *ratio* (i.e., concept), abstraction by confusion successfully yields a single concept because proportional similarity is a genuine form of similarity. While the foundation of univocal predication is shared conceptual content reflecting a qualitative identity, the foundation of analogy is the proportional similarity of such content reflecting the proportional similarity of forms or natures. Thus an analogous term can signify these analogous natures insofar as they are similar. And just as the process of abstraction by confusion is not a matter of isolating a common element, so the reverse process (contraction) is not the addition of a differentia to a generic notion, for what distinguishes one analogous nature from another must already be "contained" in the imperfect concept. Rather, a concept imperfectly representing a plurality of analogates is rendered a perfect concept of a

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 149.

given analogate by uncovering or rendering explicit their primitive diversity.²⁶⁰

Cajetan holds that his account can justify inferences employing proportionally similar concepts. When the different concepts are regarded according to what makes them distinct (i.e. as perfect representations of their respective natures), he notes that employing them in reasoning would indeed "lead to the error of equivocation."²⁶¹ But if we regard the concepts according to their unity (i.e. via an abstraction by confusion) he claims that then "one does not commit any fault, because whatever belongs to one belongs also to the other proportionally, and whatever is denied of the one is also denied of the other proportionally. The reason is that whatever pertains to a similar object as such pertains also to that to which it is similar, proportionality of course being always duly observed." Cajetan provides the following example of such an inference: "Every simple perfection is

²⁶⁰ John of St. Thomas notes that since standard abstraction proceeds by way of adding "something extraneous [...i.e.,] something of which the abstracted concept cannot be predicated," standard contraction occurs by adding something extraneous to the abstracted concept. In analogy, however, contraction proceeds not by "the addition of anything extraneous but needs merely something of which the abstracted concept can be predicated." So, for example, "in order that 'being' be contracted to 'substance' or 'accident' or 'living' or 'body,' it needs something which also is being, and of which being is predicated and which, consequently, is not extraneous to being. Such contraction is not effected by addition" (Simon 1955, 173).

²⁶¹ 1953, 69.

in God; Wisdom is a simple perfection; Therefore, [wisdom is in God]."²⁶² The fallacy of equivocation is avoided, he says, because "the word *wisdom* in the minor does not stand for this or that notion of wisdom, but for wisdom which is proportionally one, i.e. for both notions of wisdom, not taken in conjunction nor in disjunction, but insofar as they are undivided proportionally, insofar as one is the other proportionally, and insofar as both constitute a notion which is proportionally one." Nor can the confused concept of wisdom be affirmed and denied of the same thing without contradiction. Though one can say God is both wise and not wise when employing concepts perfectly representing divine wisdom (the former) and perfectly representing creaturely wisdom (the latter), one cannot do so when employing an imperfect concept of wisdom in both uses.²⁶³

II. Modal Distinction vs. Abstraction by Confusion

It may seem, however, that this account of abstraction by confusion is itself unclear. Can we possess a concept representing the analogical unity of two things without

²⁶² Ibid., 71.

²⁶³ Responding to Scotus' definition of a univocal concept in terms of the principle of contradiction, Cajetan argues that "if identity which is sufficient for contradiction is made the definition of univocation, then it is clear that, by stating that being is analogous and unified merely by proportion, one will fulfill the definition of univocation" (1953, 72).

thereby isolating an element of qualitative identity? And if the concept is not produced by isolating a shared feature, what distinguishes this concept from that of an unrelated or arbitrary collection?²⁶⁴ The kind of example that best expresses the intuitive plausibility of abstraction by confusion is, somewhat ironically, the very kind favored by Scotus in his own account of univocity: scalar properties like color that are taken to vary primitively in intensity or strength. Scotus had wanted to show how univocal predication of creatures and God could be consistent with the fact that, unlike most natures admitting of univocal predication, they don't share in any reality and hence the natures and proper concepts of each are in fact only analogous to one another. Since the proper concepts of God and creatures are not distinguished from one another by differentiae added to a genus, we cannot form a generic concept common to God and creatures. Nevertheless, he argues that if the proper concepts are distinguished as concepts of different determinates (or intrinsic modes) of a determinable magnitude, we can form a common univocal concept by conceiving of this magnitude without determining it to a given mode. This univocal

²⁶⁴ Yves R. Simon asks the same question. Since we cannot isolate a feature shared by analogous items, he notes that "it is reasonable to ask whether the unity of an analogical set is anything else than that of a collection" (1960, 8).

concept can be only an imperfect representation of the creaturely and divine realities since the magnitude exists in each only as contracted to a given mode.

Scotus derived this so-called "modal distinction" from the scholastic theory of the intension and remission of forms.²⁶⁵ Previous thinkers had attempted to explain how certain accidental qualities could undergo changes in magnitude without altering the species of the form itself. Though a piece of paper might become less intensely white with age, because whiteness is a quality admitting of remission, the underlying form of whiteness remains the same. This reasoning could also explain univocal predication in such cases; though one piece of paper might be more intensely white than another, we can predicate "white" univocally of both. Scotus suggests that a similar sort of univocity is possible in cases of predicating attributes to God and creatures. He suggests that the idea of infinite being is related to the idea of being in the way that the notion of intense white is related to the idea of white in general. Different degrees of white do not represent different species, for the color white is the sort of nature that varies primitively in degree. Thus

²⁶⁵ Dumont 1998b, 317-8.

when I say "infinite Being," I do not have a concept composed accidentally, as it were, of a subject and its attribute. What I do have is a concept of what is essentially one, namely of a subject with a certain grade of perfection-infinity. It is like "intense whiteness," which is not a notion that is accidentally composed, such as "visible whiteness" would be, for the intensity is an intrinsic grade of whiteness itself.²⁶⁶

Even though white can exist only as contracted to a given degree of intensity, we can nevertheless form a univocal concept of it. We do this not by abstracting white from its intrinsic degree (which is impossible), but by regarding the reality in an imperfect manner. The same follows for the idea of being and the other pure perfections and transcendentals. Even though being exists only as contracted to a given degree, we can nevertheless form a univocal concept of it. The univocal concept is not the idea of a reality (e.g. being) distinct from infinite or finite being, but is simply an imperfect representation of being as it exists according to its intrinsic modes.²⁶⁷

One might suspect, at this point, that the dispute between Scotus and Cajetan is merely a verbal one. In fact,

²⁶⁶ Scotus 1962, 27.

²⁶⁷ As Dumont describes it: "some particular instance of white existing at the tenth grade of intensity can be conceived perfectly, and then it is known according to the degree of perfection with which it is actually found. That same instance of white can be conceived imperfectly, and then only the nature of 'whiteness' as such, apart from the real condition of its grade of intensity, is known. The former is a proper concept of whiteness in some determinate grade, the latter a concept common to the various instances of white differing in degrees." (1998 319)

the late scholastic John of St. Thomas, who endorses Cajetan's position, characterizes the unity of the imperfect analogical concept as a sort of modal distinction, according to the "way of having a form, for each analogate has its form not in the same way, but proportionally."²⁶⁸ The key question in clarifying the distinction between Scotus' account and abstraction by confusion is this: what is the difference between 1) an imperfect univocal concept obtained by prescindendo from the intrinsic modes of various natures and 2) an imperfect analogical concept obtained by confusing or ignoring the diversity of various natures. St. Thomas goes into some detail in describing abstraction by confusion. Whereas standard abstraction proceeds by changing the *content* of what is conceived (i.e., by excluding any contracting differentiae) abstraction by confusion consists in changing *how* the content is apprehended, and thus unlike the standard abstracted concept, it includes contracting features in *act* rather than in *potency* (as a standard abstracted univocal concept does). To illustrate how this is done, he provides the example of viewing a collection of similar things from a distance:

²⁶⁸ Simon 1955, 171. Emphasis mine. St. Thomas also interprets Aquinas as holding that "being is not contracted by addition but by modes" 174.

[W]hen, from a great distance, I see a thousand men or a hill of sand, I do not discern the individual {men or grains of sand}, I see the whole multitude in one vision. The individuals are many and they terminate one act of vision as if they were one thing, yet you cannot say that in such apprehensions the many are attained only in potency: they are attained in act, though confusedly. This is how the confused concept of being is related to all its analogates: it represents immediately all things under the confusion of 'having existence,' and the only thing that it tells explicitly is 'having existence.'²⁶⁹

He goes on to explain that a confused concept is like an equivocal one in the sense that it "requires the actual plurality of the things that are taken confusedly, as happens when I perceive a multitude."²⁷⁰ However, whereas an equivocal concept signifies "several as several, that is, as having nothing in common," the analogous concept "which attains several things confusedly unites those things through that confusion itself and the only thing that it expresses in explicit fashion is the unity of those several things: again, this unity is not one of isolation, but of confusion."²⁷¹

St. Thomas alleges that the Scotistic account of transcendental univocity is ultimately inconsistent. If, as Scotus claims, being is contracted by intrinsic modes rather than differentiae, then this either a) implies that

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 179.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 180.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 179.

"the concept of being cannot be perfectly separated from the modes which contract it [and thereby] vindicates our own theory" or b) means that "being abstracts perfectly from its modes" which would render the modes differentiae and being a genus.²⁷² According to St. Thomas, the Scotists mistakenly assume that if a concept does not explicitly represent its inferiors (i.e., the entities falling under it) in act, it therefore does not include its inferiors in act. Rather, the example of seeing a multitude as unified is intended to show that what is not represented in act explicitly many nevertheless be included *implicitly*.²⁷³ Just as we can say that the diversity of the individuals is seen yet "confused" within the perceiver's perspective, so the diversity of individual analogical natures can be included within a concept even though it is their unity that is expressed explicitly.

²⁷² Simon 1955, 198-9.

²⁷³ James F. Anderson, who endorses the sort of abstraction by confusion proposed by Cajetan and St. Thomas, explains that "the intrinsically analogous and formally ontological concept that characterizes Analogy of Proper Proportionality does not prescind from its instances so as to remain 'in potency' to them, as does the *univocal* sort of notion. Because of this the latter is limitable by the addition of some *extrinsic* differential factor. 'Living organism,' for example, is conceptually univocal with respect to all its species, including its dividing differences only 'potentially,' thus being divisible *extrinsically* by them. I.e., it is because such terms are univocally conceivable, when one prescind from their various kinds, that the items responsible for their specific differentiation 'lie outside' their definitive natures. (Every cow is a living organism, but not every living organism is a cow. On the other hand, since all non-univocal objects -and of these 'being' is the principal one-really embrace their 'differences,' they cannot in truth simply exclude them even conceptually)" (1967, 58).

Part of the force of Scotus' argument is the assumption, shared by both advocates and opponents of abstraction by confusion, that the sort of change accounted for by the theory of remission and intensification of forms allowed for univocal predication.²⁷⁴ Yet if we jettison the metaphysical assumption of a common form, we can see how our ability to produce a common concept of a color might be best explained by a process like abstraction by confusion. In his own attempt to explain the intuition underlying Scotus' claims for univocity, Richard Cross uses the example of different shades of blue:

I take it that we can talk of a word's having two (or more) similar senses only if there is something in common between the two senses. But the senses can have something in common only if the attributes signified by the terms themselves have something in common. The attributes, presumably, include some more basic property that they have in common. If they did not, it would be difficult to see how we could claim that they were similar (rather than wholly different). For example, we could not claim that light blue and dark blue were similar colors unless they both had a feature in common—in this case blueness—in virtue of which they could be said to be similar to each other. Now, we can presumably find, or invent, a term to signify any common basic attribute. And this term will

²⁷⁴ It should also be noted that some scholastics denied that a single form could undergo change in (for example) intensity; rather, they held that when a given color became less intense, this was due to the fact that the original form was replaced by another. This issue is, however, distinct from the question of whether univocity is preserved, for even if there is a numerically different form in cases of such qualitative change, it does not follow that the same kind of quality (e.g. whiteness;) is no longer present when, for example, a sheet of paper becomes less intensely white.

be univocal: it will be used in the same sense in all statements.²⁷⁵

The underlying assumption at work here is that similarity must be explained in terms of the possession of a common feature.²⁷⁶ Though Scotus denied that God and creatures possess something in common in the sense allowing for standard abstraction, Cross argues that Scotus does seem to assume that some sort of ontological commonality constitutes their analogical resemblance and makes possible univocal predication.²⁷⁷ Unfortunately, Scotus never explicitly addresses this issue. In fact, Dumont has shown that Scotus' fourteenth century followers were themselves divided on the topic. While Scotists such as Antonius Andreas and Peter Thomae felt that there must nevertheless be some real community underlying the univocal concept of being, he explains that others, such as Peter of Navarre and Peter of Aquila, held that "the univocal concept of

²⁷⁵ Cross 1999, 33.

²⁷⁶ Or as Burrell puts it in his own analysis of Scotus: "if the same word names (or signifies) different things, then it must do so by a feature they hold in common" (1965, 651).

²⁷⁷ Cross thinks that Scotus' account is intelligible only if it assumes that some sort of real commonality underlies univocal predication. Though God and creatures are really diverse, Cross explains that "this does not, according to Scotus, exclude all commonality. He notes that the idea (ratio) of a simple transcendental attribute (i.e., the attribute considered without its intrinsic modes) is common 'as a transcendental is.' The account is not very explanatory, since Scotus offers no further account of what it is for a transcendental to be common. But it is clear that Scotus does not want to deny all commonality. (If he did, of course, his own univocity theory could not be sustained)" (1999, 39).

being results purely from an indifference in the mode of conception."²⁷⁸

Neither option appears to be fully consistent with Scotus' account.²⁷⁹ Andreas argued that if the common concept of being does not correspond to "something common in reality serving as its foundation," then this would violate Scotus' stated aim that metaphysics constitute a "science of reality."²⁸⁰ On the other hand, if Andreas is right that there is a "real unity" underlying univocal predication of creatures and God, then this would seem to threaten their real diversity and hence God's transcendence and simplicity. The advocates for abstraction by confusion, however, would claim that both disputants are laboring under the false assumption that the only kind of ontological unity capable of grounding conceptual unity is a unity of *commonality*. As Hochschild argues, the Scotists have overlooked the possibility that this conceptual unity could be explained by invoking a form of analogical similarity irreducible to any sort of commonality.²⁸¹

²⁷⁸ 1992, 144. Unlike Andreas, Thomae holds that the real community does not lie outside the soul, but in "intentional or conceptual being [...] a type of middle existence between a being of reason and an actually existing being in reality" (145).

²⁷⁹ I am not here considering Thomae's account since I don't fully understand it.

²⁸⁰ Dumont 1992, 142.

²⁸¹ "[T]he Scotist simply refuses to recognize something that is, in fact, real: proportional sameness, analogical unity. Although Scotus argues against the analogy of 'being' by denying the logical

Indeed, if we look at Cross's example of the two shades of blue more closely, we see that both Scotistic options prove difficult to defend. What is the common feature that explains their similarity? It cannot be explained by their sharing a common color in addition to their own particular shades, for each just is the color it is and no other. To explain their similarity by reference to their both being instances of the color blue is to beg the question, for the fact that we can truly predicate "blue" of both is what needs to be explained. And even if we could isolate a common property, what would distinguish the sort of predication it underwrites from standard univocal predication? On the other hand, if the univocity of the concept blue is not given any foundation in the colors themselves, there seems to be no explanation for why these two colors are represented by it while a third, say a shade of orange, is not. This concern is similar to the one Andreas raised regarding being. Just as there must be something in reality that secures the truth of the claim

possibility of analogy, we can see based on these considerations that in fact Scotus' logical assumptions are just an attempt to shore up his denial of the metaphysical category of proportional unity; that is why he must define univocation in terms of its capacity to serve as the basis for contradictory statements and so to preserve inferences from the fallacy of equivocation. While plausible enough at first sight, this is a radical innovation; but Scotus could do it only because he refused to countenance the reality of proportional unity" (2010, 139).

that both creatures and God are beings, so something must ground the truth of the claim that both shades are blue.

III. Modern Accounts of Resemblance

The difficulty of explaining why a given thing satisfies or falls under a given concept has been discussed in modern philosophy in the context of the problem of universals. Though it is comparatively easy to use universals to explain the extension of concepts in cases of exact resemblance, the problem is more difficult in cases of inexact resemblance. In his own analysis of resemblance, H.H. Price considers the example of various white objects—snow, chalk, paper, an unwashed tie—each of which exhibits a different degree of whiteness. Though they certainly resemble each other in terms of their color, he asks whether we can maintain that the same color (whiteness) really recurs in each. Since it instead appears that each object is characterized by a different color (and hence a different universal), “the resemblance seems to be ultimate and underivative, not dependent on the presence of a single universal in all these objects.”²⁸² The unity of the class of white objects, it would then appear, is constituted not

²⁸² 1996, 17.

by qualitative identity but by a primitive (“ultimate and underivative”) form of resemblance. The concept “white” would accordingly apply to a given range of objects because there is a sufficient likeness between them with respect to their color, not because they possess a color in common. Hume made a similar claim in his *Treatise* regarding comparisons between simple ideas, arguing that resemblance is compatible with simplicity:

It is evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; *nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance should be distinct or separable from that in which they differ.* Blue and green are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than blue or scarlet; though their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. It is the same with particular sounds, and tastes, and smells. These admit of infinite resemblance upon the general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. (1.1.7.7, emphasis mine)

There is little doubt that we possess concepts of whiteness or blueness in general, and that such concepts can be employed in reasoning without producing an equivocation. Nevertheless, philosophers have found ways of explaining the unity of classes and the extension of such concepts without assuming a form of resemblance irreducible to identity.

The realist about universals could insist that the extension of the concept white is to be explained by a shared property, so long as we make a distinction similar to the modal one employed by Scotus—a distinction between determinate and determinable properties. A determinate property can be described as a specific way of having a determinable one. So, for example, lime-green and forest-green could be characterized as determinates of the determinable property green. The resemblance in color of a lime-green object and a forest-green one could thus be explained in terms of the existence of the same determinable characteristic (green) in both objects. Crucially, the determinate/determinable relation differs from the species/genus relation insofar as the former is always non-conjunctive; that is, the determinate's relation to its determinable is not analyzable as the product of adding a contracting third property (as the species 'man' is created by adding the differentia 'rational' to the genus 'animal').²⁸³ Rather, the determinate "marks-off" a "space" *within* the determinable without the assistance of a logically independent differentiating property.²⁸⁴ In this

²⁸³ Rosenberg 2009, 210.

²⁸⁴ See Searle 1959: "in order for some property to be a genuine differentia of a species within a genus, it must be logically possible that entities outside the genus could have that property, i.e., the differentia must be logically independent of the genus. For example,

sense, the determinate/determinable relation appears to capture the paradoxical feature of analogical resemblance, namely, that similarity and difference spring from the same source.

Other realists about universals agree that resemblance must always be reducible to some form of identity, but reject the existence of determinable properties. D. M. Armstrong argues that there is no property *being red* corresponding to the predicate "red" since all universals must be determinate. That this must be so, he thinks, follows from the principle that nothing can agree and differ in the same respect. If redness is a property in all red particulars, then the same respect—their redness—will be the foundation of both their sameness and their difference. Yet since "it is impossible that things be identical and different in the very same respect [and it is] undeniable that different shades of red are different properties [...] it follows that redness is not a property

even if humans are in fact the only rational things it is at least logically possible that calculating machines, spirits, etc., could show signs of rationality. But it is not logically possible that things without shape could have all points on their surface equidistant from a common centre. [...] In short, a species is a conjunction of two logically independent properties—the genus and the differentia. But a determinate is not a conjunction of its determinable and some other property independent of the determinable. A determinate is, so to speak, an area marked off within a determinable without outside help" (143).

common to all red things."²⁸⁵ Armstrong argues instead that the predicate "red" designates not the determinable property *being red* but a class of resembling shades. He claims that this resemblance is ultimately to be cashed out in terms of *partial* identity. Though properties like color seem to lack complexity, he argues that just because we do not recognize the partial identity underlying a given instance of resemblance, it does not follow that that resemblance is not actually constituted by partial identity. In support of this claim, he cites Thomas Reid's example that we can and do recognize the resemblance of two faces even if we can't specify those respects in which they are, in fact, identical.²⁸⁶

If we use abstraction by confusion to explain the extension of the concept white, however, the unity of the class falling under the concept (e.g., the brilliant white of fresh snow, the off-white of a dirty collar) will not be

²⁸⁵ 1978, 117. A related problem arises when a defender of determinable properties asserts that resembling shades of a color do not appear to share a quality because determinables are abstract universals and hence unobservable. Panayat Buchvarov counters that it is "nonsensical" to claim that while two resembling properties are observable, the determinable constituting their resemblance is not (1966, 146). Given the unique logical relationship between determinates and determinables, if the common quality instantiated is unobservable, so must be the instances themselves.

²⁸⁶ He takes Reid's example to show that either our awareness of a respect of resemblance is 1) "vague and [...] perhaps cannot be put into words"; 2) "unconscious"; or 3) "even if both inarticulate and unconscious awareness of a respect is lacking, it might yet be the case that the resemblance which we were aware of was in fact resemblance in a certain respect" (98).

attributed to either an identity of determinable properties or to a latent partial identity of the determinate ones. Nor does it follow, however, that the class of white things is a mere arbitrary collection, the unity of which lacks any foundation in reality. Rather, abstraction by confusion assumes that the unity of the class flows from a primitive, irreducible resemblance between the properties themselves. In this way, abstraction by confusion treats cases of inexact resemblance in the same way contemporary theories such as trope nominalism do, for they both take similarity between distinct attributes to be an unanalyzable feature of the world.²⁸⁷ Analogical resemblance could be said to represent a third option, lying between identity and difference. If two simple properties are not qualitatively identical, it does not follow that they are qualitatively diverse, for they could still be analogically *similar*. Because they are similar, they can be conceived either with respect to their diversity (their failing to be qualitatively identical) or with respect to their unity (their failing to be wholly diverse). This latter operation is abstraction by confusion. Because the items in the class are not identical in color, the term "white" does not refer

²⁸⁷ However, abstraction by confusion could be consistent with a mixed-account in which universals are employed to explain exact but not inexact resemblance.

to a universal; yet since the properties are not completely diverse, the term represents something more than a mere arbitrary collection. As St. Thomas would put it, "white" would signify "not an aggregate of all its inferiors but their kinship in an analogical notion."²⁸⁸

It is at least possible that the classes of concepts of scalar properties such as color are unified through a primitive form of resemblance, and that the concepts of these properties are produced by something like abstraction by confusion. Perhaps, however, the realists are right and these and other instances of inexact resemblance can always be attributed to some sort of identity. Such an analysis, however, will not work for explaining the resemblance relationship between creaturely and divine attributes without substantially altering the traditional theistic notion of God.²⁸⁹ Whereas the ontological simplicity of colors and other scalar properties is assumed (rightly or wrongly) on the basis of their phenomenal simplicity, divine simplicity is taken to follow from divine perfection. And, even if divine simplicity is denied, qualitative identity (however slight) between creaturely and divine attributes is traditionally held to be

²⁸⁸ Simon 1955, 97.

²⁸⁹ Or without altering our notions of ourselves, though these are usually not subject to dispute.

inconsistent with divine transcendence. This is not to deny that there might be other reasons, and good ones, for questioning the traditional doctrines of divine simplicity and divine transcendence. It is, however, a mistake to argue that we must either assume some form of qualitative identity and deny the traditional theistic concept of God or embrace equivocity and its consequent agnosticism.²⁹⁰ On the contrary, we can affirm both that 1) there is a qualitative distinction between creaturely and divine attributes and 2) creation is an image and likeness of God, so long as we assume that their resemblance is analogical and hence irreducible to any form of qualitative identity.

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²⁹⁰ According to CPP, this would be agnosticism regarding *creatures*.

²⁹¹ This issue is distinct from the question as to whether the traditional conception of God is consistent with univocal predication. Scotus, as we have mentioned, affirmed that God and creatures are truly diverse and yet they can nevertheless be conceived univocally.

Ch. VI. Top-down Analogy

The goal of this chapter is to understand how analogous concepts of creaturely pure perfections could be derived from concepts of divine ones. To this end, we will first address one of Scotus' critiques of bottom-up derivation. Though Scotus took his argument to apply to all doctrines of analogy, we will argue that it can actually be taken to support top-down analogical derivation. In the next section, we will attempt to show how Descartes' explicit application of analogy to the notion of divine self-causation can be understood in terms of a top-down derivation. Finally, we will end the chapter with a few examples of transcendental top-down derivation suggested by Hartshorne and Descartes.

I. Top-down Analogy and the Traditional Problem of Religious Language

The problem of religious language is traditionally framed in terms of the adequacy of creaturely concepts. If the language we use to speak of God's nature is intelligible only in light of concepts derived from experience with creatures, it is feared that any effort to describe God's nature will entail anthropomorphism—i.e.,

the illegitimate attribution of creaturely attributes to God. One solution to this problem was to abandon any pretense of being able to conceive of God in terms of positive attributes. Instead, the tradition of negative theology maintained that we can at most conceive of God in terms of what he is not. There are at least two problems with this sort of solution. First, it seems to violate our own intuitions about the perfection of God; a God who cannot be conceived as good or wise no longer seems to be worthy of worship. Second, negative theology undermines the scientific aspirations of theology, specifically our ability to make inferences about God based upon the nature of his effects. Transcendental analogy was introduced to solve this dilemma. We can obtain analogous concepts adequate to the nature of God by "stretching" certain concepts derived from our experience with creatures. God is good, but good in a higher or more perfect way that is only analogous to creaturely goodness.

CPP, however, turns the problem of religious language on its head. The problem is not how we might conceive of God in terms of concepts derived from our experience with creatures, but instead that of conceiving of creatures in terms of concepts derived from concepts of God. This is not the issue of how we might *define* creatures in light of

notions of God derived from our experience with creatures. Rather, this issue concerns the more radical proposal of Descartes, Leibniz and others that we might, perhaps unknowingly, conceive of creaturely pure perfections and transcendental attributes via concepts of these attributes in God.²⁹² If the concepts are unchanged, the risk is not anthropomorphism but what Hartshorne has termed "deimorphism"—the illegitimate attribution of divine attributes to creatures. Alternatively, if the attributes of God are deemed too perfect or otherwise unsuitable for creatures, the consequence is (to use another term from Hartshorne) a "negative anthropology"—the conceiving of creatures either in terms of their lacking various positive properties of God, or merely by extrinsic denomination as effects of God.²⁹³

In our analysis of Descartes, we observed that deimorphism may characterize some of our pre-philosophical

²⁹² Ronald Nash briefly proposes such an account as a solution to what he sees as the anthropomorphic consequences of Aquinas's theory of analogy, which he thinks is analyzable as a form of partial univocity. "Anthropomorphism is avoided when the person explaining our knowledge of God is not an empiricist. Thomas's explanation founders because of his insistence that human concepts are derived from sensory experience. But if empiricism is rejected, if one holds instead that humans possess a priori knowledge given to them by God, we have an explanation of how the univocal knowledge about God that grounds analogical knowledge is possible" (1999, 179).

²⁹³ So, for example, creatures would be said to be "good" not because of any intrinsic feature they possess but because they are effects of that which is intrinsically good (God). This sort of anthropology is negative in the sense that it does not propose to say anything about the positive (intrinsic) nature of creatures.

understanding of creatures. Just as we may initially judge and classify what are really imperfect triangles as (perfect) triangles, we may also unknowingly apprehend creaturely goodness, for example, as an instance of genuine (perfect) goodness. It is only when we become aware that the creaturely instances of goodness fall short of true goodness that we can be said to possess a notion of imperfect (creaturely) goodness. Deimorphism in this way resembles the naïve anthropomorphism that is often said to characterize an individual's understanding of God prior to theological reflection.

A similar parallel can be found between negative theology, which typically arises through theological reflection, and negative anthropology. Indeed, Simon has observed a tendency towards negative anthropology in the history of religious thought. He claims that "many metaphysicians and religious thinkers are driven, more or less consciously and consistently, by the tendency to believe that being, goodness and the other absolute perfections belong to God in such an exclusive fashion that they can never be predicated of a creature in an intrinsic way."²⁹⁴ As we noted, Hartshorne provides a contemporary version of this tendency, observing "a strange sense in

²⁹⁴ 1960, 11.

which the analogical concepts apply literally to deity, and analogically to creatures."²⁹⁵ Citing the example of the perfection of knowledge, he suggests that "It is indeed a curious thing to see how much need there is, not so much of a negative theology as of a 'negative anthropology.' We say we know—ah, but do we? We guess, on more or less reasonable grounds, but do we literally know? If "know" means to have conclusive evidence, then when do we literally attain knowledge?"²⁹⁶ Interestingly, for Hartshorne negative anthropology is not merely a matter of how we might *define* creaturely perfections, but a consequence of the fact that our concept of a given human perfection may be, as he puts it, "a derivative concept, produced by drastically restricting the idea arising from our intuition of deity."²⁹⁷ On this score, he ties his account directly to the Cartesian doctrine that our ideas of our own perfections are (partial) negations of an innate notion of God:

I really believe that we know what "knowledge" is partly by knowing God, and that though it is true that we form the idea of divine knowledge by analogical extension from our experience of human knowledge, this is not the whole truth, the other side of the matter being that we form our idea of human knowledge by

²⁹⁵ 1962, 141.

²⁹⁶ 1970, 155.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 156.

exploiting the intuition (called by Descartes, 'innate idea', and as such not really disproved, except in a strawman version, by Locke) which we have of God. To 'know' ought to mean, having conclusive evidence, such as God has, shutting off the very possibility of error; but to apply this idea to man we must tone it down drastically indeed.²⁹⁸

Yet if negative anthropology does justice to our intuition of divine infinity, it seems to do so at the cost of violating our sense of the reality and goodness of the world. Hartshorne, for example, questions whether we "honor deity by denying to ourselves and the creatures generally even the most modest analogon to the divine attributes."²⁹⁹ Similarly, Simon argues that if we take seriously the claim that only God is good and real, "the created world disappears into a vacuum." Yet he claims that this is a viewpoint that cannot be maintained for long, "since any such experience as that of pain or love or duty causes us again to touch the universe of finite perfection [...] All mystics proclaim that God is He who is, and that I am the one who is not; but these mystical expressions of God's infinity and of the creature's wretchedness are balanced by equally mystical expressions of a sense for what is real

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹⁹ 1962, 147,

and great in this most wretched of all creatures,
myself."³⁰⁰

A negative anthropology is not, however, an inevitable consequence of CPP. Though we apprehend creatures in light of that which is truly good and real (God), we need not thereby conceive of them solely in terms of what they lack. Just as transcendental analogy has been employed to explain the bottom-up construction of concepts of positive divine perfections from concepts of creaturely ones, thereby avoiding the threat of negative theology, so it can be used to explain how concepts of creaturely positive perfections can be drawn from concepts of God. As Descartes had suggested, while only God is truly being, it does not follow that creation is equivalent to non-being; rather, creatures are apprehended as somehow falling between being and non-being. His claim that we arrive at a notion of "diminished being" by partially negating an innate notion of infinite being could thus be read as a description of the diminishing operation of a top-down analogical derivation. Hartshorne too points towards such a solution: "An all too negative theology made God the great emptiness, and an all too negative anthropology made the creatures also empty. I suggest that nothing is only nothing, that

³⁰⁰ 1960, 11.

the divine attributes are positive, and the creatures' qualities are between these and nothing."³⁰¹

II. Scotus' Critique of Bottom-up Derivation

In the previous chapter, we explained how multiple simple concepts that adequately represent analogous natures can, by virtue of their primitive resemblance, be treated as a single concept that imperfectly (or confusedly) represents both natures. Our ability to form a single concept of a general color (e.g. whiteness) on the basis of our simple concepts of various resembling shades was used to illustrate this process. When applied to the case of God, however, abstraction by confusion presupposes that we already possess proper concepts (i.e., concepts representing the natures) of both creatures and God from which we form the confused concept representing their analogical resemblance. What is left unexplained is how we obtained a proper notion of God in the first place. In his analysis of Scotus' critique of analogy, Wolter emphasizes this problem: "*Where do we get this notion which applies properly to God and is only analogous to the concept we apply to creatures? Where do we get the notion of being,*

³⁰¹ 1962, 147.

for instance, as absolutely indetermined and hence implicitly including the mode of infinity and therefore proper to God? Once we have it, the theory of analogy follows logically enough. But analogical knowledge is always a relative and comparative knowledge."³⁰² According to Scotus, there are only two ways we could obtain (by natural means) proper concepts of God: by abstracting them from sensation or by a process of rational inference on the basis of proper concepts of creatures. Though we can abstract concepts of creaturely attributes from sense experience, Scotus argues that there is no way such experience could provide us with a proper, simple concept of God:

No object will produce a simple and proper concept of itself and a simple and proper concept of another object, unless it contains this second object essentially or virtually. No created object, however, contains the "Uncreated" essentially or virtually [...] For it is contrary to the very notion of what is essentially secondary to include virtually what is prior to it. It is also obvious that the created does not contain, as part of its essence, something that is not merely common, but is exclusively proper to the "Uncreated"; Therefore, it produces no simple and proper concept of the "Uncreated" at all.³⁰³

³⁰² 1946, 41.

³⁰³ Scotus 1962, 23. Wolter provides the following illustration of virtual containment: "A baseball, for instance, could produce a simple proper notion of itself as a sphere and also a simple proper notion of a circle, for the notion of circularity is virtually contained in the notion of sphericity. But it could not give rise to a simple notion of triangle or pentagon" (1946, 51).

Scotus is not here making the broad claim that we can never derive the simple concept of a thing from knowledge of that which is merely analogous to it. Rather, he is claiming that, given the fact that creaturely perfections fall short absolutely of God's, there is nothing 'in' creatures the abstraction of which will provide us with a simple concept of a divine attribute. Hence the only way we can form a proper concept of God is by a process of rational inference from our proper concepts of creatures. According to Scotus, however, this entails that 1) we must be able to derive a univocal concept from our proper concept of creatures as a 'bridge' to form a proper concept of God and 2) the proper concept of God will not be utterly simple but a composite of this univocal bridging notion and the particular mode or grade of perfection unique to God (infinity).

In their analyses of analogy, both Mondin and Lyttkens concede Scotus' point about the unavailability of a proper concept of God for analogy by abstraction.³⁰⁴ Yet they observe that advocates of both intrinsic analogy of attribution and analogy of proportionality have often maintained that if we possess a proper concept of the

³⁰⁴ Mondin: "Since we do not have a direct knowledge of both primary and secondary analogates we cannot proceed to form a concept which represents vaguely both of them, by disregarding the different ways in which the analogous perfection is realized by them" (81). See also Lyttkens 1953, 360-5.

primary analogate (the creature), then, owing to the analogical similarity between the creature and God, we can use this concept as an *imperfect* representation of the secondary analogate (God) of whom we have no direct knowledge. Mondin suggests that while the procedure of abstraction by confusion discussed in the previous chapter is a form of "incomplete abstraction," this latter process is "a sort of vague intuition: in some way we intuit in the perfectly known analogate the other analogates." Aquinas's account of how we extend the term "good" from creatures to God—"When we say that God is good [...] the meaning is, Whatever good we attribute to creatures pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way"—could perhaps be interpreted as just such a procedure: when we use the term "good" to describe God we are using the creaturely concept to imperfectly represent the goodness of God.³⁰⁵

There are a few problems with such analogy by intuition, however. First, it does not seem that this maneuver produces a concept capable of meeting Scotus's logical criteria of univocity. Either we employ the concept

³⁰⁵ It should be noted, however, that the imprecision of this concept is not the same kind characterizing the imperfection of a concept derived from abstraction by confusion. In the latter, the proper concepts of the analogates are included actually yet implicitly within the confused concept, and we can attend to proper concepts of these analogates by uncovering this latent diversity. We could not, however, derive a proper concept of God's goodness from the creaturely concept that is regarded as an imperfect representation of this goodness, for it wasn't 'within' the concept to begin with.

as a perfect representation of the creaturely analogate or we use it as an imperfect representation of the divine analogate—since we can't regard the concept in two different ways at the same time, there doesn't seem to be any way of representing both analogates at the same time.³⁰⁶ Second, and perhaps more importantly, the knowledge produced by such analogy is disappointingly thin. On the basis of a concept of creaturely goodness we can conceive of God as being in some way good, but we cannot be said to possess a concept of the qualitatively unique property that is *divine* goodness. We may use terms such as "perfect" "supreme" "highest" or "infinite" to characterize God's goodness, but these terms must be empty apart from signifying only that the goodness in question is greater in some qualitatively distinct *yet unknown* way. If we want these concepts to have a more robust positive significance, it seems that our only option is to accept Scotus' position that they can be added to a univocal notion of goodness to specify the mode in which that goodness is realized.

Alston has criticized Aquinas' account of analogy on just this point. For Aquinas, he says, "the perfection signified is not fully specified; instead we simply

³⁰⁶ In other words, the claim is that since what differentiates the concept of a creaturely property from that of its analogous divine one is the *manner* in which we regard the concept, there doesn't seem to be any way to represent the unity of these properties.

indicate that it is a higher form of a creaturely perfection but without being able to say just what the higher form is."³⁰⁷ This is a problem, he thinks, because it leaves the truth conditions of the predication unknown. If we cannot specify the respects in which the divine and creaturely versions of the perfections are similar and different, then we cannot infer facts about the divine nature by considering creation. This problem, says Alston, "strikes at the heart of Thomistic theology, for at many crucial points it depends on taking principles (assumed to be) true of human so-and-so's to be true of divine so-and-so's."³⁰⁸ By yielding only indeterminate concepts of the divine attributes, the bottom-up approach to transcendental analogy undermines the scientific aspirations of theology.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ 1993, 170.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 173.

³⁰⁹ Alston provides the following example: "The whole argument for the central thesis that the perfections of all things are in God hangs on the principle that whatever the cause bestows on the effect preexists in the cause, a principle that is drawn from reflection on causal relations in the created order. Thomas would, presumably, reply that the ways in which divine perfections surpass their created counterparts are not such as to invalidate the applications of these principles to the divine case. But how, on his own principles, can he know this, or even be reasonably assured of it? By his own admission he is in no position to spell out the respects of similarity and dissimilarity between divine and human causal agency, willing, and so on. Therefore, how can he be assured that the dissimilarities are not such as to undermine the application of principles arrived at by a consideration of the creaturely analogues?" (1993, 173).

Advocates of the bottom-up approach to transcendental analogy therefore face a dilemma: either the derivation produces only an indeterminate (vague) concept of the divine analogue, or it produces a determinate (proper) concept in violation of the ontological difference between divine and creaturely attributes. While the former option appears to deprive religious language of much of its presumed significance, the latter amounts to pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Yet a top-down approach to transcendental analogy can avoid this dilemma. Descartes, as you may recall, shared Scotus' skepticism regarding our ability to derive proper notions of divine attributes from analogous concepts of creaturely ones. He had argued that if we did not possess an innate idea of the divine attribute to begin with, any process that begins with a concept of a creaturely attribute can produce at best a notion of a divine attribute differing merely by degree. Unlike Scotus, however, Descartes explicitly disavows any form of univocity; and unlike many advocates for analogy, he did not abandon the position that we possess determinate (proper) concepts of God's nature.

While the qualitative distinction between creaturely and divine attributes may forestall any direct derivation of the former from the latter, it does not follow that the

opposite derivation cannot be made. Since God cannot be said to lack formally any pure perfection present within creation, it would follow that there is nothing 'in' the concept of creaturely perfection that is not present, in some way, within the proper concept of the divine correlate. This is the possibility that Klima had raised when he observed that if Aquinas had held that divine being were first known, then the conceptual order would match the ontological, for "we could understand created being directly as a sort of diminished being." Since what is responsible for the qualitative distinction of creaturely pure perfections from divine ones is not a positive quality but merely a lack of some sort, possessing a proper concept of a divine attribute should enable one to derive, by a process of partial negation, a proper concept of an analogous creaturely one.

III. Descartes' Analogy of Divine Self-Causation

Descartes explicitly appeals to transcendental analogy in his defense of the claim that God derives his existence from himself. He argues that we possess a common (analogical) concept of a preserving or sustaining cause—a concept derived from proper concepts of self-sustaining

causation (necessary existence) on the one hand and external-sustaining causation (contingent existence) on the other. If we did not possess such an analogical common concept, derived from proper concepts of qualitatively distinct divine and creaturely existence, we would not be able to infer God's existence from our own. Descartes did not believe that any of our proper concepts of God could be derived from those of creatures; indeed, his account suggests that our original notion of existence must be that of necessary existence, and it is from this concept that we derive a notion of contingent existence. We shall further argue that this example illustrates how philosophical theology (in this case, a causal argument for divine existence) can presuppose positive knowledge of the divine nature and hence require top-down analogical derivation.

The second causal proof in the Third Meditation is intended to show that only God could be the source of a thinking thing with an idea of God. The narrator must therefore show why he could not be responsible for his own existence. To this end, he argues that if he were powerful enough to preserve himself in existence, then he would be powerful enough to "give" himself every perfection of which he has some idea, and thus he would "neither doubt nor

want, nor lack anything at all" (CSMII 168).³¹⁰ Even if the power of self-causation were not a sufficient condition for possessing other attributes, the narrator can nevertheless claim that it is a sufficient condition for possessing any item of knowledge, for such knowledge would be "merely an accident of that substance" (CSMII 33). Thus any instance of doubt, including doubt as to whether one possesses the power of self-causation, would be incompatible with possessing such power.³¹¹ The narrator therefore believes that he can be certain that his existence is sustained by something outside of himself.

Several of Descartes' critics, however, objected to his description of necessary or independent existence as a condition in which a thing "derives its existence from itself" (CSMII 34). In the First Objections, the theologian Johannes Caterus argued that the expression is ambiguous. The statement that a thing derives its existence

³¹⁰ It will turn out that Descartes does not believe that God literally 'gives' himself further perfections, any more than he 'gives' himself existence. Rather, this language is a consequence of the fact that the proof involves treating divine formal causality as analogous to efficient causality. Properly speaking, says Descartes, "we perceive by the natural light that a being whose essence is so immense that he does not need an efficient cause in order to exist, equally does not need an efficient cause in order to possess all the perfections of which he is aware: his own essence is the eminent source which bestows on him whatever we can think of as being capable of being bestowed on anything by an efficient cause" (CSMII 168).

³¹¹ It is also possible that Descartes is here appealing to the transparency of mental phenomena. Accordingly, if we (as thinking things) possessed the power of self-causation, we would necessarily be aware of it.

from itself can be interpreted in the traditional way as the purely negative claim that it is uncaused, or as the positive (and paradoxical) claim that it somehow causes itself as though it were its own efficient cause. Assuming that it is impossible for something to be the efficient cause of itself, Caterus believes that Descartes means the expression to be taken in its traditional (negative) sense.³¹² He argues that since a thing's lacking a cause is merely an extrinsic fact about that thing and hence does not tell us anything positive about that thing's nature, it cannot license the conclusion that the thing possesses any other perfection. Descartes, however, *did* intend the claim "derives its existence from itself" to be taken positively. He maintains that, aside from the "literal and strict meaning of the phrase 'efficient cause,'" there is a "place for another kind of cause *analogous* to an efficient cause" (CSMII 79). It is this analogous sense of the phrase that gives positive meaning to the expression "derives its existence from itself." The bulk of his reply to Caterus, as well as to Arnauld who will raise more pointed

³¹² As Carriero has explained, the traditional (negative) notion of divine aseity assumes the Aristotelian claim that since "everything that is moved is moved by another," a regress to a first cause leads us to an "unmoved mover," not a self-moving one. Yet Descartes, he says, is not "seeking a first cause for motion or change" but rather "for something's existing rather than falling into nothingness" (2009, 217).

objections, is his explanation of what this positive meaning could be.

Descartes admits that it is obvious that a thing cannot be its own efficient cause in the sense of a mere originating cause, for this sense presupposes 1) the temporal priority of cause to effect and 2) the existence of a cause distinct from the effect. Regarding the first point, he reminds Caterus that, in inquiring into the explanation for his existence as a thinking thing with an idea of God, he is searching for an explanation encapsulating *both* the originating and the preserving cause of his existence. Indeed, the narrator in the Third Meditation had argued that there is merely a conceptual distinction between creation and preservation, for to preserve something in existence is equivalent to, at every moment, creating "that thing anew as if it were not yet in existence" (CSMII 33).³¹³ Thus even if a thing had existed from eternity, we would still require some explanation as to what sustains it in existence, and this efficient cause would not be something temporally prior to it. Thus the

³¹³ Schmaltz notes that Descartes is here endorsing "the received scholastic position in Suarez that God conserves the world by means of the very same act by which he created it [...] the power by which God conserves is not merely the same type as, but also token-identical to, the power by which he creates" (2008, 83). The simultaneity of cause and effect was a premise in Aquinas' Second Way (his proof for the existence of an unmoved mover based upon the existence of a series of efficient causes). See Secada 2000, 166-7.

concept of efficient cause does not presuppose temporal priority.³¹⁴

Yet even if the notion of an efficient cause simultaneous with the existence of its effect is intelligible, how could something sustain *itself* in existence? Once we have established that God derives his existence "from himself" in the negative sense that he does not depend on anything outside himself for his continued existence, Descartes argues that we nevertheless can and should request an explanation for why God does not need such an external sustaining cause, for "it is impossible for us to imagine anything deriving existence from itself without there being some reason why it should exist rather than not exist."³¹⁵ The only sort of explanation we could provide, however, is one that appeals to God's own nature (of which we all have a robust idea). Descartes does not

³¹⁴ One way of understanding this is to say that Descartes is interested in causation *in esse* rather than causation *in fieri*. Causation *in fieri* concerns merely the becoming of a thing, whereas causation *in esse* concerns the origin *and* continued existence of a thing. In his reply to Gassendi, Descartes illustrates this distinction by comparing the dependence of a house on its builder with the dependence of sunlight on the sun: "[A]n architect is the cause of a house and a father of this child only in the sense of being the causes of their coming into being; and hence, once the work is completed it can remain in existence quite apart from the 'cause' in this sense. But the sun is the cause of the light which it emits, and God is the cause of created things, not just in the sense that they are causes of the coming into being of these things, but also in the sense that they are causes of their being; and hence they must always continue to act on the effect in the same way in order to keep it in existence" (CSMII 254).

³¹⁵ Descartes is here appealing to a very strong version of the principle of sufficient reason. See Schmaltz 2008, 74.

therefore mean that God sustains himself in the way he sustains a creature, i.e., through "the kind of preservation that comes about by the positive influence of an efficient cause" (CSMII 79). Rather, to say that God preserves himself in existence is to say that "the essence of God is such that he must always exist." What sort of essence is that? It is the idea of a nature possessing "immense and incomprehensible power" (CSMII 79). If the preserving cause of a thing lies outside it, then there is a clear sense in which that thing lacks the power to determine its own existence. That God's existence is not contingent upon anything outside himself can and should be explained in positive terms as following from his omnipotence.

In the Fourth Objection, however, Arnauld presses Descartes to explain in more detail the positive sense of causation involved in divine self-preservation. Quoting from Descartes' First Reply, Arnauld asserts that it is simply "false" that "God 'in a sense stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect'" (CSMII 146). Like Caterus, Arnauld claims that the notion of something causing its own existence is incoherent, for an efficient causal relation always implies the temporal priority of cause to effect and the

distinction between cause and effect.³¹⁶ Further, Arnauld argues that if the explanation for God's existence is to be found in an examination of his essence, then it doesn't make any sense to cite this as a "cause" for God's existence: "If anyone asks why God exists, or continues in existence, we should not try to find *either in God or outside him* any efficient cause, or quasi-efficient cause [...] instead, we should confine our answer to saying that the reason lies in the nature of a supremely perfect being."³¹⁷ In other words, Arnauld is accusing Descartes of employing an equivocal notion of "cause" in his proof for God's existence. To ask for an explanation for the continued existence of a thing is to request an explanation by way of *efficient* cause, but this is not what is provided when we cite God's essence as the explanation for his existence, for here we are providing a *formal* cause. Arnauld claims that Descartes' explanation is akin to

³¹⁶ Arnauld's objections are more detailed. As Bonnen and Flage observe, Descartes argues for the distinction between cause and effect by citing both the "irreflexive nature of causality" (nothing can cause itself) as well as its "dyadic and assymetrical nature" ("there is a mutual relation between cause and effect. But a relation must involve two terms.") (1999, 848).

³¹⁷ Italics mine. Bonnen and Flage describe Arnauld's objection as follows: "[I]n appealing to efficient causation with respect to God, Descartes has misstated the proof. Rather than repeatedly asking whether or not the cause of one's being is self-caused and pushing the inquiry until such a point as one finds a self-caused being, Descartes should have asked whether the cause of one's being is itself caused or is God. The chain would have ended at the point that God was identified as an efficient cause of one of the causes of one's being, since the essence of God entails existence: A formal cause would have ended the chain of efficient causes" (1999, 849-50).

citing an efficient cause to explain why the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles.

Though Descartes dismisses Arnauld's objections as the "least well-taken," he nevertheless decides to answer them at length. He argues that Arnauld has failed to appreciate that he had claimed that God is his own efficient cause only "in a sense" (i.e., *analogously*) and hence did not suppose that "he was the *same* as an efficient cause" (CSMII 165). Temporal priority is not a necessary feature of efficient causes in general, and though the distinction between cause and effect is a criterion of an external sustaining (efficient) cause, it is not a feature of the notion of a self-sustaining cause. Descartes therefore agrees with Arnauld that God's sustaining cause is, properly speaking, not an efficient cause but a "formal cause" insofar as it is "a reason derived from God's essence" (CSMII 165). Why, then, does he believe that citing a formal cause could constitute an answer to, rather than a repudiation of, the request for an explanation for God's existence? The answer is that, in this case, citing a formal cause explains why God does not, and cannot, depend for his existence on anything external to him. God is his own cause in the sense that "the inexhaustible power of God is the cause or reason for his not needing a[n] [external]

cause. And since that inexhaustible power or immensity of the divine essence is as positive as can be, I said that the reason or cause why God needs no [external] cause is a *positive* reason or cause" (CSMII 165). Descartes is not committed to the absurd view that formal "reasons" are always analogous to efficient "causes." Arnauld's triangle objection therefore misses the mark. Rather, "the formal cause will be strongly analogous to an efficient cause" because, "*in this context,*" the formal cause can do the explanatory work of an efficient cause (i.e., it can explain why God exists independently) (CSMII 168 emphasis mine).³¹⁸ And the reason why a formal cause can do the explanatory work of an efficient cause in this context is that, in God, "there is no distinction between existence and essence," for his ontological independence follows from his omnipotence (CSMII 170).

What kind of analogy is Descartes here invoking? Upon an initial reading, one might conclude that he is providing an account of analogy by intuition, in which we use our determinate concept of an efficient sustaining cause as an imperfect (indeterminate) representation of a formal self-

³¹⁸ "And just as no one criticizes these proofs, although they involve regarding a sphere as similar to a polyhedron, so it seems to me that I am not open to criticism *in this context* for using the analogy of an efficient cause to explain features which in fact belong to a formal cause, that is, to the very essence of God" (CSMII 168) (emphasis mine)

sustaining one. After all, Descartes states that he is using "the analogy of an efficient cause to explain features which in fact belong to a formal cause" (CSMII 168), and he describes the phenomenon of self-sustaining existence in language that is normally reserved for efficient causality, not the other way around. He appears to suggest as much when he uses geometrical examples to illustrate the extension of the concept of an external sustaining (efficient) cause to the phenomenon of self-sustaining causation: "[I]n between 'efficient cause' in the strict sense and 'no cause at all', there is a third possibility, namely 'the positive essence of a thing', to which the concept of an efficient cause can be extended. In the same way in geometry the concept of the arc of an indefinitely large circle is customarily extended to the concept of a straight line; or the concept of a rectilinear polygon with an indefinite number of sides is extended to that of a circle" (CSMII 167). Just as we may conceive of a circle as a rectilinear polygon with an indefinite number of sides, so the passage suggests we may use the concept of an efficient cause to represent self-sustaining causation.

Yet Descartes does not believe, and his geometrical examples do not suggest, that our concept of a self-sustaining cause is nothing more than the concept of an

efficient cause regarded indeterminately. This is the position an advocate of the traditional (bottom-up) account of analogy would endorse; it is the sort of bottom-up position that Gassendi had argued for in the Fifth Objections, where he asserts that "it is more than enough if, on the analogy of our human attributes, we can derive and construct an idea of some sort for our own use—an idea which does not transcend our human grasp and which contains no reality except what we perceive in other things" (CSMII 200-01). What needs to be distinguished is 1) the origin of the analogous concepts from 2) how these concepts are employed within the proof for God's existence. Archimedes' proof, in which a circle is regarded as though it were a polygon with infinite sides, presupposes that we already possess a determinate concept of a circle and grasp its similarity to such a figure. It is only because we *already recognize* that a circle is analogous to a polygon with infinite sides that we are willing to accept that features demonstrated of this figure have application to the circle. Thus, Descartes imagines Archimedes asserting that "If I thought that a sphere could not be taken to be a rectilinear or quasi-rectilinear figure with an infinite number of sides, I should attach no force to my proof, since the proof does not strictly apply to a sphere as a

curvilinear figure but applies to it only as a rectilinear figure with infinitely many sides" (CSMII 171). The proof will, of course, involve our treating a circle as if it were a polygon with infinite sides rather than the other way around, and we may consequently describe a circle as a polygon with infinite sides. Yet this is simply a result of the direction of the *inference* (our inferring features of the circle from features of the polygon), and not a sign that our concept of a circle is nothing more than the concept of a polygon with an indefinite number of sides.³¹⁹

Similarly, Descartes insists that, for the sake of his proof, we must understand and describe God's self-sustaining existence in terms of efficient causality, as a condition of deriving existence "from himself" as though he were his own efficient cause. But this assumes that we *already possess a notion of such self-sustaining existence and grasp its likeness to efficient causality*. "In refusing to allow us to say that God stands toward himself in a relation analogous to that of an efficient cause," says Descartes, "M. Arnauld not only fails to clarify the proof

³¹⁹ If we were instead drawing an inference about the nature of a polygon from the nature of a circle, then we would extend the concept of a circle to that of a polygon, and we could describe a polygon with infinite sides as though it were a circle. Similarly, if Descartes were interested in drawing inferences about efficient causes of existence from formal causes of existence, then he might very well describe a case of efficient causality as a scenario in which the reason for a thing's existence lies outside its essence.

of God's existence, but actually prevents the reader from understanding it" (CSMII 170). Just as we can infer facts about a circle from facts about polygons only if we are willing to treat a circle as though it were a polygon with infinite sides, Descartes asserts that we must be willing to treat God's formal causality as though it were an instance of efficient causality so as not to exclude outright from our inquiry the case of divine existence:

[I]t is clear to everyone that a consideration of efficient causes is the primary and principal way, if not the only way, that we have of proving the existence of God. We cannot develop this proof with precision unless we grant our minds the freedom to inquire into the efficient causes of all things, even God himself. For what right do we have to make God an exception, if we have not yet proved that he exists? In every case, then, we must ask whether a thing derives its existence from itself or from something else; and by this means the existence of God can be inferred, even though we have not given an explicit account of what it means to say that something derives its existence 'from itself.' (CSMII 166)

Yet if a willingness to treat an instance of formal causality as similar to an instance of efficient causality is necessary if we are to include God within the scope of our inquiry, so a recognition that this formal causality is *only* analogous to, and hence not the same as, efficient causality is necessary if our inquiry is to have an end: "How would those who do not yet know that god exists be

able to inquire into the efficient cause of other things, with the aim of eventually arriving at knowledge of God, unless they thought it possible to inquire into the efficient cause of anything whatsoever? And how could they reach the end of their inquiries by arriving at God as the first cause if they thought that for any given thing we must always look for a cause which is distinct from it?"

The proof for God's existence therefore presupposes that the inquirer will possess, and apprehend an analogical relation between, determinate concepts of dependent and independent existence. This is clear from Descartes' explicit assertion that we are able to derive an analogical "common" concept from these concepts via a process similar to that of abstraction by confusion. We can infer God's existence from the principle that everything "derives its existence from itself or from something else" only because we can

spontaneously form a concept of cause that is common to both an efficient and a formal cause: that is to say, what derives its existence 'from another' will be taken to derive its existence from that thing as an efficient cause, while what derives its existence 'from itself' will be taken to derive its existence from itself as a formal cause—that is, because it has

the kind of essence which entails that it does not require an efficient cause. (CMSII 166)³²⁰

Efficient and formal causes of existence fall under an *analogically* common concept of cause. They do not, and cannot, fall under a *univocally* common concept because an efficient cause must be distinct from its effect. Again, Descartes allows that we can form a univocal concept of an efficient cause embracing both instances in which the cause is prior to its effect as well as those in which a cause is simultaneous with its effect, for "the restriction 'prior in time' can be deleted from the concept while leaving the notion of an efficient cause intact" (CSMII 167). However, instances of self-sustaining causation cannot fall under a univocal concept of efficient cause since "a cause which is not distinct from its effects is not an efficient cause." Yet it does not follow, he says, that the formal cause of God's existence is "in no sense a positive cause that can be regarded as analogous to an efficient cause; and this is all that my argument requires."

³²⁰ Descartes continues "Accordingly, I did not explain this point in my Meditations, but left it out, assuming it was self-evident" (CSMII 166-7).

IV. Descartes' Analogy of Causation as Top-down Derivation

Abstraction by confusion presupposes proper concepts from which the "common" analogical concept can be derived. Accordingly, Descartes must hold that we possess proper (determinate) concepts of both efficient and formal causes of existence. What is the origin of these concepts? Is our concept of independent (necessary) existence a negation of the concept of dependent (contingent) existence? The fact that "independent" is a grammatical negation of "dependent" would seem to support such a reading,³²¹ yet Descartes repeatedly emphasizes that we possess a positive concept of divine existence far exceeding the negative notion of something that is merely uncaused. The narrator's idea of this cause or reason is a concept of the "immense and incomprehensible power that is contained within the idea of God" (CSMII 79). If Descartes were an empiricist, he would face the difficult task of explaining how we could attain, from experience, the concept of the sort of power from which existence follows. Yet he holds that our idea of God, including all that it implicitly contains, is innate; indeed, in the Third Meditation proofs for the existence of

³²¹ For example, in the Fourth Meditation: "Cumque attend me dubitare, sive esse rem incompletam & *dependentem*, adeo clara & distinct idea entis *independentis* & complete, hoc est Dei, mihi occurrit;" (AT VII 53, emphasis mine)

God, the narrator cannot yet appeal to anything more than his own existence and his idea of God.

In fact, Descartes states that one of the reasons why the explanandum of his proof must be his existence as a thinking thing *with an idea of God* is that this idea "provides me with the opportunity of inquiring whether I derive my existence from myself, or from another" (CSMII 78).³²² In his own analysis of this passage, Carriero suggests that Descartes is here claiming that the idea of God provides us with the "categories dependent and independent in a manner that enables me to apply them to myself and see that (1) that I fall on the dependent as opposed to the independent side of things and (2) that things that fall on the dependent side depend immediately on the thing that falls on the independent side."³²³ It is clear that the idea of God, particularly his omnipotence, provides us with a concept of independent or necessary existence, for this existence is one of his properties. But how could the idea of God provide us with the category of deriving existence "from another"?

³²² Descartes claims that an idea of God is also necessary for the proof insofar as 1) the idea "contains the essence of God [...] and according to the true logic, we must never ask about the existence of anything until we first understand its essence"; 2) "this idea provides me with the opportunity [...] of recognizing my defects"; and 3) "this same idea shows me not just that I have a cause, but that this cause contains every perfection, and hence that it is God" (CSMII 78).

³²³ 2009, 213.

The best, and indeed only, answer I think we can provide here is that the concept of contingent or dependent existence is derived from our concept of necessary or independent existence. We noted that Descartes, as well as others, describe the derivation of analogical creaturely concepts from divine ones as a process of partial negation. Examples of such derivation exhibit a common pattern. According to CPP, we initially employ concepts of the divine versions of pure perfections and transcendentals in our everyday judgments and classifications without realizing it. It is only when we recognize the insufficiency of purported instances of these properties that we attain concepts of their imperfect varieties as well as an explicit awareness of the perfection of the original divine analogues. That possessing the concept of the divine version would enable us to both recognize creaturely (imperfect) instances of this property as well as apprehend their relative imperfection is explained by the ontological fact that there is nothing 'in' the creaturely version of the property that cannot be found to reside formally in the divine correlate. Since this ontological basis for resemblance cannot be analyzed by identifying a shared feature among differentiating ones, the resemblance must instead be attributed to a primitive

relation between one or more aspect(s) of the (complex) creaturely property and the divine one.³²⁴

To return to our example, how might we derive the concept of a thing that draws its existence "from another" from the concept of a thing that exists "from itself"? Though Descartes often describes God's necessary existence in traditional terms as following from the fact that he is identical with his essence, he actually holds that since existence is an attribute and hence only conceptually distinct from substance, creatures too are identical with their existence. What distinguishes God's existence from that of creatures' is that God is identical with *necessary* existence, while creatures are identical with *possible* existence: "Possible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being" (CSMII 117). Just as God's independence follows from his completeness—particularly, his perfection with respect to the attribute of power—creaturely dependence could be said to follow from their incompleteness, their possession of an imperfect analogue of divine power. From the concept of a thing whose power

³²⁴ The resemblance could hold between individual aspects of the complex creaturely property and the divine one, or between some or all of the features of the complex creaturely property considered as a whole and the divine one.

entails existence, therefore, we could derive the concept of a thing that possesses no such power and consequently does not exist "from itself" but "from another."

This analysis implies, however, that we possess determinate concepts of divine and creaturely power. Though the distinction between God's power and our own is often cast as one of degree, divine omnipotence can be interpreted as a consequence of uniquely *creative* nature of divine power. Descartes often refers to God as a "total cause" of existence, distinguishing his creative power from the sort of (creaturely) causal power that requires preexisting material. In a passage in the *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes illustrates this distinction as part of an explanation of the causal similitude principle. A house need not resemble its builder, for

[h]e is not the cause of the house, in the sense in which we are taking the word here. He merely applies active forces to what is passive, and so there is no need for the product to be like the man. In this passage, however, we are talking about the total cause, the cause of being itself. Anything produced by this cause must necessarily be like it. For since the cause is itself being and substance, and it brings something into being, i.e. out of nothing (a method of production which is the prerogative of God), what is produced must at the very least be being and substance. To this extent at least, it will be like God and bear his image.

Whereas creaturely power is always limited by the "passive" material on which it can work, and is therefore appropriately described as *constructive* power, the divine correlate does not require any preexisting material. God's power is unlimited because it is *creative* in the absolute sense that he can create *ex nihilo* (i.e., produce being from nothing). In a recent work, the philosopher of religion Barry Miller suggests a similar qualitative distinction between creaturely and divine power.³²⁵ Creaturely power, he argues, varies according to the degree to which a given effect is due to the agent versus how much is attributable to preexisting materials. Miller suggests we can derive the analogically distinct notion of a purely creative power by attending to a series of ever-greater instances of creaturely constructive power (where less and less of the outcome is due to preexisting material). However, CPP suggests that our initial (unexamined) notion of power is the absolute (creative) kind,³²⁶ and it is from this that we derive a concept of the lesser sort.

Descartes' analogy of causation thus implies a top-down derivation of concepts of both existence and power.

³²⁵ 1996, 87.

³²⁶ This power is, perhaps, the 'magical' sort exhibited in fairy tales and movies that most of us, as children, accepted without question. Experience is then an education in the *limits* of human power; we discover that, at least within the realm of experience, that every instance of human creation is in fact a form of construction.

God's existence and power are the genuine or true version of these properties. When we apprehend creaturely analogues in light of these standards, we see they resemble existence and power even though they fall short absolutely of these kinds. We express the resemblance by extending the terms "existence" and "power" to them, their difference through the qualifications "contingent" and "constructive." This characterization may give the misleading impression that "necessary/contingent" and "creative/constructive" are differentiae, "existence" and "power" genera. Yet this is not the case, for true existence is *necessary* existence, genuine power is *creative* power, and the predicates "contingent" and "constructive" do not represent positive differentiae, but are equivalent to "non-necessary" and "non-creative." Again, the paradox of partial negation is the paradox of analogy, where the same thing is apprehend as the source of commonality and difference.

Carriero has argued that for Descartes "philosophical theological investigations presuppose that we already have some grasp of what God is; this is not the sort of thing we can bootstrap our way into."³²⁷ Indeed, the second causal proof for God illustrates a form of philosophical theology that would be impossible were it to be based on a

³²⁷ 2009, 209.

traditional, bottom-up account of analogical derivation. The proof requires us to assume, from the outset, a particular analogical relation between creaturely and divine existence: the fact that God is *like* creatures in possessing a cause but *unlike* them in being self-caused.³²⁸ We can grasp this analogical relation *only because we already possess an idea* "containing the essence of God," particularly, the idea of an immense power from which existence follows.³²⁹ Since we possess determinate concepts of creaturely *and* divine existence, and can grasp the analogy between them, we are entitled to the premise that everything must either derive its existence from itself or from another. Apprehending the analogy is essential for the proof, for without it Descartes claims we would either exclude God from our inquiry or we would assume that God needed an external cause as well.³³⁰ Since, as Alston

³²⁸ God's existence has a cause in the sense that there is a cause (i.e. reason or explanation) for his not needing an external preserving cause.

³²⁹ As Carriero puts it, "the contention that we cognize God immediately (and positively), as something *a se*, and not negatively (and obliquely), as something *sine causa*, is essential, Descartes holds, to our ability to advance causal demonstrations for God's existence" (2009, 221).

³³⁰ If I thought that nothing could possibly have the same relation to itself as an efficient cause has to its effect, I should certainly not conclude that there was a first cause. On the contrary, I should go on to ask for the cause of the so-called 'first' cause, and thus I would never reach anything which was the first cause of everything else. However, I do readily admit that there can exist something which possesses such great and inexhaustible power [...] that it is, in a sense, its own cause.

argued, a bottom-up approach to analogy could provide us with only negative or indeterminate notions of divine power and existence, it could never underwrite the intelligibility of something deriving existence "from itself." Yet a top-down approach provides Descartes with determinate concepts of both God and creatures: the idea of God directly provides him with a determinate concept of a thing deriving its existence from itself, and it indirectly (via partial negation) provides him with the determinate concept of a thing deriving its existence "from another."

V. Top-down Derivation of Knowledge and Love

In addition to being metaphysically necessary and omnipotent, the theistic God is also often characterized as omniscient and omnibenevolent. Though we will not attempt to provide detailed accounts of top-down derivation for these properties, we can provide a rough sketch of why such an account might be called for. An important requirement for motivating a top-down account of analogical derivation for a given property is being able to explain how our concept of the divine version could differ from our concept of the creaturely property in such a way that prohibits the derivation of the former from the latter (e.g., by

amplification or negation).³³¹ In the case of knowledge and love, for example, we must be able to show that the divine properties are not distinguished from their creaturely versions merely by their scope or degree, e.g., the fact that God knows everything there is to know and loves everything worthy of love, for it is the *qualitative* difference between the divine and creaturely versions of these perfections that calls for a top-down derivation.

We noted that Hartshorne, in his own account of a top-down derivation of knowledge, affirms a qualitative distinction between the divine and creaturely properties. He suggests that the divine sense of "know" means having "conclusive evidence [...] shutting off the very possibility of error," and that if we "tone [this concept] down drastically" we arrive at a concept of creaturely knowledge, which does not require having *conclusive* evidence. It is not that God merely knows *more* than we do, but that his knowledge features a definitive quality absent in its creaturely version. Descartes had suggested something similar when he responded to Burman's claim that human understanding, considered essentially, is not imperfect. He responds that it "is not just that our understanding ranges over fewer objects than that of God:

³³¹ Of course, this must be done without precluding the possibility of deriving a concept of the creaturely property from the divine one.

rather, it is extremely imperfect in itself, being obscure, mingled with ignorance, and so on." In the Third Meditation, the narrator argued that we can judge doubt to be a sign of imperfection only because we possess the idea of a state of (perfect) knowledge precluding such uncertainty: "[H]ow could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?" (CSMII 31).

God's knowledge does not differ from ours merely in its scope, but in its conclusive nature. Yet we cannot take this analysis to express a simple qualitative identity underlying the resemblance relation (e.g., that human knowledge is equivalent to divine knowledge minus the feature of conclusiveness). Traditionally, the conclusive nature of divine knowledge was attributed to the fact that it was considered immediate, non-propositional, and identical with divine power.³³² Descartes appears to share this view, arguing that "[i]n God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually" (CSMK 26). In his own

³³² According to CPP, these further features would ostensibly enable us to recognize that the mediated, propositional and truth-contingent aspects of human knowledge constitute imperfections as well.

analysis of the Meditations, Stephen Menn therefore emphasizes that Descartes, like traditional Neoplatonist thinkers, held that God is not just omniscient

but that he is *essentially* omniscient; and since the fact that god knows X cannot be dependent on anything outside God, it follows that God must have knowledge by being himself the standard according to which knowledge is assessed, and not merely by being perfectly conformed to that standard. *This is, for Plotinus and for Augustine and for Descartes, the primary way of knowing; souls have knowledge only in a weaker and derivative way, and we confuse our conceptions of God's knowledge if we imagine it along the model of psychic knowledge. (emphasis mine)*³³³

The definitive nature of God's knowledge is due to the fact that he is "himself the standard according to which knowledge is assessed."³³⁴ Its unlimited scope can be attributed to this same fact, for an actual (quantitative) infinity of things known could follow from the qualitative difference that divine knowledge is not conformity to a standard. Thus the sense in which creaturely knowledge is "weak" or "derivative" is not due merely to the fact that God knows more than we do and with a level of assurance that we cannot match. Rather, God's way of knowing is radically different from the mediated, propositional, and

³³³ Menn 1998, 289

³³⁴ Whereas for Plotinus this follows from the fact that "Nous not only knows all the intelligibles, but also is them, or contains them all within itself," Descartes would say it follows from the fact that "everything is either identical with God or essentially dependent on God's will" (289)

truth-contingent nature of "psychic" knowledge. This does not appear to be a concept of knowledge that we can produce simply by amplifying aspects of our own way of knowing. We can, perhaps, represent to ourselves an approximation of such knowledge by amplifying features of our own (e.g., the extent and degree of certitude), but we cannot construct a concept of divine knowledge through such amplification.

Hartshorne also provides a top-down account of the property of love.³³⁵ He argues that if love means caring about the well-being of others (full stop), then we must admit that humans fail to fully exhibit this property: "A human being appreciates the qualities of this or that other person—except the qualities he does not appreciate, through some limitation of his own; he cares about the other's weal or woe, with similar exceptions; he wishes him well—except so far as (perhaps unconsciously) he has impulses to wish him harm, whether from envy, rivalry, fear, or what not."³³⁶

³³⁵ Ronald Nash also uses love as an example of top-down derivation: "An empiricist like Aquinas is forced to say that our first contact with love comes through our experiences with other human beings. But human love falls miles short of divine love, thus forcing us to treat our fundamental understanding of love as an analogy. But suppose instead that our contact of such predicates as "love" and "perfection" are ours as part of our innate idea of God present within us as part of the image of God. In this second case, we recognize instances of human love (the real analogy) because we have an implicit understanding of God's love. We are drawing a theological application from Plato's treatment of equality and Augustine's explanation of our knowledge of unity. The reason we can recognize two equal particulars is because we first know Equality itself. We can recognize imperfection in the creation because we first have an innate idea of perfection" (1999, 179).

³³⁶ 1962, 141-2.

Yet God, says Hartshorne, "appreciates the qualities of all things—period. [...] He cares about their weal and woe—there is no material qualification or negation." As with the case of knowledge, however, the resemblance relation is not amenable to a simple analysis of partial qualitative identity. I take Hartshorne to be arguing that the problem with the human property is not merely that it is exhibited only selectively, infrequently, and according to various degrees, but that these very limitations are signs that the regard is defective *even when it appears to be expressed at its fullest*. To love one person while hating or feeling indifferent towards another is to exhibit something less than genuine love towards the former. Divine love is not qualitatively identical to human love minus selectivity, for example, for such differentiae (for lack of a better term) change the very nature of the thing they specify.

Though Descartes never provides an account of divine love, his description of the most altruistic forms of human love suggest a qualitative distinction between the two. In his work *The Passions of the Soul*, he characterizes the passions as inherently egoistic, originating in a concern for, and functioning on behalf of, our own welfare. In the case of love, says Descartes, the passion "impels the soul to join itself willingly to objects that appear to be

agreeable to it," in such a manner that "we imagine a whole, of which we take ourselves to be only one part, and the thing loved to be the other" (CSM 356). What distinguishes altruistic love from lesser varieties is that, in the case of the former, we take ourselves to be the *less important* part of the imagined whole. A father regards his children, says Descartes, "as other parts of himself, and seeks their good as he does his own, or even more assiduously. For he imagines that he and they together form a whole of which he is not the better part, and so he often puts their interests before his own and is not afraid of sacrificing himself in order to save them." While the scope of our love is determined by the extent of the whole of which we imagine ourselves to be a part, its degree is determined by how we value other parts in comparison to our own. "In the case of devotion," which Descartes takes to be the proper form of love for God, "we prefer the thing loved so strongly that we are not afraid to die in order to preserve it" (CSM 357).

What is significant about Descartes' account is that human love, even in its purest and most altruistic forms, is conditioned by the egoistic nature of human passion. In order to love something such that we put its interests before our own, we must engage in act of imaginative

projection bordering on self-deception: we must regard the loved thing as in some way connected to ourselves, as parts of a larger whole, and thus momentarily disregard the truth that "each of us is a person distinct from others, whose interests are accordingly in some way different from those of the rest of the world" (CSMK 266).³³⁷ We cannot, apparently, love another while continuing to regard them as they truly are, i.e., distinct from ourselves. The problem is not that human love thereby always fails to be truly altruistic, but that due to the egoistic nature of our passions, altruism is attainable for us only if we engage in an act of imaginative projection. If Descartes' analysis is correct, the selectivity and frailty of human love could be attributed to the limits of such projection: it is one thing to regard one's children as part of oneself, it is quite another to regard other people, especially one's enemies, in this way. The apparently quantitative deficits that Hartshorne claims distinguishes human love from its divine correlate may be rooted in just such a deeper

³³⁷ Though Descartes describes the injunction to view oneself as part of a whole one of the "truths most useful to us," what he wants us to accept is not the truth that our distinctness is an illusion, but the truth that we "ought [...] to think" in this way because engaging in this imaginative projection has practical value (CSMK 266). Frierson (2002, 325-31) provides good reasons for interpreting Descartes in this manner. As our earlier analysis of the real distinction between God and creatures suggests, if the distinction between creatures and God were illusory then this would impute imperfection to God. Descartes' description of this procedure as an imaginative, rather than intellectual, exercise also supports this interpretation.

qualitative distinction between the properties. As with the case of existence, power, and knowledge, CPP would suggest that our original, unexamined notion of love is the divine sort—a regard that is unlimited in scope and degree because it is totally un-egoistic in nature. This is not the sort of concept that we can produce by merely imagining a regard that is less selective or inconstant, for the distinction is ultimately a qualitative one.

Ch. VII. CPP and Perfect Being Theology

The tradition of perfect being theology (PBT) employs the intuition of divine perfection to determine God's nature. A perfect being, it is held, must possess every great-making property (i.e., pure perfection) in the highest possible way. For Descartes, as well as other early-modern rationalists, divine perfection is *the* guiding notion for understanding God's nature. Descartes' endorsement of CPP, however, enables him to successfully respond to two major critiques of PBT. The first criticism, expressed in contemporary thought by Barry Miller, is that PBT provides us with concepts of divine attributes that differ only by degree from creaturely ones, thereby failing to do justice to divine transcendence and divine simplicity.³³⁸ Yet if Miller's critique is justified, we are apparently left with the difficult task of explaining how we can attain concepts of qualitatively distinct divine perfections in the first place. A proponent of CPP, however, can affirm that there is a qualitative distinction between creaturely properties and divine ones without thereby suggesting that the concepts of (qualitatively distinct) divine properties are derived from creaturely

³³⁸ 1996, 2-4.

ones—the sort of operation that many perfect being theologians (e.g., Scotus) have argued is impossible. The top-down direction of derivation in CPP also enables its proponents to address the argument that the criterion of perfection inevitably reflects the interests and values of the perfect being theologian. According to CPP, however, it is by virtue of *already possessing* a notion of a standard of perfection (God) that we apprehend certain creaturely properties as instances of pure perfections.

I. Perfect Being Theology and Univocity

Barry Miller has provided a general critique of the univocist tendencies of PBT. Though some advocates of PBT (e.g., the early modern rationalists) affirmed that the divine perfections are nevertheless qualitatively distinct from creaturely ones, Anselm as well as contemporary advocates of PBT such as Thomas Morris often seem to portray the distinction as one of degree. According to these theorists, we determine God's nature by identifying which creaturely properties are pure perfections and then amplifying them to their maximal degree. For example, we recognize that the property of wisdom is always preferable to anything incompatible with it, and that since this

property can be realized more or less perfectly, we can and must conclude that God possesses it in the highest degree.³³⁹

Miller does not deny that we ought to understand God as the absolutely perfect being. He argues, however, that PBT fails to conceive of God as a transcendent being worthy of worship. Though understanding God as possessing every pure perfection in the maximal way succeeds in setting him apart from creatures, Miller thinks that this separation does not constitute an "absolute divide."³⁴⁰ He argues that it is "difficult to see how it could be more than a difference of degree, since the terms indicating his properties - 'powerful,' 'knowing,' 'loving,' 'merciful,' 'generous' and so on - seem to be used univocally of God and creatures."³⁴¹ In treating the distinction between creaturely and divine pure perfections as one of degree, he thinks PBT conceives of God as merely the greatest creature, thereby succumbing to anthropomorphism and idolatry.³⁴²

³³⁹ Possessing wisdom is preferable both to its absence (folly) as well as to any property (e.g. that of being a stone, or being non-conscious) incompatible with it.

³⁴⁰ 1996, 2.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² "Anthropomorphism" is the attribution of human properties to God and "idolatry" is the worship of anything less (or other) than God. Anthropomorphism is a violation of divine transcendence, while idolatry is the worship of something that is unworthy of worship.

For Miller, however, the alternative is not to reject positive predication altogether and embrace negative theology. Rather, he thinks we can preserve the basic intuition of perfect being theology so long as we recognize a distinction between what he calls the "limit simpliciter" and the "limit case."³⁴³ Whereas the limit simpliciter is the final member of a series of things ordered according to which they possess a given property (F) to an increasing degree, the limit case of such a series is that which lies outside the series and is that towards which the series converges. The crucial distinction is that while the limit simpliciter of a series is an instance of F along with every other member of the series, the limit case of a series is not an F. What perfect being theologians have overlooked, says Miller, is "the possibility of there being anything similar to, but *beyond*, the maximum of a series of Fs."³⁴⁴

Miller asks us to imagine, among other examples, the case of a series of regular polygons ordered according to the number of their sides, taken to infinity. The limit case of such a series, that towards which this series converges, is itself not a polygon but a circle. Since a defining characteristic of regular polygons (being

³⁴³ 1996, 7.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.

equiangular and equilateral) is absent from a circle, it does not really belong to the series. When Miller applies the distinction to the pure perfection of power (described in the previous chapter), he finds that the limit case of constructive power is the qualitatively distinct property of divine creative power. After constructing a series "in which increasingly more of the effects produced was due to the power employed and increasingly less to the materials on which the power was expended," Miller claims that he can see that the series converges upon a "case where the constructor has nothing whatever to work on, the case in which all the causality comes from him and none at all from his using any preexisting materials."³⁴⁵

Yet the limit case/limit simpliciter distinction does not imply that there is no relationship between the two. Even though 'F' cannot be predicated univocally of members of the series and the limit case of the series, Miller argues that it does not follow that 'F' must be equivocal. If the limit case of a series were merely a matter of convention, then the limit case of one series would be interchangeable with the limit case of another. That they are not substitutable, however, suggests that there must be some similarity between members of a given series and the

³⁴⁵ 1996, 87.

limit cases of those series. Miller concludes that the relation must be one of analogical resemblance.³⁴⁶

Miller argues that if we apply the distinction to our language about God, we will find that it radically changes the significance of the terms we use to qualify divine predicates. Though perfect being theologians may distinguish divine attributes from creaturely ones by characterizing the former as "infinite," "perfect," or "unsurpassable," Miller argues that these "qualifiers do nothing to change the sense of the terms they qualify."³⁴⁷ They merely serve to indicate that the qualities are possessed at a maximal degree. Yet if the divine attributes are viewed as the limit cases of creaturely ones, Miller claims the qualifications function as "alienans adjectives," for they change the meaning of the terms they qualify.³⁴⁸ The adjectives "decoy" in "decoy duck" or "negative" in "negative growth" combine with the terms they modify to designate things that are not, respectively, true ducks or true instances of growth. Similarly, the adjectives "infinite" in "infinite knowledge" or "perfect" in "perfect goodness" combine with the terms they qualify to designate divine attributes that are not, respectively,

³⁴⁶ He devotes a separate article to this claim. See 1990, 63-84.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

really instances of knowledge or goodness. God's so-called knowledge and goodness are qualitatively distinct from the creaturely varieties insofar as these attributes, as limit cases, fall outside any series of increasingly more perfect creaturely instances of them.

Miller argues that treating God's attributes as the limit case instances of human attributes not only preserves God's transcendence without disregarding the intuition of divine perfection, but is able to make sense of the doctrine of divine simplicity. One of the chief obstacles to the doctrine of divine simplicity (as well as divine transcendence) is that it seems to preclude any sort of likeness between God and creatures. Yet if God's attributes are the limit case instances of human ones, he claims that we can do justice to the qualitative distinction demanded by the doctrine without violating the intuition that creatures resemble God with respect to their perfections. Miller does not abandon the principle of divine perfection. However, he believes that the guiding or controlling notion that ultimately decides which of the properties are legitimately attributed to God ought to be one that does justice to the limit case/limit simpliciter distinction. For this reason, he prefers the principle of subsistent

existence (God's identity with his existence) to that of perfection.

II. Miller's Critique and CPP

Much of Miller's account is consistent with the theory of religious language suggested by CPP. Though Descartes and others employed the intuition of divine perfection as a principal guiding notion for understanding God, they too wanted to affirm a qualitative break between divine qualities and their creaturely correlates so as to secure divine transcendence and satisfy the apparent logical demands of divine simplicity. Like Miller, they appeared to rely (or so I have argued) upon a doctrine of analogical resemblance to explain how creaturely perfections could nevertheless be said to resemble their divine correlates. Yet what distinguishes Miller's account from those like Descartes' is his insistence that we derive concepts of divine attributes from our concepts of creaturely ones. Miller's account is a contemporary version of bottom-up analogical derivation; it suggests that we can obtain (or construct) a concept of the analogically distinct notion of a limit case quality by attending to a series of creaturely instances of a given quality. The Cartesian critique of

bottom-up analogical derivation thus applies to Miller's account just as it does to traditional scholastic theories of transcendental analogy. According to this critique, we would never be able to arrive at a proper concept of an analogically distinct divine attribute by modifying a concept of a creaturely one unless we already possessed (implicitly) a concept of the divine attribute in question.

Miller outlines a basic strategy for determining divine attributes. The first step is to see, for any given creaturely attribute *F*, whether it has a limit case or not. Miller adds, however, that since "the limit case terminates an ordered series of instances of *F*, the question cannot be answered without first specifying in what respect the instances can be ordered."³⁴⁹ Once we order a series of *F* in such a way that they do, in fact, lead towards a limit case instance of *F*, he thinks we will be able to 'see' that the series 'points' to this limit case. Applied to the example of the regular polygon and the circle, we would first construct a series of regular polygons with increasing numbers of sides and angles. Once we have such a series, we can ostensibly grasp the fact that this series, taken to its limit, converges on the limit case of a circle. However, Descartes had questioned this assumption in his

³⁴⁹ Miller, 86.

critique of amplification arguments. Could we really grasp that the series 'points' to a circle without already possessing a notion of a circle in the first place? Though improbable, it is at least conceivable that we might unwittingly construct the series without possessing a notion of a circle, but it is hard to see how we could ever 'see' that this series converges on the limit case of a circle unless we already possessed such a concept. Or, to employ another example from Descartes, we might construct a series of creatures with ever-decreasing degrees of dependence. But could this series provide us with the limit case concept of an absolutely *independent* being (God) unless we already possessed (at least implicitly) this notion?

Nor is Miller able to answer the broader critique of bottom-up transcendental analogical derivation raised by Scotus. Since creaturely perfections fall short absolutely of their analogous divine correlates, the concepts of these perfections cannot directly provide us with proper concepts of the divine correlates. If proper concepts of divine perfections are instead obtained by a process of rational inference (of which Miller's 'convergence-to-a-limit' approach seems to be an instance), there must be some sort of univocal core to which the distinguishing factor of

supereminence or infinity can be added. However, Miller explicitly denies that his account of analogical resemblance is compatible with the sort of partial univocity favored by Scotus and Alston.³⁵⁰

The distinction between Miller's account of analogical derivation and that required by CPP can be expressed in terms of which qualifiers are assigned the role of alienans adjectives. According to Miller, these adjectives signal that a limit case instance of F is not really an instance of F. When the adjectives "infinite" or "perfect" qualify "goodness," for example, they indicate a (limit case) property that isn't a genuine instance of goodness. According to CPP, however, the alienans adjectives are those that apply to members of the *series*, signaling that they are not really instances of the limit case property. It is instead adjectives like "finite" or "imperfect" that shift the meaning of the terms they modify; just as an imperfect circle is not a true circle, so imperfect goodness is not genuine goodness. This account of language more accurately reflects the epistemological requirements

³⁵⁰ "If there were a common core of meaning between 'F' in 'God is F' and 'Maria is F' then the use of 'F' would not be analogical, but either partly or wholly univocal. Not only that, but the effect of thus predicating 'F' of God would be to apply to him some core predicates having exactly the same senses as when predicated of creatures. The result would be a God conceived of in the image of creatures—an anthropomorphized God" (1996, 150).

of the examples he provides. We can 'see' that the series of regular polygons converges on the limit case instance of a circle because we judge that the shapes will more closely approximate, though never reach, the shape of a circle. In other words, we (at least implicitly) apprehend the polygons as *imperfect circles*, i.e., approaching yet falling short absolutely of the property of circularity as such.

III. The Criterion of Perfection

By invoking a qualitative distinction between creaturely pure perfections and their divine analogues, proponents of PBT need not portray the distinction between these perfections as being merely one of degree, and by endorsing a top-derivation, they can explain how concepts of creaturely perfections can be derived from concepts of qualitatively distinct divine ones. A more basic criticism, however, has been lodged against the theory. Even if we can affirm a qualitative distinction between creaturely and divine perfections, how do we determine which creaturely perfections should be seen as having divine analogues in the first place? According to PBT, we begin by asking whether possessing a given property is preferable to

possessing anything incompatible with it. If it is, then we ostensibly know that creatures are more perfect (qua creatures) to the extent that they possess it, and that God must possess its divine equivalent.³⁵¹

The problem, however, is that this procedure leans rather heavily on our fallible and, perhaps, species-relative intuitions regarding which properties are preferable to others.³⁵² Xenophanes had famously argued that if cows and horses could draw, they would depict gods with, respectively, bovine and equine characteristics. Even if these animals insisted that the gods possessed only the divine *analogues* of rumination or galloping, for example, critics could justifiably accuse them of fashioning deities in their own images. Our ascribing analogues of human characteristics to God could be similarly ridiculed. Nor has there ever been complete consensus across cultures and times as to which characteristics a greatest being must possess. Though philosophers once held that a perfect being must be simple, immutable, and impassible, all of these attributes have been questioned in contemporary thought.³⁵³

³⁵¹ A tree would not be more perfect as a tree if it possessed wisdom (indeed, it would no longer be a tree). Yet it would be more perfect as a creature if it were wise.

³⁵² The procedure also relies on our intuitions regarding possibility and compossibility. Divine simplicity has, for example, been criticized on the grounds that it leads to logical absurdities (e.g., God's being a property).

³⁵³ Hartshorne, for example, has argued for excluding these attributes.

Advocates of PBT are generally upfront and unapologetic regarding the role intuition must play in identifying great-making properties. Thomas Morris, for example, notes that the method of PBT requires us to "consult our value intuitions" and assumes there will be "widespread agreement among people who are rightly positioned and well disposed" concerning these intuitions.³⁵⁴ He admits, however, that since "it is a fact that philosophical intuitions differ," PBT will never be able to provide us with "the ideal of an armchair science of easily ascertained, self-evident truths."³⁵⁵ Nevertheless, he argues that even if there is uncertainty regarding what exactly perfection entails, the fundamental principles of theism—there is "a creative source of all

³⁵⁴ 1991, 38. In an effort to illustrate how advocates of PBT consult their intuitions in developing a concept of God, he provides a schema in which a perfect being is conceived in an ascending order of greatness. God can be conceived as:

- (1) conscious (a minded being capable of an engaged in states of thought and awareness),
- (2) a conscious free agent (a being capable of free action)
- (3) a thoroughly benevolent, conscious agent,
- (4) a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with significant knowledge
- (5) a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with significant knowledge and power,
- (6) a thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with unlimited knowledge and power, who is the creative source of all else.
- (7) thoroughly benevolent conscious agent with unlimited knowledge and power who is the necessarily existent, ontologically independent creative source of all else.

³⁵⁵ 1987, 23. Morris thinks our intuitions provide at most "defeasible epistemic status" for our selection of great-making properties. See 1991, 41.

else that might exist"; "no effect can exceed its ultimate cause in metaphysical status"; and there is an "objectivity of value structures"—strongly support the basic contention that God is a "maximally perfect being."³⁵⁶ Since theism places God at the very top of this hierarchy of value, Morris concludes that it is not man but God who is "the measure of perfection."³⁵⁷ Similarly, Katherin Rogers recognizes that our ability to correctly identify which attributes characterize a greatest being presupposes that we have intuitive access to an objective hierarchy of value. Despite the fallibility of these intuitions, however, she argues that "in all the debates between various conceptions of the nature of God, none of the participants argues for a God whom they judge to be *less* than the best."³⁵⁸

Some contemporary critics of PBT have accused Descartes—considered by many a paragon of armchair philosophizing—of disguising his own theological intuitions about divine perfection as the deliverances of a priori reasoning. Some readers find passages such as the following to reflect an all too uncritical faith in our ability to identify perfections appropriate to God:

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 1987, 28-9.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 1987, 29.

³⁵⁸ 2000, 2.

In order to know the nature of God, as far as my own nature was capable of knowing it, I had only to consider for each thing of which I found in myself some idea, whether or not it was a perfection to possess it; and I was sure that none of those which indicated any imperfection was in God, but that all the others were. Thus I saw that doubt, inconstancy, sadness and the like could not be in God, since I myself would have been very glad to be free from them. (CSI 128)

Christopher Insole, for example, traces the anthropomorphic tendencies of contemporary PBT to Cartesian philosophy of religion. He reminds us that Descartes, in the Third Meditation, provisionally defines "God" as an "infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things which exist [...] have been created and produced."³⁵⁹ This picture of God, says Insole, is developed from an "unproblematized notion" of human subjectivity—in truth, an Enlightenment ideal of human nature—"that of a finite substance, temporal, mutable, autonomous in some crucial respects, knowledgeable to an extent, potent, the proximate cause of some (but not all) of the things which are created and produced." Descartes has here inaugurated a method of philosophical theology according to which divine attributes are drawn from a constructed and "parochial" model of the

³⁵⁹ 2010, 476.

human subject. By uncritically selecting such a model of subjectivity and then attributing to God supereminent versions of these attributes, later philosophers have similarly claimed to have arrived at a substantive model of God's nature. Yet according to their theological critics, says Insole, this procedure instead yields only "the grotesque construction of a super-(human) subject, a bloated infinitely magnified mirror-image of the rational, powerful, and benevolent man."

In his own analysis of Descartes' philosophical theology, Philip Clayton provides a similar critique of Cartesian PBT. Responding to the list of perfections Descartes attributes to God, Clayton asks: "[W]hence do we derive these notions of perfection that we attribute to God? Is it not, as Ludwig Feuerbach argued, merely a matter of taking what one most values and projecting it onto the universe itself?"³⁶⁰ Just as Morris had admitted in his own defense of PBT, Clayton argues that the concept of a greatest being seems to presuppose access to an objective hierarchy of value: "Unless there were agreement on goods and a consensus on their status as objective, the best one could achieve would be a hierarchy of things that the person, or group of persons, values. To label the top of

³⁶⁰ 2000, 171.

this scale 'God' is to be guilty of projection in the most blatant possible manner."³⁶¹ Clayton takes Descartes' claim that our concepts of God are derived by amplifying concepts of creaturely ones as an explicit admission that our concept of God is the result of such projection. He consequently claims that Descartes must face what he calls "Feuerbach's dilemma": "either God is unknowable through attributes accessible to humans, which is another way of saying that God is simply unknowable to humans; or God is knowable in this way, but at the cost of our never knowing for sure whether we have come to know a being separate from ourselves or whether we have projected our own ideas of perfection onto the universe."³⁶² If we reject negative theology and aspire to understand God, concludes Clayton, we can never be sure that we are not merely "extrapolating from human qualities and longings (for greater power, greater understanding, etc.) to the idea of a being who has what we lack."³⁶³

³⁶¹ Ibid., 173.

³⁶² Ibid., 175.

³⁶³ Ibid., 176. Maritain (1944) also objected to what he interprets as the univocist and anthropomorphic tendencies of Cartesian PBT. "Cartesian knowledge of divine perfections," he says, "proceeds in a purely geometrical fashion: God being by definition the supremely perfection, nothing is more simple than to attribute to Him everything which it seems to us to be a perfection to possess—without the slightest critical elaboration of the concepts which we thus use, without that attribution being therefore justified or compromising any sure criterion [...]; and without the possibility of any philosophical solution being proposed to the apparent antinomies and to the essential

There can be little doubt that Descartes endorsed an objective hierarchy of value ordered by approximation to divine perfection. Indeed, in his account of the human will, he provides an explicit account of how God serves as a non-egoist standard of value. In the Fourth Meditation, the narrator claims that even though God's will must be "incomparably greater," it is unclear how any such faculty could surpass his own; hence he argues that "it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God" (CSMII 40).³⁶⁴ In the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes goes on to state that the human will's likeness to its divine correlate is the foundation of its value. It is *because* our free will "renders us in a certain way like God" that it serves as a

questions which concern the divine nature and operations." He thus concludes that "Cartesianism, in respect to Christian metaphysics elaborated during the preceding centuries, has been one of the most singular regressions that the history of thought has to record" (152). Emblematic of Maritain's misreading of Descartes is his failure to see how Descartes' mathematical illustration of analogy respects and preserves the qualitative difference between God and creatures. Maritain quotes T. L. Penido's claim that Descartes' Archimedean examples betray an "anthropomorphic univocity." According to this reading of the mathematical examples, "One takes a created perfection, one increases it indefinitely along the same line and one says: there is the 'way of eminence' (attributing to God the perfections we know here on earth raised to the nth power), divine perfection is at the end" (153). To read the mathematical examples in this way, however, is to fail to appreciate that the concept of the divine perfection at issue is the limit case instance of the creaturely perfection, and hence *qualitatively* distinct from the creaturely perfection.

³⁶⁴ The narrator states, however, that the equivalence between his own will and God's is only apparent: "it does not *seem* any greater than mine when considered as will in the essential and strict sense" (CSMII 40) (emphasis mine). Descartes' commitment to divine simplicity would suggest that the human will is, nevertheless, only analogous to its divine counterpart.

"good reason for esteeming ourselves" (CSMI 384). As one commentator puts it, for Descartes, "the free will is valued not because it is useful but because its infinitude makes us like God."³⁶⁵ Assuming this analysis would hold for the other pure perfections as well, it suggests that their value is rooted in their resemblance to their divine analogues.³⁶⁶

How, then, do we access this objective hierarchy of value? Insole and Clayton's criticisms of Descartes on this score are not new. Indeed, in the second chapter we noted that Gassendi made similar arguments, observing that our concepts of divine attributes are "taken from things which we commonly admire in ourselves." Descartes' response to Gassendi and other critics also applies to the contemporary ones: we are able to attain concepts of divine attributes different in kind from our own only because we already possess innate notions of these attributes. Despite appearances, the process of amplification is not really one of *forming* an idea but of making an idea *explicit*. We do not construct concepts of divine perfections; we enter the world already possessing these notions and (unknowingly)

³⁶⁵ Frierson 2002, 324.

³⁶⁶ The only difference, presumably, would be that we value human freedom more than other perfections because we perceive a greater likeness between human freedom and its divine analogue than that holding between the other human perfections and their divine analogues.

employ them in our everyday classifications and judgments, constructing concepts of the *creaturely* versions of these perfections through partial negation.

If our implicit concepts of divine perfections are actively responsible for our capacity to *amplify* our creaturely perfections past the point of qualitative difference, it stands to reason that they are also responsible for our initial *selection* of these creaturely perfections as candidates for amplification as well. In the Second Replies, Descartes attributes our ability to recognize that certain creaturely perfections are pure perfections (and hence must exist "formally" in God) to our possessing an innate idea of the divine essence:

[T]here are many indefinite particulars of which we have an idea, such as indefinite (or infinite) knowledge and power, as well as number and length and so on, that are also infinite. Now we recognize that some of these (such as knowledge and power) are contained formally in the idea of God, whereas others (such as number and length) are contained in the idea merely eminently. And this would surely not be the case if the idea of God within us were merely a figment of our minds. (CSMII 99)

Our intuitions regarding which attributes are pure perfections are not therefore ungrounded; they are guided by our prior (implicit) possession of a standard of perfection—an innate idea of God. It is because we already

have an idea of that which lies at the very top of the ontological hierarchy, that which is most true and real, that we apprehend certain creaturely properties as pure perfections and so suitable candidates for amplification.³⁶⁷ Just as knowing the model of a series of drawings enables us to apprehend these drawings as more or less accurate depictions of the model, so innate notions of divine power or knowledge enable us to grasp certain creaturely power or knowledge as more or less perfect instances of their divine analogues.

In response to the claim that we project onto God qualities we admire in ourselves, Descartes could therefore answer that we tend to admire these qualities in ourselves because we (unknowingly) attribute their more perfect analogues to God. An innate idea of God serves as the source of the deepest and most universal values common to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. We tend to admire human knowledge, power and freedom because it is with respect to these features that we (implicitly) apprehend ourselves as images and likenesses of God. In the Third Meditation, for example, the narrator portrays God as the implicit object of his aspiration: "I am a thing which is

³⁶⁷ The question of how we justify our claim that a given perfection belongs to God is a separate issue. Here Descartes will appeal to intuition—the "natural light" or "clear and distinct perfection."

incomplete and dependent on another and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things, not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely [...].” The universal nature of human aspirations could be attributed to the fact that an innate notion of divine perfection is a common endowment.

This is not to say that we cannot make mistakes about what divine perfection entails. Though Descartes did believe that, at least among metaphysicians, there was a general consensus regarding which attributes a perfect being must possess,³⁶⁸ he did not claim that we have infallible access to what is contained in our idea of a perfect being. The average person, he allows, may “muddle things up by including other attributes” that are in fact inconsistent with absolute perfection (CSMII 99). And even the experts (metaphysicians like himself) have at best only an imperfect grasp of all that divine perfection requires. Yet Descartes argues that such fallibility is entirely

³⁶⁸ In his response to the anonymous objection forwarded by Mersenne, Descartes argues that “If the idea were a mere figment, it would not be consistently conceived by everyone in the same manner. It is very striking that metaphysicians unanimously agree in their descriptions of the attributes of God (at least in the case of those which can be known solely by human reason). You will find that there is much more disagreement among philosophers about the nature of anything which is physical or perceivable by the senses, however firm or concrete our idea of it may be” (CSMII 99)

consistent with the idea of God being innate: "That not everyone shares the same understanding of God despite the fact that the idea of God is imprinted on them is no more surprising than the fact that not everyone shares the same understanding of a triangle despite the fact that everyone is aware of this idea" (CSMII 257). Indeed, for all the perfections that have been disputed (e.g. impassability, simplicity, immutability), there are others (e.g., knowledge, love, power, freedom) that are rarely questioned.³⁶⁹ The existence of an innate notion of divine perfection thus entails a consensus only among those who are suitably equipped to engage in a deliberate, careful analysis of divine perfection.³⁷⁰

That the perfections we ascribe to God are mostly the analogues of those we admire in ourselves is simply a

³⁶⁹ Proposed supereminent versions of these qualities (e.g., omnipotence) have, however, been disputed. One could argue, along with Hartshorne, that omnipotence is incompatible with creaturely power and the existence of evil, for example.

³⁷⁰ In his dedicatory letter to the *Meditations*, Descartes suggests the number of suitably equipped meditators will be small indeed: "Although the proofs I employ here are in my view as certain and evident as the proofs of geometry, if not more so, it will, I fear, be impossible for many people to achieve an adequate perception of them, both because they are rather long and some depend on others, and also, above all, because they require a mind which is completely free from preconceived opinions and which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses." He goes on to assert that the number of those with an "aptitude for metaphysical studies" is surely no greater than the number who have "an aptitude for geometry"; and whereas students to geometry assume that geometrical propositions are introduced only when there is "a conclusive demonstration available," people tend to assume that, in philosophy, "everything can be argued either way" and hence "few people pursue the truth." (CSMII 5)

consequence of the fact that it is with ourselves that we are directly acquainted. The innate notions of attributes that we unknowingly employ in our everyday judgments will inevitably be those that apply to our own nature and circumstances. Thus while God may indeed have, as the narrator in the Meditations suggests, an infinite number of perfections, and while these perfections will also be contained in our innate idea of him, yet, due to the finite nature of our own minds, we can achieve an awareness of only those that are analogous to our own perfections, for we represent God's perfections to ourselves by indefinitely amplifying creaturely correlates. If, hypothetically, we were to come into contact with beings considerably different from ourselves, we may indeed become aware of new perfections that are appropriate to ascribe to God. Assuming that these beings do possess pure perfections that we lack, our very ability to *conceive* of these perfections would be explained by our accessing hitherto latent ideas of their divine correlates. Our contact with these beings would not *provide* us with the ideas of these perfections, but would merely enable us to make these notions *explicit*. The new experience would merely be the occasion for our drawing notions of these novel perfections from our innate idea of a perfect being.

The version of the dilemma Descartes, and other advocates of CPP, actually face is therefore not the one Clayton proposed of choosing between negative theology and anthropomorphism, but that of choosing between negative anthropology and deimorphism: either we are unknowable to ourselves given the fact that our self-ascription of limited perfections are complete negations of positive notions of God's perfections; or we are knowable in this way but at the cost of our never knowing for sure whether we have come to know ourselves or whether we have projected our ideas of divine perfections onto ourselves. We have argued in previous chapters, however, that this is a false dilemma—a top-down account could employ a theory of analogical resemblance, just as many bottom-up ones do. When we apprehend ourselves as imperfectly wise, for example, we are not attributing to ourselves the perfection of true wisdom; only God is really wise. Nor are we simply denying ourselves the property of wisdom. Rather, we are acknowledging that we possess a deficient analogue of the genuine thing—an imitation of divine wisdom.

Though contemporary perfect being theologians tend to assume, along with most contemporary philosophers of religion, that our concepts of divine perfections are derived from concepts of creaturely ones, the bottom-up

approach to concept derivation is not an essential feature of PBT.³⁷¹ Not only is PBT consistent with a top-down approach, some of the most important traditional practitioners of PBT including St. Augustine and St. Anselm proposed something similar to the top-down derivation required by CPP. Though neither explicitly endorsed a theory of analogy,³⁷² they did appeal to theories of divine illumination to explain both the certainty characterizing various judgments as well as the *origin* of the concepts employed in these and perhaps other judgments.³⁷³ For these thinkers, many of our judgments regarding the perfection of creatures presuppose reference to standards of perfection exemplified only by God.³⁷⁴ Thus even traditional versions

³⁷¹ Contemporary practitioners of PBT advocating for a bottom-up approach include: William Morris (1987, 1991), Daniel J. Hill (2005) and William Alston (1989), among others.

³⁷² An argument for interpreting Anselm as an advocate of univocity and not, as some interpreters would have it, a forerunner of scholastic analogy, can be found in Ch. V of Rogers 1997.

³⁷³ For a discussion of both of these features of divine illumination in St. Augustine's work, see Evangelist 2010.

³⁷⁴ Augustine, for example, observes that we possess abstract concepts of wisdom, unity, and goodness that could not have been derived from sense experience. Though there is scholarly debate concerning the precise nature of his theory of divine illumination, Ronald Nash (1969, 109-10) has suggested that these concepts are roughly equivalent to innate ideas. These concepts not only enable us to recognize imperfect instances of, for example, wisdom, unity or goodness, but serve as standards according to which we may judge their relative (im)perfection. As Evangelist puts it, these concepts are "normative standards which we apply when we draw comparisons between things or judge how they ought to be" (2010, 10). In the *Freedom of the Will*, for example, Augustine argues that our ability to recognize the absence of unity in bodies presupposes our possessing a notion of absolute unity: "When I am seeking unity in the corporeal realm and am at the same time certain that I have not found it, nevertheless I know what I am seeking and failing to find, and I know that I cannot find it, or rather that

of PBT are not inherently vulnerable to the projectionist critique. To the extent that there is a general consensus regarding the properties a perfect being must have, this need not be explained as a consequence of humans projecting onto God what they value most about themselves. If an implicit awareness of God is a constitutive feature of human nature, our general agreement about what is both valuable in ourselves and necessarily true of God can be attributed to this common endowment.

it does not exist among corporeal things. When I know that no body is a unity, I know what unity is" (2.8.21). Likewise, in *On the Immortality of the Soul*, he argues that we would not be able to judge that some things are better than others "unless a conception of the good itself had been impressed upon us, such that according to it we might both approve some things as good and prefer one good to another." See Nash (1969, 105-6). Anselm makes similar claims in the *Monologian*, arguing that we would not be able to judge creatures as wise, just or good without referring them to standards of divine wisdom, justice and goodness. See Ch. IV of Rogers 1997.

Ch. VIII. Analysis and Critique of Cartesian CPP

I. The Plausibility of our Awareness of Absolute Imperfection

We concluded in the first chapter that the Cartesian argument from CPP is simply the claim that in order to judge that something is imperfect insofar as it is like-X but not-X, we must possess a concept of X. The significance of the predicates "perfect" and "imperfect" in CPP is best captured by examples such as those we find in geometry where the perfection in question is definitive of the kind (rendering "perfect" equivalent to "true" or genuine), and hence where imperfection indicates falling short of the kind. The idea of a perfect (or "true") circle is prior to the idea of an imperfect one in the sense that we cannot conceive of a thing as resembling yet failing to be a circle unless we possess a concept of a circle as such; however, we can possess the concept of a circle without possessing the concept of something that resembles but falls short of it. As the idea of a perfect circle is simply the idea of a circle, so the idea of a perfect or infinite being is the idea of being as such. Since the properties possessed by a perfect being are definitive of being, anything that fails to possess these properties can

be called a "being" in only a non-univocal sense of the term. If constructing ideas of God by manipulating (via negation or amplification) our ideas of creatures requires an awareness of their absolute imperfection, these operations presuppose the very concepts they are intended to produce.

A. CPP as Transcendental Argument

The argument from CPP could accurately be described as a transcendental argument.³⁷⁵ While such arguments are usually employed to show how an uncontroversial fact about our mental life presupposes some disputed fact about extra-mental reality, they can also be used to establish other facts about our mental life, especially those of which we are not directly aware. In the case of CPP, the claim is that our apprehension of absolute imperfection presupposes a concept of the kind with respect to which we see ourselves falling short. Some philosophers, such as Barry Stroud, believe that transcendental arguments that infer facts about our mental life are more plausible than those that attempt to demonstrate facts about the extra-mental world.³⁷⁶ Robert Stern, however, has questioned this

³⁷⁵ See Schechtman 2011.

³⁷⁶ 2000, 158, 233-5.

assumption: "How can claims of necessary connections between some thoughts or experience and some others be defended more cogently than claims of necessary connections between some thoughts or experience and the world? Why are such 'bridges' or modal connections easier to make 'within thought' than between how we think and how the world must be to make that thought possible?"³⁷⁷

Stern's concern is valid for many transcendental arguments of this type. Though it may be true, for example, that our being able to think of ourselves as subjects of experience presupposes our thinking of the world as containing objective particulars independent of our experiences, the conclusion is not obvious; it requires, at the very least, further elaboration. Compared to a transcendental argument such as this one, however, the presupposition relation identified by CPP is a truism (which may explain why Descartes and others spent so little energy explaining or defending it). That I cannot conceive of something as not-X without possessing a concept of X is hardly a contentious claim. What is *not* obvious or uncontroversial are the purported mental facts from which the inference in CPP is made. Do we really apprehend ourselves as imperfect in the *absolute* sense, e.g., as

³⁷⁷ Stern 2011.

failing to possess *true* wisdom or *genuine* power, as failing to be *real* beings?

An uncharitable reader might here accuse Descartes and others of trading on an ambiguity—of using the uncontroversial fact that we are aware that we are in *some* sense imperfect to obscure the fact that the imperfection in question must be the absolute sort for the argument to work.³⁷⁸ Further, if our sense of imperfection is merely a vague apprehension that we fall short in some absolute yet *unspecified* way, this awareness could hardly credit the inference that we possess *proper* concepts of these qualitatively distinct perfections. Descartes' critics as well as later empiricists such as Locke and Hume often responded to rationalist arguments of this type by denying that the concept or knowledge in question possesses the unique or rich content (or, in the case of knowledge,

³⁷⁸ A defender of CPP perhaps should also address a more general, if perhaps rarely articulated, criticism: namely, that the assertion that human beings possess an innate idea of the divine essence or receive some sort of ongoing divine illumination is an *extravagant* claim and thus requires especially persuasive evidence. From the perspective of traditional theism, however, there is no reason why the evidentiary bar for CPP should be especially high. If an infinite and transcendent being exists and has the sort of special relationship with human beings that the Abrahamic religions claim, it would be unsurprising if it endowed us with at least an inchoate or dispositional awareness of that which is most real and most valuable, i.e., itself. This is not to discount the importance of revelation, but explains why the truth of revelation has significance for us, i.e., because it answers to deep and universal longings that are part of our nature. Leibniz expresses a similar view: "[T]he inclination we have to recognize the idea of God is part of our human nature. Even if the first teaching of it were attributed to revelation, still men's receptiveness to this doctrine comes from the nature of their souls" (1981, 76).

necessity or universality) allegedly incompatible with its empirical or manufactured origin. In this case, the critic can argue that there is less to our sense of imperfection than advocates of CPP presume. It is true that the rationalists could and did argue that our absolute imperfection is something of which we are usually only *implicitly* aware: Descartes and Malebranche often appeal to implicit awareness or implicit knowledge of God, and it is well-known that Leibniz developed a robust theory of unconscious perception.³⁷⁹ Yet if the awareness of imperfection at issue in CPP is only an implicit awareness, then this awareness ceases to be an uncontroversial fact of our mental life and CPP loses much of its force as a free-standing argument.

B. Transcendental Argument Against Amplification

However, Descartes can be read as providing an argument—another transcendental argument, in fact—to show that we do indeed apprehend ourselves, at least implicitly, as radically imperfect in the sense required by CPP.

³⁷⁹ Leibniz also invokes implicit knowledge, though it is not clear whether this is something distinct from unconscious awareness. See Jolley 1984, 175. Jolley also emphasizes that implicit knowledge is unlike dispositional knowledge for Leibniz in that “implicit or virtual knowledge is in a sense really actual; it is contrasted not with actual knowledge but with express” (173).

Descartes' critics had claimed that the concepts of divine perfections that we do have are constructed from concepts of our own via a process of amplification. He had responded that while we do indeed use a process of amplification as a heuristic device for making our concepts of divine properties explicit, since the concepts thereby attained are qualitatively distinct from the creaturely ones, our ability to arrive at them presupposes an *implicit* awareness of the divine perfections. To use the geometrical example, we can 'see' that a series of polygons ordered according to progressively greater numbers of sides converges on the limit case instance of circularity only because we already possess a concept of a circle. We could never construct the concept of a circle merely by noticing that the sides of a polygon could always be increased in number. Rather, attending to this series enables us to 'reach' the idea of a circle because we *implicitly* apprehend the polygons as imperfect circles. Similarly, we can obtain concepts of qualitatively distinct divine properties by amplifying concepts of creaturely ones only because we, at least *implicitly*, apprehend these properties as absolutely imperfect versions of divine ones.

Yet philosophers have objected to the assumption that amplification enables us to arrive at proper concepts of

absolutely infinite and qualitatively distinct divine perfections as well as to the alleged presupposition relation that we could arrive at such concepts only if we were already (at least implicitly) aware of them. Regarding the first objection, the traditional scholastic view was that even though we know that certain things are true of God (e.g., that he is uncaused), we do not have an idea representing his essence. None of our ideas of divine perfections can represent these perfections as they exist in God—all of our concepts of God are, to use a term we employed in our discussion of analogy, improper. This view was, in part, a consequence of general assumptions about both the origin of our ideas in sense experience (an assumption they shared with later empiricists) as well as their representative capacity (i.e., that no idea, qua finite thing, can represent the infinite).³⁸⁰ Though Rationalists could address these claims by invoking a theory of innateness and by affirming a distinction between the objective and formal reality of ideas,³⁸¹ the true

³⁸⁰ Though Malebranche adopted the Cartesian account of CPP with respect to our idea of God, he agreed with Aquinas that, since ideas are finite entities, no idea could ever represent the infinite. Thus he held that our 'idea' of God was really God's actual presence to the mind.

³⁸¹ Carriero suggests that, in response to Aquinas's claim that "since every created image belongs to some fixed genus [...] no created image can possibly represent God" Descartes could argue that "the argument trades on a confusion between formal and objective reality: while it may be true that every created representation is finite in terms of its formal reality (determined, for example, to belong to the genus human

strength of the objection lies in the purported experiential fact that we don't fully understand what divine knowledge or power, much less the divine being, is like. Perhaps we can be reasonably certain that God has knowledge and power and that these properties must differ qualitatively in certain ways from creaturely ones, yet this knowledge doesn't seem to presuppose the possession of a concept representing the divine essence.

This objection assumes, however, a criterion for concept-possession that advocates of CPP can and did reject: namely, that possessing a concept entails an awareness of all its contents. According to Descartes, the inadequacy of our understanding of the infinite is not due to the inadequacy of our *idea* of the infinite (for this idea really contains infinite objective reality), but our inability to conceive or represent to ourselves everything contained within it. As we have noted, Descartes invokes a distinction between comprehending something in thought and merely "touching" it with one's mind, a distinction that he applies to both the general concept of an infinite being as well as to the individual perfections that we ascribe to

intellectual idea), it does not follow that every created representation is finite in terms of its objective reality" (2009, 182).

this being.³⁸² In the same way that we know that certain perfections must be ascribed to God even though we assume that there are (perhaps) infinitely many of which we have no understanding, so Descartes thinks we can be certain of various features of these perfections even though we cannot pretend to possess knowledge of everything they contain. For example, despite the fact that we do not know all that infinite being entails, we can be certain that God possesses power; and despite the fact that we do not know all that infinite power requires, we do know that it is incompatible with God's relying on an external efficient cause for his existence. We do not stipulate that an infinite being possesses a power incompatible with contingency, but discover it through an analysis of our concept of infinite being.³⁸³

Even if we allow that possessing a concept that truly represents a divine perfection or the divine essence need

³⁸² God, says, Descartes "has all those perfections which I cannot comprehend, but which I can somehow touch in thought." Carriero observes that this distinction (between 'touching' and 'comprehending') resembles the one Aquinas makes between the vision of God that the blessed achieve after death and the sort of cognition of God that no finite thing, even the blessed, can achieve. He goes on to argue that Aquinas would probably agree that if, hypothetically, we possessed an idea representing God's essence, we would indeed have the understanding of it that Descartes alleges we do.

³⁸³ Indeed, as we noted in the second chapter, there is a stronger claim here too: Descartes believes that not only is non-comprehensive awareness compatible with possessing a concept that truly represents God's essence, but it would in fact be *incompatible* with divine infinity if we could comprehend everything contained in our idea of God.

not entail awareness of everything that concept includes, we might still question the assumption that we could never produce these concepts by modifying concepts of creaturely perfections. Scotus, for example, believes we can form a proper concept of a divine property (which applies only analogically to creatures) by contracting a candidate property to an infinite grade (or mode) of perfection. While we can derive a notion of the pure perfection from its creaturely instance, he realized that he must provide some explanation of how we can conceive of this property as intensively infinite without help from innate ideas or divine illumination. To this end, he provides a detailed account of how one might obtain the concept of an infinite grade of being. In brief, he argues that we first move from the concept of the potentially infinite in quantity (“[which] has only being in the making or potentially”) to a concept of the quantitatively infinite in act (“a whole [which] has nothing outside itself”) by imagining that the succession of parts constituting the potentially infinite quantity “were taken at once or that they remained in existence simultaneously.”³⁸⁴ If we then wish to think of something that is actually infinite with respect to its being, we likewise think of something that is whole and

³⁸⁴ Quotation from Frank 1995, 152.

perfect in the sense that its *qualities* cannot be exceeded intensively.³⁸⁵ In brief, says Scotus, "[f]rom the notion of the infinite in the Physics, then, applied imaginatively to something infinite in quantity, were that possible and applied further to something actually infinite in entity, were it possible, we can form some sort of idea of how to conceive a being intensively infinite in perfection and power."³⁸⁶

Some have cast doubt on Scotus's contention that we can move from the quantitative to the qualitative infinite. Citing the example of infinite whiteness, Locke argued that "properly speaking, we can add infinity only to those things with parts [...] it doesn't make sense to speak of infinite whiteness or infinite sweetness: to the perfectest idea I have of the whitest Whiteness, if I add another of a less or equal whiteness, (and of a whiter than I have, I cannot add the idea,) it makes no increase and enlarges not my idea at all."³⁸⁷ Further, as we have noted in a previous chapter, critics have questioned Scotus's assumption that ontological analogy could be compatible with conceptual

³⁸⁵ Unlike the quantitatively infinite in act, however, an actually infinite being cannot be construed as having parts each of which is less than the whole. Infinite being must be metaphysically simple.

³⁸⁶ Frank 1995, 153.

³⁸⁷ 1975, 221. Leibniz, in his response to this objection from Locke, argues that "nothing prevents one from having the perception of a whiteness more brilliant than one at present conceives." Nevertheless, he goes on to argue that the example of color is misleading since we can have only a confused idea of it (1981, 158).

univocity. Whatever the merits of these critiques, Scotus' account shows at the very least that it is not *obvious* that we cannot construct proper concepts of actually infinite, qualitatively distinct divine properties from concepts of creaturely ones. A defender of CPP would need to explain why the qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely properties constitutes an insuperable barrier to constructing proper ideas of divine properties from ideas of creaturely ones but does not prohibit deriving concepts of creaturely properties from concepts of divine ones. To merely affirm, as Descartes does, the scholastic principle that knowledge of what is not cannot bring us to knowledge of that which is, is to assume a relationship between the conceptual and ontological that Scotus flatly denied.³⁸⁸

C. Generalizing the Argument from CPP

Descartes may be right that our ability to conceive of the divine perfections reached through (a purely heuristic process of) amplification presupposes an implicit awareness that the creaturely properties thus amplified are imperfect

³⁸⁸ Again, Scotus agrees that there is a qualitative distinction between creaturely and divine properties and that our proper notions of each are only analogically related to the other. Because we can form a univocal notion of a property by prescinding from its grade of perfection, however, this ontological diversity does not impede our moving from a concept of the creaturely property to a proper concept of the divine one.

in the absolute sense. Yet if this argument is the sole support for the premise that we apprehend ourselves as absolutely imperfect, then CPP rests on a poor foundation indeed. Apart from the problems raised by Scotus and others, there is the fact that the argument against amplification can have purchase only for the few who engage in philosophical theology and attain the alleged insights into the divine nature in the manner described. In defense of CPP, it may be true that there are other contexts in which philosophical theology seems to presuppose an awareness of the divine nature. Gilson, in his analysis of Bonaventures' account of CPP,³⁸⁹ observes that the premises of cosmological arguments often seem to involve knowledge of the very features of God that they are invoked to establish:

We think we are starting from strictly sensible data when we state as the first step in our demonstration that there are in existence beings mutable, composite, relative, imperfect, contingent: but in actual fact we are aware of these insufficiencies in things only because we already possess the idea of the perfections by whose standard we see them to be insufficient. It is only in appearance and not in reality that our reasoning begins with sense data. Our awareness,

³⁸⁹ For Bonaventure's accounts of CPP, see Aersten 2012, 147-60; Cullen 2006, 61-6; and Gilson 1965, 108-25. Though Bonaventure argued that we conceive of infinite being by virtue of conceiving of being, he held that our concepts of all the other divine attributes are derived from experience. The tendency of divine illuminationists, especially later ones such as Ghent, to fold aspects of Aristotelian empiricism into their accounts of ideogenesis makes it difficult to draw historical parallels between their accounts of CPP and that which is found in early modern rationalism.

apparently immediate and primary, of the contingent implies a pre-existent notion of the necessary.³⁹⁰

Though such cosmological arguments may indeed presuppose notions of divine properties, the purported awareness of absolute imperfection is here limited to the questionable insights of a small group of theologians and metaphysicians. Even if their alleged awareness of absolute imperfection does indeed presuppose prior ideas of the perfect, the argument from CPP would be stronger, and have greater significance, if it could be shown that an awareness of absolute imperfection is implicated in more universal and mundane features of human experience.

We have, to some degree, done this in our analyses of top-down analogical derivation. Harshorne's insight into the radical imperfection of human knowledge and love may be a common, if not quite universal, experience. According to this analysis, our original, unexamined notion of knowledge is one characterized by conclusiveness and immediacy; it is when we, as adults, begin to examine our so-called knowledge that we see, as the narrator does in the *Meditations*, that our justifications actually lack the definitive nature we had (implicitly) assumed they had, and that our very need to appeal to (and remember) these

³⁹⁰ 1965, 115.

justifications is a sign of our absolute imperfection as knowers. Similarly, it is perhaps the notion of a love unconditioned by ego that we, in the best case scenario, carry through childhood and believe is realized in our parents' regard for us. Experience is an education in the limits of love, enabling us to apprehend even parental love as at best an imitation of God's love for us.

Our initial response to this disappointment may be to dismiss our former notions of knowledge and love as simplistic or naïve, and hence to classify the more complex and comparatively imperfect forms as the genuine thing—we might conclude that knowledge just *is* mediated; love just *is* limited by the bounds of the self, and we were foolish to think otherwise. But there are other cases where we seem to resist this reclassification. Though we recognize that human justice is inevitably imperfect, compromised as it is by factors such as limited resources and limited knowledge, we are not inclined to redefine our notion of justice according to its human approximations. The notion of absolute or perfect justice may be unrealistic from the perspective of what is attainable within human society, but we nevertheless recognize it to be something more than a childhood fantasy. In his own analysis of Cartesian CPP, James Lawler cites a child's innate sense of fairness as a

consequence of her possessing a standard of perfect justice:

The child who has no distinct idea of perfection nevertheless knows when something goes wrong or is inadequate to its way of looking at things. It's not fair, the sister says when her brother gets more than she does. She has no distinct idea of fairness which she can articulate consciously, but nevertheless operates in the light of an idea that, in a male-dominated society, may never have been taught to her. The idea of fairness is only a particular expression of the more general idea of a truth or standard or ideal by which all things are variously evaluated.³⁹¹

The girl's apparently naïve notion of fairness enables her to identify injustices that her community does not recognize. More importantly, we can imagine that this same notion would eventually enable her to recognize the imperfection of what passes for justice in human society more generally. Since this notion of absolute justice is an ideal inspiring us to improve our own systems of justice, however, we resist redefining it in terms of its imperfect forms.³⁹²

Another candidate for a nearly universal awareness of absolute imperfection is the sense of metaphysical contingency that we discussed in the context of Descartes'

³⁹¹ 2006, 338.

³⁹² What is the qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely justice? Part of the distinction might be the inherently restorative, rather than merely retributive, nature of divine justice. Since human justice can be restorative as well, however, one would need to distinguish divine restoration from its human counterpart.

analogy of causation. According to this analysis, our original notion of existence is of metaphysically *necessary* existence following from purely *creative* power, and it is only because we possess these concepts that we can become aware of the absolute imperfection of creaturely (contingent) existence and creaturely (constructive) power. It is perhaps such an implicit concept of necessary existence that enables many of us, usually at some point in late childhood, to achieve the (often startling) insight of our own powerlessness and consequent dependence. The shock of this realization and the anxiety it inspires has not only been a major theme of art and literature for millennia (as well as an important theme in psychology), but it can be understood to inspire that most basic religious and philosophical question, often first asked in early adolescence, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" Given sufficient reflection, we may attribute our contingency to the fact that the reason or cause for our existence lies outside ourselves. This realization may, in turn, give rise to an explicit notion of a more perfect form of existence enjoyed by a metaphysically necessary being, i.e., a being that neither came into existence nor could cease to exist since the foundation of its existence lies within itself. Such a being would exhibit not merely a

very low degree of contingency, but absolutely no contingency at all. Yet if CPP is correct, this apparently negative concept of necessary existence—expressed grammatically as the negation of dependent existence (i.e., in-dependent existence)—is in fact our original, positive notion of existence, and it is only because we already possess such a concept that we can apprehend our own *kind* of (contingent) existence as imperfect in the first place.

Yet if an implicit awareness of absolute imperfection were a universal feature of human nature, one would expect it to play some role in shaping human desire and aspiration more generally. There is some suggestion of this at the end of the Third Meditation, where the narrator states that the idea of God—a “mark of the craftsman stamped on his work [... which] need not be anything distinct from the work itself”—shapes human nature by serving as an implicit object of human desire. Our awareness of a being possessing every perfection “not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely” explains why we aspire “*without limit* to ever greater and better things” (CSMII 35, emphasis mine). Lawler thus argues that, for Descartes, the idea of perfection is “the better, or the best, that stands above pleasure and pain and allows us to be discontent with

our contentment."³⁹³ Malebranche too asserts that the inexhaustible nature of human desire ought to be attributed to an implicit awareness of the absolute inadequacy of creaturely goods in comparison to God: "The inclination toward the good in general [i.e., God] is the source of the restlessness of our will. Everything the mind represents to itself as its good is finite, and everything finite can momentarily distract our love, but cannot hold it permanently."³⁹⁴ These claims are surely reminiscent of Augustine's famous observation, in the *Confessions*, that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O Lord."

Unfortunately, arguments intended to show that an awareness of absolute imperfection is implicated in more universal and mundane features of human experience are susceptible to objections similar to those raised against arguments that appeal to the more recondite insights of philosophical theology. Though an unceasing restlessness, for example, may indeed be a universal feature of human nature, this is not an *uncontroversial* fact. There are certainly some, like Saint Augustine, for whom a perpetual dissatisfaction with finite goods seemed to be an explicit and dominant feature of their psychology; angst-ridden

³⁹³ 2006, 338.

³⁹⁴ 1997, 269.

characters such as these have also been a staple of 19th and 20th century literature. Yet how does one explain the equally, if not more, common phenomenon of human quietude, of apparent satisfaction with worldly goods, knowledge, and love? It is true that such satisfaction may be merely apparent, and it is one of the achievements of 20th century psychology to show how unconscious discontentment and anxieties can broil beneath even the most placid surfaces. Yet it follows that appeals to chronic disquietude or other ostensibly universal signs of an awareness of absolute imperfection can be persuasive only in the context of further assumptions about human psychology and behavior. Further, even if we grant that such infinite restlessness is a universal feature of human nature, it is not obvious that this cannot be explained without appealing to an implicit awareness of absolute imperfection. Perhaps this restlessness can be sated—it is just that we have not found the finite good or set of goods that will do it.

Descartes undoubtedly believed that we all possess an innate idea of God and that we all, at least implicitly, apprehend ourselves as radically imperfect in light of this standard. He did not, however, feel it necessary to provide independent arguments for the premise that we apprehend ourselves as absolutely imperfect. This is perhaps due to

the fact that his appeal to an awareness of absolute imperfection (as well as his claim that this awareness presupposes a robust idea of God) may have been intended to have probative force only for the suitably trained and properly disposed meditator.³⁹⁵ Like his rationalist successors, Descartes was often at pains to emphasize that anyone can discover the innate truths 'within' so long as they follow the correct method of philosophizing (e.g., turn away from the deliverances of the senses towards the intelligible realm, withhold judgment in the absence of clear and distinct conceptions, etc.)³⁹⁶ In response to Burman's repeated objections concerning the apparent absolute perfection (infinity) of the human will, Descartes asserts that "there is no point in arguing like this on these matters. Let everyone just go down deep into himself and find out whether he has a perfect and absolute will, and whether he can conceive of anything which surpasses him in freedom of the will. I am sure everyone will find that

³⁹⁵ In the preface to the *Meditations*, Descartes states that "I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between" (CSMII 8).

³⁹⁶ It is difficult, however, to reconcile the rationalists' confidence in their own methods with the fact that scores of intelligent, sympathetic inquirers have followed these methods and failed to attain the same insights, much less the fact that the rationalist themselves did not always agree. To cite a famous case, Leibniz argued that Descartes' ontological argument was incomplete because it failed to demonstrate that God's existence is non-contradictory (as it would be if, for example, certain perfections were incompatible). See, for example, Leibniz 1981, 437.

it is as I say" (CSMK 342). Presumably the same sort of introspection would enable us to see how our other attributes fall short absolutely of their divine correlates. This would suggest that if we are capable of going "down deep" into ourselves, our absolute imperfection will be obvious and independent arguments for the claim unnecessary. Conversely, if we are not properly disposed for such meditation, the implication seems to be that further argumentation would be pointless. That we possess an idea of the infinite in comparison to which we judge ourselves to be absolutely imperfect is a truth that, like the cogito, we have to discover for ourselves, if at all.

II. The Ontology and Cognition of Primitive Resemblance

CPP assumes that the imperfect is qualitatively distinct from the perfect. An imperfect circle is judged to be imperfect insofar as it fails to be a circle. Yet we have noted that the argument also assumes a positive (resemblance) relation between the two: an imperfect circle is apprehended as being in some way *like* a circle. In the case of things like circles, this resemblance could be said to supervene on more basic features of qualitative identity. When it comes to the resemblance relationship

between God and creatures, however, divine simplicity and transcendence were traditionally taken to rule out any form of qualitative identity. We have therefore argued that CPP, as it applies to the perfections of God and creatures, assumes a form of analogical resemblance that is primitive or irreducible in nature. We used the apparently primitive similarity of scalar properties such as the resemblance of different shades of a single color to illustrate how this similarity might be cognized.

A problem for Descartes' account of CPP that we have not yet addressed, however, is that examples such as these involve a resemblance between two *simple* phenomenal properties. In the case of God and creatures, however, the ontological picture appears to be one in which numerous qualitatively distinct, individually complex creaturely properties bear a primitive (analogical) resemblance to a single, metaphysically simple thing—the divine essence. Unlike Leibniz, Descartes endorsed the traditional theory of divine simplicity, which entails that the divine attributes themselves are, in reality, identical to the divine essence and hence identical to each other.³⁹⁷ We have

³⁹⁷ See "Divine Simplicity" in vol. 8 of the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (784). According to Adams, Leibniz "speaks without embarrassment of God as having a plurality of distinct properties. He maintains that God is simple, but in the same sense in which all the monads or fundamental substances of his system are simple—that is, in

noted on numerous occasions that a commitment to a strong version of divine simplicity was, for many scholastic thinkers as well as for Descartes, a primary reason for rejecting univocal predication of God and creatures. Yet if divine Goodness, Justice, and Wisdom are in reality identical, then what basis is there for apprehending creaturely goodness as imperfect *goodness* rather than imperfect justice or wisdom? The identity of the divine attributes would seem to entail that an analogically similar instance of, for example, creaturely goodness must resemble divine wisdom in precisely the same way it resembles divine goodness. If the divine attributes are not qualitatively distinct, then it appears to follow that creaturely pure perfections are not either.³⁹⁸

Descartes follows the scholastic tradition in holding that divine simplicity is compatible with conceiving of God

the sense of having no parts that are or could be substances. Properties, distinct from each other as they may be, do not count for Leibniz as parts that could disturb the simplicity of a substance" (2008, 105).

³⁹⁸ Scotus faced a similar problem in his account of univocal predication. If "good" can be predicated univocally of both creatures and God, and God's goodness is identical with his wisdom, it would entail that creaturely goodness is identical with creaturely wisdom. He attempted to reconcile divine simplicity with univocal predication by invoking a weaker form of divine simplicity. Though the divine attributes are not really distinct, he claimed that they were "formally distinct" insofar as they admit of different definitions. The formal distinction of the divine attributes is not something that is imposed by the intellect but is a feature of the divine nature itself. Scotus thought he could thereby affirm that divine wisdom is really identical with divine goodness, and that both "good" and "wise" can be predicated univocally of creatures and God, without accepting the absurd conclusion that creaturely wisdom is the same as creaturely goodness.

in terms of a diversity of attributes. He argues that it is due to a "defect of our intellect," rather than an actual metaphysical complexity within God himself, that we ascribe attributes to him in a "piecemeal fashion, corresponding to the way in which we perceive them in ourselves" (CSMII 98). It may appear that he has backed himself into a corner here, for how can he maintain that we possess proper concepts of God if we are conceiving of him as though he exhibits a metaphysical complexity he actually lacks? In fact, Descartes did not believe that the distinctions we make between the divine attributes are to be attributed solely to our own intellects. Rather, he suggests that such distinctions always have some basis in the reality conceived.³⁹⁹

Indeed, on this score Descartes appears to follow Aquinas, who believed that the distinctions we make between God's (really identical) attributes have a foundation in his incomprehensible nature: Given God's transcendent greatness, we, finite beings that we are, cannot comprehend his essence with a single concept.⁴⁰⁰ As we noted in the

³⁹⁹ "I call it a conceptual distinction—that is, a distinction made by reason *ratiocinatae*. I do not recognize any distinction made by reason *ratiocinantis*—that is, one which has no foundation in reality—because we cannot have any thought without a foundation" (CSMK 280). See Skirry 2005, 39-69.

⁴⁰⁰ Aquinas' account thus falls between those that invoke a purely conceptual distinction that has no foundation in reality and the Scotistic formal distinction, in which our concepts correspond to

second chapter, Descartes believed that our inability to comprehend the divine essence with any given concept does not entail that our concepts of God are improper; rather, our need to conceive of God in terms of a diversity of attributes is, like our inability to grasp everything contained in our concepts of these attributes, a sign that the object of our thought is the divine essence itself.⁴⁰¹ Descartes could therefore argue that even though creaturely pure perfections resemble the same, metaphysically simple thing—the divine essence—we apprehend this resemblance only by conceiving of God in terms of various qualitatively distinct attributes. We apprehend an instance of creaturely goodness as an instance of imperfect *goodness* rather than an instance of imperfect justice or wisdom because it resembles the divine essence *as conceived as perfect goodness*, not as conceived as perfect justice or perfect wisdom.

Yet even if we may conceive of the divine essence in terms of qualitatively distinct attributes, one might still

formalities that are really identical yet differing in terms of their definitions.

⁴⁰¹ Beyssade, who emphasizes the positive nature of divine incomprehensibility for Descartes in a number of articles, puts it this way: “[I]ncomprehensibility is not an obstacle or a limit to our intellectual understanding of God; on the contrary, it reveals God in his truth, in his real and positive transcendence. This incomprehensibility does not reveal a regrettable and provisional failure of my limited mind, but instead a necessary incommensurability between the infinite and any finite mind, even one more perfect than my own, even the mind of an angel” (1993, 89). See also 1996, 192-3.

question whether the example of scalar magnitudes is appropriate given the complex nature of the creaturely attributes in question. How could we grasp a primitive resemblance relation between a complex (creaturely) property and a metaphysically simple (divine) one? If the divine nature can be legitimately conceived in terms of a diversity of attributes, one might argue that these attributes themselves may be legitimately conceived as exhibiting the same complexity as their creaturely correlates. Yet this solution will not work if conceiving of these attributes as though they were complex involves ascribing to God more basic attributes that are, in fact, not pure perfections. The complex property of creaturely knowledge, for example, involves a psychological state of belief that many have argued is incompatible with divine perfection; we cannot conceive of divine knowledge as involving belief without thereby conceiving of God as something that is less than perfect. Alternatively, one might argue that only some of the (simple) parts of complex creaturely properties resemble the divine attributes.⁴⁰² The problem with such an account, however, is that we are not then justified in apprehending the entire (complex) creaturely property as a pure perfection.

⁴⁰² For example, creaturely knowledge features thought, which is itself a perfection.

A more promising explanation for how we might apprehend a primitive resemblance between a complex (creaturely) property and the metaphysically simple divine nature (conceived with respect to individual properties) would appeal to our ability to view the complex creaturely property holistically. If we can conceive of that which is simple as though it were complex, perhaps we can conceive of what is complex as though it were simple. Even if none of the parts of a creaturely property resemble the divine nature when taken in isolation, the suggestion here is that they do when taken together as a whole. Though the traditional accounts of analogy of attribution and proportionality often appear to be insufficiently precise, their generality could perhaps be attributed to the fact that the analogical resemblance they express lies, as it were, on the surface and so cannot be uncovered through further precision. We apprehend human knowledge as a likeness of the divine quality not by recognizing that various aspects of the complex property resemble the divine quality, but by noticing a resemblance when viewing the property holistically.⁴⁰³

⁴⁰³ Such an account of resemblance could apply even to cases where there is some form of underlying qualitative identity. Perhaps it is true that two shades of green resemble each other by virtue of some qualitative identity, but it does not follow that we recognize their resemblance by (implicitly or unconsciously) apprehending this

A final respect in which the primitive resemblance of scalar properties fails to capture all the features of transcendental resemblance is the assumption that God, as what Descartes termed a "total cause," cannot be said to lack any reality or perfection found in creatures. What distinguishes creaturely properties from divine ones is merely an absence of some sort. Though this is stretching things a bit, there is a sense in which the containment of one analogue in another can be applied to scalar properties. A shade of dark green might be said to 'contain' everything found in the lighter shades from which it is created. We might further imagine that these lighter shades are apprehended as imperfect versions of the darker one -i.e., resembling it, but nevertheless qualitatively distinct. The problem here, however, is that the lighter shades aren't features of the darker shade considered as a *phenomenal* property. The darker shade can no more be said to 'contain' the lighter ones than the latter can be said

identity. Rather, it is the primitive resemblance that they bear to one another when taken as phenomenal gestalts. To use Reid's example, even if two resembling faces really feature elements of qualitative identity, it does not follow that our apprehension of their resemblance must be ascribed to an unconscious awareness of this identity, for another possibility is that we apprehend a resemblance between the two faces regarded holistically.

to 'contain' the former for, when considered phenomenally, the constituents of their composition are irrelevant.⁴⁰⁴

Though it is admittedly difficult to provide a satisfying account of transcendental analogical resemblance, perhaps this should be unsurprising. Why should we expect that the resemblance relation that holds between complex creaturely properties and the metaphysically simple divine essence would be similar to any of the more familiar kinds of resemblance found between creatures? Whether or not we find the above or any other theory of analogical resemblance plausible will hinge, to a large extent, on whether we accept the apparently

⁴⁰⁴ The traditional claim that the resemblance relation between God and creatures is asymmetric—viz., that creatures can be said to be 'like' God but God cannot be said to be 'like' creatures—does not appear to be based upon the ontological supremacy of the divine analogate or any other feature unique to the resemblance relation itself, but is rather attributed to the fact that creatures are created by God in his own image. Aquinas, for example, suggests that the impropriety of likening God to creatures is akin to the impropriety of likening an image to the man who served as its model: "[I]t is more fitting to say that a creature is like God rather than the converse. For that which is called like something possesses a quality or form of that thing. Since, then, that which is found in God perfectly is found in other things according to a certain diminished participation, the basis on which the likeness is observed belongs to God absolutely, but not to the creature. Thus, the creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God. But we cannot in the same way say that God has what belongs to the creature. Neither, then, can we appropriately say that God is like a creature, just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him. All the less proper, moreover, is the expression that God is likened to a creature. For likening expresses a motion towards likeness and thus belongs to the being that receives from another that which makes it like. But a creature receives from God that which makes it like Him. The converse, however, does not hold. God, then, is not likened to a creature; rather, the converse is true" (SCG 1.29.139). I don't take Aquinas here to be denying that resemblance is always transitive, but merely to be observing that we usually don't express the resemblance of an image and its model by saying the model is like its image.

incompatible theological intuitions analogy was invoked to reconcile. If we agree that divine simplicity and transcendence preclude any form of qualitative identity between God and creatures and yet nevertheless believe that creation is in some sense an image and likeness of God, some explanation has to be provided of how this can be so.⁴⁰⁵ Though we have shown that a top-down account of analogical derivation may have some epistemological advantages over the more traditional bottom-up version, it does nothing to render analogical resemblance any less mysterious.

⁴⁰⁵ While Scotus denies that the absence of qualitative identity is incompatible with univocal predication, he never shows that it is compatible with some form of resemblance.

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