

# THE EXCESS OF THE INFINITE

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In this paper I will be arguing that Descartes has a problem with God, but not the one that is usually discussed – namely, that he needs God for his system, but fails to prove God's existence. I will be suggesting, on the contrary, that at least in one place in the 3rd meditation he has a rather good argument for God's existence (or at least for the transcendence of our being by the infinite, which may not amount to the same thing), but that the *nature* of divinity invoked by that argument makes it incapable of playing the foundational role it is supposed to play within the Cartesian system. Further, through a comparison with Georges Bataille I will suggest that Descartes may have succeeded in establishing something that actually *challenges* the value of the scientific project to which he is devoted.

A preliminary doubt, on the basis of these introductory comments, might be how Descartes's argument could simultaneously succeed and fail. The simple answer to this is that there are two separate objectives to the 3rd meditation, both explicitly stated by Descartes, which opens the possibility (for which I will be arguing) that he achieves one without achieving the other. The first is stated near the beginning of the meditation:

„I must enquire whether there is a God...and if I find that there is one, I must also enquire whether he can be deceitful; for without the knowledge of these two truths, I do not see that I can ever be certain of anything.” (DMAM, p115)

Let us call this the foundationalist objective, since it frames the discussion of God within the general Cartesian objective of founding knowledge. There are theological objections to this objective, which I shall come to later. But there is also a puzzle about how it connects with, or rather fails to connect with the 2nd meditation. For surely the whole point of the *cogito* was, as Descartes puts it at one point, „*I am, I exist*: this is

certain..." (DMAM, p105)? Is the 3rd meditation, then, starting again from zero, providing a second, alternative foundation (in God) to that provided by the *cogito*? Perhaps two Archimedean points are better than one...?

Whatever the ultimate answer here (and it certainly seems that Descartes needs God as much as he needs the *cogito*), there is another motivation for the 3rd meditation which responds to the situation reached by the end of the 2nd meditation, rather than ignoring it. Immediately prior to beginning his argument for God's existence, Descartes draws attention to the following problem as the one to be resolved:

"...until now it has not been by a certain and premeditated judgement, but by a blind and rash impulse, that I have believed that there are things outside myself, and different from my being..." (DMAM, 118)

This may look like the scepticism of Meditation 1, but it is not the same: there, the problem was of generalized doubt and uncertainty – I could not be sure of any of my opinions. Here, however, the question is „whether there are things outside myself...different from my being”: a new doubt, built on the *success* of the *cogito*, and in a sense opposite to the original problem. Instead of wondering how he can know anything at all, Descartes now wonders how he can be sure he himself is not everything, that there is an „outside” to his existence. How, in other words, to escape the threat of solipsism posed by the *cogito*? I will term this the anti-solipsism objective. In what follows I will focus on this second objective, which, it seems to me, provides the basis for Descartes's most persuasive arguments in the 3rd meditation, returning to the question of how this relates to the foundationalist objective only after going through his most interesting „proof”.

Descartes's method for attaining this anti-solipsism objective is to subject his ideas to an interrogation: is there any of them which he can be sure was not generated by himself? The difficulty, of course, is that he cannot at this stage of the Meditations assume the existence of an external material world. So the evidence has to be „internal”: is there any idea I could not *conceive of* as coming from me?

His answer is, of course, affirmative – my idea of God must have had its origins outside of me; it and it alone guarantees that I am not „alone in the world” (DMAM 121) (or, perhaps more accurately, that I am not co-extensive with the world). Descartes's argument for this assertion is, I believe, potentially more powerful than is often acknowledged, but I readily admit that much of the 3rd meditation is both obscure and implausible. I will therefore ignore the bulk of the meditation and focus solely on that part in which Descartes tries to argue for a pre-existing infinity from the very idea of the *cogito* itself – sharing the general view that the „Causal Adequacy Principle” just will not work.

Descartes first introduces the discussion on which I will concentrate as follows:

„although the idea of substance is in me, for the very reason that I am a substance, I would not, nevertheless, have the idea of an infinite substance, since I am a finite being, unless the idea had been put into me by some substance which was truly infinite.” (DMAM 124)

This looks straightforward enough, but it remains to be clarified why the idea of the infinite cannot come from me: after all, I am not a unicorn either, and that does not mean that the idea of the unicornian was put into me be a substance that was truly unicornian. Descartes deals with this objection in a new and startling formulation which goes much further than the first:

„I see manifestly that there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite, and hence that I have in me in some way the notion of the infinite, before that of the finite, that is to say the notion of God, before that of myself.” (DMAM 124)

This breaks the unicorn objection (since „more reality” and some kind of priority is now being claimed for the infinite in comparison with the finite), but does this new claim not contradict the findings of the 2nd meditation, which seemed to prove that my idea of myself was the primary datum? Not necessarily: in the first place, it can be argued that the *cogito* does not produce „myself” in the normal, limited sense. The whole point of Descartes’s 3rd meditation argument is, after all, to show that „I” have limits, am not co-extensive with my world, am not, in other words, *infinite*. But even if we take the *cogito* as establishing a finite self, Descartes gives himself some leeway by saying that I have the notion of the infinite „in some way” prior to that of the finite. So although the *cogito* was presented as my most immediate certainty, that does not preclude me from perhaps unearthing deeper certainties as I reflect further on the situation revealed by the *cogito*. I suspect it is this latter possibility that Descartes has in mind, for he continues:

„For how would it be possible for me to know that I doubt and desire, that is to say, that I lack something and am not all perfect, if I did not have in me any idea of a more perfect being than myself, by comparison with which I know the deficiencies of my nature?” (DMAM 124)

This is an ingenious move: anticipating the „how is it possible?” line of reasoning so familiar from Kant, Descartes tries to think through to the preconditions of the *cogito*, and concludes through counterfactual reasoning that *finitude* must be among them: for if I were co-extensive with and creator of my world I would not find myself doubting and desiring. If I were everything I would not experience *lack*, would perhaps not even comprehend what lack could mean. However, even if this is a plausible anti-solipsist argument, one could still ask why it implies an experience of „the infinite” as primordial.

I think this is best seen by a consideration of desire. Desire is always concerned with „overcoming a lack”: we want to remove some particular limitation or other. But then could it not be that in the background of our day-to-day efforts to overcome particular limitations there is a more general sense of „being without limits” towards which we are striving – infinite being, in other words? Perhaps the particular objects of desire are only means to the general aim of becoming without lack, without limits? On this view, if we are from the start desiring beings, seeking to overcome the things that limit us, then we are from the start projected towards what is without limits, the infinite.

Descartes thus makes a strong case for the infinite as an absolutely basic condition of our subjective experience, but there remains an important doubt: is the infinite genuinely other, or simply our *alter ego*, a projection formed by negating and extrapolating indefinitely from what we are now? Is infinite being already potentially within me? Descartes’s answer does indeed help establish the radical independence of the infinite, but at a high price: it renders it unsuitable for the other, foundationalist objective of guaranteeing knowledge. Descartes considers the possibility that I might myself be able to attain the infinite divine nature by incremental improvement, only to reject it:

„all these excellences do not belong to or approach in any way the idea I have of the Divinity, in whom nothing is to be found only potentially but all actually existent. And is it not even an infallible argument of the existence of imperfection in my knowledge that it grows little by little and increases by degrees?” (DMAM 126)

Indeed it is, but then on what basis can we grasp the nature of knowledge other than as something that grows by degrees? The nature of divine knowing, in other words, is utterly veiled from us. This has clear implications for what Descartes can mean by „the idea of God”. Earlier in Meditation 3 he had declared that

„the name *idea* properly belongs...(to those thoughts which are), as it were, the images of things”, (DMAM 115) and rashly included God in the list of such image-ideas. But now he is admitting, as the decisive anti-solipsist argument, that divine knowledge cannot even be conceived, let alone pictured. Descartes is forced to concede that „it is in the nature of the infinite that it should not be understood by my nature, which is finite and restricted...” (DMAM 125)

So Descartes is on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand his foundationalist objective requires a comprehensible God capable of being assigned concrete properties (essentially a benevolent father-figure, who above all would not allow us to be deceived); on the other hand Descartes finds himself driven, in order to demonstrate that God is not simply a figment of my creative mind, to insist on the utterly incomprehensible nature of „infinite substance”. But if the infinite is beyond my comprehension, by what right can

I determine it as a non-deceptive creator – a highly specific – and anthropomorphic – description?

In the remainder of this paper, I want briefly to explore, primarily with reference to Bataille, what the implications might be if one picks up on the incomprehensible infinite rather than the benign creator God. (Due to constraints of time, this can only amount to the briefest sketch.) These implications are, I think, profoundly hostile to the Cartesian project: the infinite not only does not positively assist Descartes, it runs directly counter to his key objectives.

In the first place, the divine conceived as infinite substance can no longer guarantee the value of the knowledge-project, as Descartes sometimes implies that it can. For example, in his *Letter from the Author* Descartes asserts:

„Truly God alone is perfectly wise, that is to say, has complete knowledge of the truth of all things; but we may say that men have more or less of wisdom as they have more or less knowledge of the more important truths.” (DMAM 174)

Now such a statement implies that divine knowledge is simply human knowledge indefinitely extended (to include all the things of which we are as yet ignorant): it is only quantitatively, not qualitatively different from human knowledge. However, we earlier saw Descartes argue that a knowledge that „increases by degrees” is by nature imperfect: at that point he was concerned to stress the radical incommensurability between finite and infinite knowledge, to guarantee that the idea of the infinite cannot have been generated by us. He cannot both argue for the incommensurability and pretend that human knowledge is gradually approaching divine knowledge.

Bataille, unencumbered by the countervailing desire to give divine blessing to the knowledge-project, is able to focus more clearly than Descartes on the incommensurability:

„God no doubt can know himself but not according to the discursive mode of thought which is ours...It thus appears that God having to know himself is no longer „intellectual nature”, in the sense in which we can understand it. Even „without limitation”, understanding cannot go beyond...the (discursive) mode without which it would not be what it is.” (IE, p107)

Bataille’s problem is that insofar as knowledge involves lucid understanding it implies a separation between knowing subject and known object: the knowing consciousness is aware of its objects as separate from it. Such separation and division, however, are marks of imperfection: therefore divine (perfect) knowledge must have an entirely different nature, and expanding our discursive knowledge in the manner of Descartes would not in any sense take us closer to the divine. Moreover, human knowledge is always the result of

activity and project, the mark of a problem overcome – terms which it makes no sense to apply to the divinity.

The second point goes further: not only are we *not approaching* the divine by being absorbed in the knowledge-project, we are actually *denying and denigrating* it. The infinite is that which exceeds us, which cannot be put to the service of finite ends. And yet the foundationalist objective in proving God's existence is precisely to use Him to guarantee human knowledge, which in turn is foreseen as useful to practical human concerns. God, therefore, is made doubly useful. But is a „useful God” not an absurdity, a contradiction in terms? Bataille has shown that from the start, from the most primitive societies, an *essential* part of the distinction between sacred and profane has rested in the distinction between the sovereign and the servile. So, rather than human wisdom approaching the divine, as Descartes boasted, the foundationalist role for God means the very opposite: all wisdom conceived in profane terms, in terms of the rational-useful, and conversely the abolition of the sovereign and sacred.

Perhaps, though, this succeeds only in showing that Descartes belongs more completely and unambiguously to our modern, de-deifying world than he is usually given credit for. Nietzsche warned us that when Gods die their shadows can remain on cave walls for centuries: perhaps the infinite divine is just such a shadow, gradually fading and diminishing in significance along with our decomposing God?

Bataille, I believe, offers a challenge to such a confident dismissal, and in effect a more materialist version of Descartes's claim that „there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite“. He conceives of the human individual as „discontinuous being”, separated from the world around it by its individuated body and consciousness. But at the moment of our death there will be a return to continuity, and likewise at our conception there was a moment of continuity when sperm and ovum fused together and as individual, discontinuous beings, ceased to exist. For Bataille, these fundamental facts have implications for our sense of what we are:

„We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear.“(E, Intro, p15)

In a double sense, this gives a primacy to the in-finite, unlimited, unbounded being: first, it describes the individual in negative terms, thus giving primacy to the unlimited: – „dis-continuous” being – and second it posits a nostalgia for a „lost continuity”, a continuity that was at the material origin of our discontinuous selves.

Moreover, we do not have to refer to origins to be immediately aware of the infinite. As Bataille says elsewhere:

„There is in nature and there subsists in man a movement which always exceeds the bounds, that can never be anything but partially reduced to order...it is by definition that which can never be grasped, but we are conscious of being in its power...” (E, p40)

This is an important theme in Bataille: we are aware of the infinite as a *threat* to the order and „limits” within which the world of work and rationality operates, a threat epitomized by the violence of death (which brings the return of continuous being).

But if Bataille provides us with new reasons for taking seriously Descartes’s thesis about the centrality of infinity to human experience, he also reveals to us why Descartes himself was so reluctant to explore its implications. For if I am primordially aware of the infinite, is it not natural, as Bataille suggests, that there will be an equally primitive *desire* for the infinite within me? Such a desire, however, cannot be fulfilled through discursive knowledge since, as we have seen, the infinite is incommensurate with such knowledge. As Bataille sees it, the only possibility is of a *fusion* with infinite being, which must involve a sacrifice (temporary or permanent) of the lucid, rational, knowing individual consciousness that is at the core of Cartesianism. By placing the infinite at the heart of human existence Descartes has thus introduced an element which his rationalist system cannot deal with. To label it „God” was a way of trying to tame it, but, as a final passage from Bataille indicates, in the end it cannot be tamed:

„the universe that bears us along answers no purpose that reason defines, and if we try to make it answer to God, all we are doing is associating irrationally the infinite excess in the presence of which our reason exists with our reason itself. But through the excess in him, that God whom we should like to shape into an intelligible concept never ceases, exceeding this concept, to exceed the limits of reason.” (E, pp40-1)

## References

- DMAM: R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, tr. F.E. Sutcliffe, Penguin, Middlesex, 1968.  
IE: G. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, tr. L.A. Boldt, SUNY, New York, 1988.  
E: G. Bataille, *Eroticism*, tr. M. Dalwood, Marion Boyars, London, 1962.