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The Refutation of Existing Proofs for the Existence of God and the Continued Search for a Valid Proof of the Existence of God: A Defense and Interpretation of Kant

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Claremont McKenna College

The Refutation of Existing Proofs of the Existence of God and the Continued
Search of a Valid Proof of the Existence of God: A Defense and Interpretation of
Kant

submitted to
Professor James Kreines

by
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“The present world discloses to us such an immeasurable showplace of manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty, whether one pursues these in the infinity of space and time or in the unlimited division of it, that in accordance with even the knowledge about it that our weak understanding can acquire, all speech concerning so many and such unfathomable wonders must lose its power to express, all numbers their power to measure, and even our thoughts lack boundaries, so that our judgement upon the whole must resolve itself into a speechless, but nonetheless eloquent, astonishment. Everywhere we see a chain of effects and causes, of ends and means, regularity in coming to being and perishing, and because nothing has entered by itself into the state in which it finds itself, this state always refers further to another thing as its cause, which makes necessary just the same further inquiry, so that in such a way the entire whole would have to sink into the abyss of nothingness if one did not assume something subsisting for itself originally and independently outside this infinite contingency, which supports it and at the same time, as the cause of its existence, secures its continuation” (A623/B651).

“And if someone traced a continuous line which is sometimes straight, sometimes circular, and sometimes of another nature, it is possible to find a notion, or rule, or equation common to all the points of this line, in virtue of which these very changes must occur. For example, there is no face whose contours are not part of a geometric line and cannot be traced in one stroke by a certain regular movement. But, when a rule is extremely complex, what is in conformity with it passes for irregular.

Thus, one can say, in whatever manner God might have created the world, it would always have been regular and in accordance with a certain general order. But God has chosen the most perfect world, that is, the one which is at the same time the simplest in hypotheses and the richest in phenomena, as might a line in geometry whose construction is easy and whose properties and effects are extremely remarkable and widespread. I use these comparisons to sketch an imperfect likeness of divine wisdom and to point out something that can at least elevate our minds to conceive in some way what cannot be sufficiently expressed. But I do not claim to explain in this way the great mystery upon which the entire universe depends” (Leibniz 227).

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Dedication

If anyone has never experienced a Massachusetts summer night, you understand the quixotic nature of the whole ordeal – you understand the damp, fecund smell of the cool grass mowed earlier in the day; you have felt the hot, salty sweat cool and dry on your lower back into a light layer of salt that feels almost, but not quite rough to the touch as a cool night breeze replaces the muggy, lazy sun from the passing day. You know the cricket’s chorus, you have felt the hot, itchy welts rise from under your skin when the mosquitoes come out – you understand that time will urge your removal from this summer into the fall, then into the winter – you understand that space will move you far, far away from this place.

I remember this feeling well. I remember these summer nights – going on night runs by the football fields, stopping by Stop and Shop to get iced sugar cookies and Lays when the CVS was closed, swimming in the quarry that gave my best friend giardia, or crying on the banks with Charlie’s lanky arm around me when Sonia’s cat and Natalie’s father died on the same Tuesday afternoon. I felt infinitely small but infinite during these lazy summer evenings.

I dedicate this thesis to Sonia Rowley and Grace Vogelzang. It was a lazy summer night when, with the two of them, I first considered the issue this thesis attempts to address. Sitting in wicker chairs on Sonia’s backyard porch, we started with the assertion that God exists, argued against the assertion that God exists and finally came to a standstill. The mosquitos were biting us so I asked to go inside. Sonia and Grace followed. We went upstairs, we talked about boys, moving onto college, our ever-so-divergent faiths, and finally returned to the conversation we had settled into comfortably earlier in the night. What happens, we asked, if we can never know if God does or does not exist in the first place? The conversation quieted. We went to bed with

the windows open and woke up too early to the screeching of robins and sparrows making their morning wake-up rounds and the morning heat coming into the window, barraging us in waves.

A new day began.

I never understood how Massachusetts nights catapult one into throws of contemplation, why I thought I knew what romantic love was then, or even purport to understand it now. I never understood the argument for, or against the existence of God even though I rolled the question over and over in my head night after night that summer with dizzying intensity and wonder.

I dedicate this thesis to my mom and dad, and little brothers: Nate and Miles, who let me come to Southern California for college and forget these summer nights for a few years. I dedicate this thesis to my philosophy professors; Professor Kreines, Professor Hurley, Professor Obdrzalek, Professor Kind, Professor Areshidze, Professor Thomas, and Professor Locke who led me on this rigorous and delightful journey as a young and chaste philosopher. I dedicate this thesis to Anthony Davanzo, Clay Spence, Caroline Bowman, and the rest of the Hegel and Nietzsche crew for their early inspiration and conviction to my life as a philosopher. I, of course, dedicate this thesis to Sonia and Grace.

Introduction

Upon first glance, Descartes' transcendental proofs of God seem probable. However, as one digs deeper, one understands that there are grave philosophical misconceptions and miscalculations contained in the premises of these proofs. Kant reveals these errors and supports their gravity. I use Kant as a bedrock to understand these mistakes in current spatio-temporal and transcendental proofs for the existence of God, and develop a discussion of the necessity of the continued search for, and potential foundation of, an alternative proof of the existence of God.

Thus, in this thesis, I will attempt to undertake a few projects:

1. I will attempt to instill the thought of the necessity of a commitment to the idea of the existence of God;
2. I will then explain and clarify the three transcendental proofs for the existence of God and what I take to be Kant's most relevant and substantive refutations of these proofs;
3. I will explain and clarify Kant's perceived failure of spatio-temporal proofs;
4. I will summarize what I consider to be most grave failure of the transcendental proof;
5. Finally, I will assume Kant's refutation of the ontological proof to be a metaphysical failure, and discuss potential solutions to the current issues of proofs for the existence of God.

Kant's Appeal for Commitment to Existence of God

“This footing gives way unless it rests on the immovable rock of the absolutely necessary. But this itself floats without a support if there is still only empty space outside it and under it, unless it itself fill everything, so that no room is left over for any further i.e. unless it is infinite in reality. If something exists, then it must be conceded that something exists necessarily. For the contingent only exists under the condition of something else as its cause, and from this the same inference holds further all the way to a cause not existing contingently and therefore necessary without condition” (A585/ B613).

Kant begins the Transcendental Ideal in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by establishing the claim that it is human nature to try to understand the existence and nature of God. Kant then claims that there does not exist a successful proof of the existence of God, yet, that it is still important to commit to the belief of the existence of God to promote one's free will and rationality. In this way, Kant begins his journey of disproving the existence of God with a plea to avoid complete skepticism of the existence of God.

Kant asserts that it is the nature of human thought and speculation to attempt to understand “the complete ground for the thoroughgoing determination of its concepts” as a “resting place in the regress from the conditioned, which is given, to the unconditioned, which in itself and as regards to its mere concept is not indeed actual given, but which alone can complete series of conditions carried out on their grounds” (A584/B612). This reasoning process begins with experience, and thus is grounded in the perceivable world.

The metaphysical, question-begging nature of human reason attempts to understand the existence and nature of God as the unconditioned. One line of reasoning we might take is as so: if we assume that some unconditioned must exist, we realize that if this being is the only unconditioned being, that it must be the “sufficient condition for everything else” that exists in the world (A587/B615). The unconditioned being thus also contains all reality in it. Therefore, this being is necessary, and necessarily infinite in its reality and perfect existence as the concept

of a limited God contradicts the fact that it is the singular original grounds for all reality (A587/B615). This rational argument, although fickle when proving the existence of God, opens a common line of rational reasoning for the conceptualization of God.

Kant then addresses the fact that, through our empirical knowledge and the nature of God, he believes we cannot perceive God cosmologically, and thus can never know or prove that God exists (A589/B617). However, he claims, we do have intuition that God exists. Further, the intuition that God exists leads us to the realization that everything else that exists, as God is the unconditioned cause of all that we perceive to exist (A589/B617). Therefore, even though we may not be able to prove that God exists, we should commit to assuming God's practical existence as we know that everything must follow from a God-like existence and thus, because we know everything else exists, we can commit to believing that God exists even without proving the existence of God.

We could assume that instead, everything exists in itself as unconditioned and necessary. However, this idea conflicts with our intuition (A590/B618). Thus, we commit to the assumption of God as necessary for the existence of everything. This reasoning trickles down into our incentives to avoid skepticism regarding existence: our intuition of existence requires the existence of God. Only if we rationally commit to God as the condition for everything that is conditioned can we establish moral and other value claims over our beliefs, our actions, and our lives (A590/B618). Kant concedes that this argument is transcendental as it assumes the "inner insufficiency of the contingent" (A590/B618). However, the conditioned has the strong force of perception and intuition behind it as "one sees things alter, arise, and perish; therefore they, or at least their state, must have a cause" (A590/B618). We have intuition that a highest cause must exist, and thus can reasonably commit to this intuition to avoid skepticism.

Thus, before objecting to all transcendental and spatio-temporal proofs of the existence of God, Kant presents us with an appeal to practically commit to the idea of God. Kant believes that even considering the failure of proofs for the existence of God, it is still important to rationally commit to the idea of the existence of God to avoid skepticism and instill order and purposiveness into our lives and our views of the nature of reality.

Transcendental Proofs for the Existence of God

Three Transcendental Proofs

There are three main types of transcendental proofs for the existence of God: the teleological proof, the cosmological proof, and the ontological proof. The teleological proof (what Kant calls the physico-theological proof) begins with determinate experience of the sensible world's harmony and arrives at the determinate existence of God by way of a rational PSR. The cosmological proof is grounded on an indeterminate experience but also rises to the determinate existence to God by way of a similar rational PSR. Kant shows that the ontological proof, upon which both the teleological and cosmological proof rest – the teleological proof nestled in the cosmological proof – does not call upon experience, but rather rests on a fallacy of pure concepts, fails by its own regard, and thus brings the other two down with it.

To explore these three transcendental proofs, I will outline Descartes' ontological and cosmological proofs for the existence of God, and detail Kant's refutation of both. I will also detail Kant's conception and refutation of the teleological proof. I will also attempt to highlight the streamlined nature of Kant's major objections to these proofs to illuminate, and later address, a main issue that arises in each transcendental proof.

Descartes' Ontological Proof of God

In Descartes' Fifth Meditation, Descartes establishes an ontological proof for the existence of God. Descartes' ontological proof for the existence of God begins with an appeal to the reader to decouple sense perception from theoretical understanding and thus existence from essence. One must decouple these types of thought so that this proof for the existence of God can rest solely on the theoretical idea of God to "arrive at knowledge of the proof" (Descartes 84).

To set up the ontological proof, Descartes first attempts to extrapolate the difference between existence and essence.¹ Descartes claims that perception of existence can be “confused” and thus that one can easily incorrectly perceive an object (Descartes 87). On the other hand, when one examines their thought, one finds “distinct” ideas of essence such as qualities such as “extension in length, breadth or depth ... size, figure, situation and local movement” and thus can “assign each of these movements all degrees of duration” (Descartes 87). He claims that “even if perhaps [essences] do not exist anywhere outside me, [they] still cannot be said to be nothing” (Descartes 88). These essences are applied to thought through reason, so that one could, for example, consider a triangle in theory without ever having perceived a triangle in nature. Further, through reason, one knows that these concepts exist independently of one’s perception of external objects as, through reason, one can form an infinite number of figures, numbers, and other matters that one has never perceived as existing independently of one’s mind.² Thus,

¹ For a full explanation of Descartes’ classification and explanation of thought, please see exhibit A in the appendix.

² In the Third Meditation, Descartes explains how perception, through one’s free will, can be fickle: one can derive an idea of a thing through the perception of that thing that does not reflect the reality of the thing. For example, one can easily mistake a full-grown cat in the distance for a kitten, or can perceive lukewarm water to be scalding on freezing hands. Descartes thinks that thoughts that one forms independently of perception (and thus solely from reason) are immune to these errors. Thus, reason is more reliable than judgement by way of perception: the impulses one receives from nature, what Descartes deems judgements, are fickle, whereas natural light, the reason that equips one to form ideas independently of one’s perception, and thus are independent from the objects of sense, are not susceptible to the judgements of error.

Since Descartes claims that ideas are not brute through the PSR in his Third Meditation, we thus understand that the idea of God must come from either sense perception or reason – we must either perceive God, or have the essence of God in our thought. In the Third Meditation, Descartes proves that one cannot perceive God because that person, as a finite, imperfect substance, cannot perceive an infinite, perfect being. Thus, it must be the case that our idea of God is thus derived from the a priori understanding of the essence of God.

Descartes separates those ideas that one has thought and those that are derived from objects external to oneself through perception of the independent object.³

Descartes then claims that just as we have the ideas of numbers, pure and abstract mathematics, or the concept of extension in our reason, we have the a priori idea of the essence of God. However, though we “have been accustomed to distinguishing existence from essence,” God presents us with a special case to this rule (Descartes 88).

At this point in the proof, Descartes makes an interesting claim: that the claim of a priori understanding of the essence of God is not indeed a sophism meant to couple God’s existence under God’s essence, but rather that in God’s perfection, God’s existence is God’s essence (Descartes 89). Unlike knowing the essence of a triangle without having to know whether it exists, Descartes claims that “it is obvious to anyone who pays close attention that existence can no more be separated from God’s essence than its having three angles equal to two right angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle” (Descartes 89).

Descartes makes this bold claim through illuminating the following contradiction. We understand God as the greatest conceivable being: a being whose essence includes all perfections. In the concept of perfection lies the concept of existence: God cannot “possess every sort of perfection” without possessing the perfection of existence (Descartes 89). Thus, existence is a perfection. If God’s essence did not include existence (i.e. God did not exist) then there could exist a being that is more perfect than God: namely, one that holds all perfections

³ The idea of essence in Meditation V bears resemblance to Plato’s Theory of Forms in the *Phaedo*. There seems to be a connection between Plato’s forms and particulars and Descartes’ theory of essence. Further, it seems that the knowledge of Descartes’ essences is like how Plato believes one arrives at knowledge of the forms. Descartes claims that when one discovers the ideas of essence “it seems that [she] is not so much learning something new as recalling something [she] knew beforehand” (Descartes 87).

including existence. However, herein lies a contradiction: God cannot be at once the greatest conceivable being and not the greatest conceivable being. And thus, one cannot conceive of the essence of God without the existence of God, that is “a supremely perfect being without a supreme perfection” (Descartes 89). In this way, Descartes claims that God exists.

In summary, Descartes develops his ontological proof for the existence of God in the following way:

- P1. God is the greatest conceivable being and is perfect
- P2. We have the idea of the essence of God
- P3. Existence is a perfection
- P4. The essence of God cannot exist without God’s existence
- P5. God exists,

With the following contradiction, which is implicit in P4:

- 1. Assume the essence of God without God’s existence
- 2. P3
- 3. We can conceive of a being with an essence greater than God’s (i.e. that has all perfection including existence)
- 4. P1 and 3: contradiction
- 5. It is false that God doesn’t exist by way of contradiction
- 6. God exists.

Kant's Refutation of the Ontological Proof of God

Kant begins his attack of Descartes' ontological proof of God by first approaching two general worries with the proof, and then developing a precise attack of P4 and P5 of the proof.

The two general worries are as follows:

1. Kant begins his objection to Descartes' ontological proof for the existence of God by classifying the type of knowledge in P3 and P4 of Descartes' ontological proof. Kant asserts that the claim "God is a necessary existent" is a nominal definition of God (A593/B621). This nominal definition of God, namely "something whose non-being is impossible" is purely definitional and gives us no knowledge of how it is indeed impossible to consider the essence of God without considering God's existence (A593/B621). Kant claims that thus, when we think of the essence or concept of God as an unconditionally necessary being and thus rejecting "all the conditions that the understanding always needs in order to regard something as necessary", we do not know if we are "thinking something or perhaps nothing at all" (A593/B621).
2. The second worry underlies P2 and P3. Descartes claims that in knowing that the essence of God is perfect, we know that we will never fully be able to comprehend the essence of God as a finite substance cannot fully comprehend that of the infinite. Kant worries that Descartes thinks that God is "an object lying entirely outside the sphere of our understanding" but at the same time Descartes only employs examples of concepts that lie within our understanding to prove the concept of God (A593/B621). Kant thinks Descartes incorrectly draws parallels between essences within our understanding to the essence of God which is outside

our understanding “as if one understood quite well what one meant by this concept” (A593/B621).

Kant lays out his attack on P4 and P5 of Descartes’ ontological proof for the existence of God as follows. Kant claims that when one considers the essence, or concept of a thing or object, this person must actively posit that thing or object (A594/B622). When one considers the essence of a triangle, one postulates the triangle and thus puts it forward as the basis of the argument or definition (A594/B622). As Kant claims, when one considers the essence or concept of a thing or object, one creates the subject of the thought. When considering an essence or concept, the subject of the essence or concept – this postulate – wills the predicate of the essence, which is the nominal definition of the essence (A594/B622). As such, the predicate solely seeks to clarify the subject and does not add any more reality or essence to the subject than what exists in the positing of the subject. When one thinks of the essence of a triangle, one thinks of its predicate as having three edges and three vertices. Having three edges and three vertices does not tell us anything additional about the triangle than what is already inherent in the essence of the triangle, and further, does not give the essence of the triangle any more reality than that which the essence possesses.

This subject to predicate relation exists by way of the predicate necessarily pertaining to the subject: the predicate is only “the absolute necessity of the judgement or the conditioned necessity of the thing” and thus only pertains when the essence of the thing is posited (A594/B622). The predicate is only necessary when the essence of the thing is posited or the thing itself is conditioned (i.e. the thing exists in sensory world). We can say that the subject necessarily pertains to the predicate because a contradiction arises if one takes away, or

“cancels,” the definition of the essence of a thing (the predicate) but posits that essence (the subject) (A595/B623).⁴ On the other hand, Kant claims, if one does not posit the subject or the predicate then no contradiction arises as “by cancelling the thing itself, you have cancelled everything internal to it” (A595/B623). After illuminating the general relationship between subject and predicate, Kant reveals where Descartes incorrectly employs this relationship in his ontological proof.

In P1, P2, and P3, Descartes claims that, similarly, when we posit God as a concept or essence, we determine that God’s existence is one of its many predicates implicit in the predicate of perfection (A595/B623). Kant thinks that labelling “existence” as one of God’s many predicates implicit in God’s perfection is deeply misguided (A595/B623).

Kant thinks that the nature of the predicate is such that “the absolute necessity of the judgement is only a conditioned necessity of the thing, or of the [definition] of the judgement” (A594/B622). Thus, a proposition about a triangle having three sides and three vertices is only necessary “under the condition that a triangle exists” (is given) (A594/B622). The predicate does not claim that three sides and three vertices are unconditionally “absolutely necessary” (A594/B622).

However, because of the “illusion of [the] logical necessity” of existence for the concept of God with “existence comprehended within the range of its meaning,” one thinks that “because existence necessarily pertains to the object of this concept i.e. under the condition that I posit this thing as given (existing), its existence can also be posited necessarily” (A595/B623).

⁴ Here, I believe Kant uses the word “cancel” to mean “to take away the concept of.” This phrasing is a little wonky, however, one can visualize a subject – predicate relationship, and what effect removing the subject, the predicate, or both the subject and predicate would have on the statement.

Kant believes that existence is not a predicate as existence is always a synthetic claim about reality – it always adds more reality to the thing that exists, as, when something exists it necessarily has more reality than its mere essence or concept. Existence is a substantive claim about reality and thus is the “positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves” (A599/B627). Through analytic thought, one cannot “go beyond the concept of existence to supply the thing with existence” (A594/B622). Thus, one cannot assert the existence of God through the purely analytic essence of the nature of a posited God.

This claim is made clear through Kant’s prior theory of contradiction. Kant established that when met with a subject and predicate relation, cancelling the predicate will lead to contradiction because in this case, the essence of the subject is left without definition (A595/B623). For example, if one cancels “three sides and three vertices” and is left with just the concept of a triangle an absurdity arises: the essence of the triangle is not itself anymore.

Likewise, assume one posits the concept of Professor Kreines. A predicate of the concept of Professor Kreines (along with loving Rice Krispie Treats and knowing Hegel pretty darn well) might be that Professor Kreines could possibly exist. If we cancelled the predicates of the essence of Professor Kreines, namely, loving Rice Krispie Treats, knowing Hegel pretty darn well, and possible existence, we would be left with the essence of Professor Kreines devoid of analytical footing. In this case, we would have an essence without its necessary definition – a clear contradiction as essence cannot be posited without its predicate. However, if we asserted the concept Professor Kreines exists, and fallaciously took Professor Kreines’ existence to be a predicate of the essence of Professor Kreines, then cancelling the predicate of existence would “cancel the thing itself with all its predicates” (A595/B623). It is the case that every cancellation of a predicate but still positing the predicate’s subject will yield a contradiction. We know that

the essence of Professor Kreines is a subject as all essences are subjects. Thus, when we cancel the predicate (existence) and not the subject, and a contradiction does not arise, we clearly see that existence is not a predicate. We can do the same with the concept of God as we did with the concept of Professor Kreines, and arrive at the same conclusion. This is precisely Kant's worry about P4 illuminated: the nature of existence is being a synthetic claim (A599/B627). It is not true in virtue of its concepts.

From here, Kant concludes that the claim "God exists" cannot be true in virtue of the concept of God, as one cannot conjure existence from concepts: it is rather a "mere novelty of scholastic wit" to "take an idea contrived quite arbitrarily and extract from it the existence of the corresponding object itself" (A603/B631). It seems to be the case that no matter how much we bolster the concept of James Kreines with an abundance of colorful predicates, that even an infinitude of the most beautiful and witty predicates, we cannot will the concept of James Kreines into existence if he does not exist already such that he shows up at Claremont McKenna College on Monday afternoon to teach. Instead, our "consciousness of all existence" is contained entirely in the "unity of experience" and although existence outside this unity of experience "cannot be declared absolutely impossible" we can never prove this presupposition (A602/B630). No matter how I conceive of a concept, write it down on paper, draw it on the walls in brilliant colors, or how much I really want it to exist, I may never will a concept into existence. Likewise, God exists cannot be true in virtue of the concept, or essence of God.⁵

⁵ Kant illuminates this argument through a scenario of a merchant. I have paraphrased the scenario here for your enlightenment, or maybe amusement. Consider a merchant with 100 dollars in a safe. If the merchant adds three zeros on the paper that he records his amount of money, the 100 dollars he has in the safe does not magically grow to 100,000 dollars. Likewise, if we understand the concept of God to be that God exists, this does not mean that God suddenly exists. The existence of a thing, whether it be 90,900 extra dollars or God itself, cannot be willed analytically. Rather, these both are substantive claims about reality. God

Commentary

Kant's attack of Descartes' ontological proof for the existence of God seems to accept that all of the premises necessarily follow from one another, and thus that the proof itself is valid. The first worry that Kant brings up against Descartes' proof is merely speculative: perhaps Descartes has an explanation for the claim that impossible to consider the essence of God without considering God's existence. The second worry also seems speculative as there may exist examples of things outside our understanding that Descartes could better use to illuminate the knowledge that God is perfect through a more accurate parallel.

Finally, Kant's last attack of Descartes' ontological proof is metaphysical in nature and concerns the way in which we arrive P5 the proof: that, to prove God exists, God has to self-cause from a concept. The thought of a concept willing itself into existence (even if it is a perfect, all-powerful, infinite being) seems immediately absurd. On the other hand, it also seems absurd that an infinite being would ever not exist, and thus would, at some point in time must self-cause into existence from its own concept.

Descartes' Cosmological Proof of God

Descartes begins his cosmological argument for the existence of God by establishing a basic claim that one cannot doubt and thus is true through natural light: the notion that "I think, and thus I exist." Then, he establishes a specific version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) by claiming it is true through natural light.⁶ This PSR claims that "there must be at least as

exists is a synthetic claim, and can never be proved true in virtue of only concepts. And thus, Kant claims, God exists cannot be true in virtue of the concept of God (A603/B631).

⁶ The Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) is a "powerful and controversial" family of principles that is based on the claim that everything must have a "reason, cause, or ground" (Stanford

much [reality] in the ... cause as there is in the effect of that same cause” (Descartes 73). He deems this to be true by claiming that “what is more perfect ... cannot come into being from what is less perfect” (Descartes 73). For example, one’s perception of a pony cannot cause a pony to exist, however the existence of a pony can cause one’s perception of that pony. This specific version of the PSR extends directly to ideas by way of the fact that “just as the objective mode of being belongs to ideas by their very nature, so the formal mode of being belongs to the causes of ideas ... by their very nature” so that “there [must be] at least as much formal reality [in the cause] as there is objective reality contained in the idea” (Descartes 74).

Descartes then considers the sources of one’s ideas. In addition to one’s ideas being caused by things with as much or more formal reality as the idea has objective reality, one’s ideas could be caused by other ideas that have the same or more objective reality as the idea in question (Descartes 74).⁷ When considering corporeal things, Descartes understands that “there is nothing in them that is so great that it seems incapable of having originated from me” (Descartes 75). Descartes understands that all corporeal, or finite beings, have the same level of formal reality as himself, so theoretically, ideas of all corporeal things could arise from himself.⁸

Encyclopedia 2016). The first recorded use of the PSR was by Spinoza in 1663, and since then, the principle has been widely used in metaphysics. The most common manipulation of the PSR involves the clarification of both the “everything” and “reason, cause or ground” qualifications of the principle.

⁷ Included in the appendix is a full explanation of Descartes’ classification of ideas. This classification of ideas is meant to act as background knowledge for Descartes’ cosmological proof of the existence of God. This explanation clarifies terms used in this proof such as “objective reality” and “formal reality.”

⁸ Here, Descartes employs a healthy dose of skepticism that makes this explanation more palatable to the reader. Descartes does not want to overstep his boundary of the proof, so thus remains skeptical as to whether finite substances exist independently of himself while still attempting to prove the existence of an infinite substance.

However, although it is possible that the idea of all finite substance is in oneself by being a finite substance and thus having the same formal reality as all other finite substances, this “fact is not sufficient to explain my having the idea of an infinite substance, since I am finite” (Descartes 76). The idea of God as a “certain substance that is infinite, supremely intelligent, and supremely powerful” has infinite objective reality so therefore the cause of this idea must have infinite formal reality (Descartes 76).

Given the above, Descartes claims that we clearly and distinctly have the idea of the infinite in us clearly and distinctly as it would be impossible for one to “doubt and ... desire” and understand that “I lack something and that I am not wholly perfect, unless there were some idea in me of a more perfect being” (Descartes 76). Further, there is no way for “these perfections” that one attributes to God to somehow exist in the person potentially as God is that “in which there is nothing whatever that is potential” (Descartes 77). As a finite being, one understands that they do not have the formal reality of an infinity contained within oneself as both the nature of substance is finite and by way of not fully being able to grasp the notion of an infinite being, and thus “the idea again by which [one understands] a supreme God, eternal, infinite, [immutable], omniscient, omnipotent, and Creator of all things which are outside of Himself, has certainly more objective reality in itself than those ideas by which finite substances are represented” (Descartes 78). Therefore, if the idea of God exists in a person actually, then the cause of this idea must be God. The idea of God exists in everyone clearly and distinctly, so thus, Descartes claims that God exists.

In summary, Descartes develops his cosmological proof for the existence of God in the following way:

- P1. I think, therefore I exist
- P2. The idea of the infinite clearly and distinctly exists in me
- P3. PSR: the cause of a thing must have at least as much reality as the thing itself
- P4. The cause of my idea of the infinite must have at least as much reality as my idea of the infinite
- P5. I do not have infinite formal reality
- P6. The cause of my idea must exist outside of me
- P7. The only thing that could cause my idea is the formal reality of the existence of God⁹
- P8. God exists.

Kant's Refutation of the Cosmological Proof of God

"The unconditioned necessity, which we need so indispensably as the ultimate sustainer of all things, is for human reason the true abyss. Even eternity ... does not make such a dizzying impression on the mind; for eternity only lacks the duration of things, but it does not sustain that duration. One cannot resist the thought of it, but also cannot bear it that we represent to ourselves as the highest among all possible beings might, as it were, say to itself: "I am from eternity to eternity, outside me is nothing except what is something entirely though my will; but whence am I?" Here everything gives way beneath us, and the greatest perfection as well as the smallest, hovers without support before speculative reason, for which it would cost nothing to let the one as much as the other disappear without the least obstacle" (A613/B641).

Kant attacks Descartes' cosmological proof for the existence of God by claiming that it argues from a premise of existence and then uses the PSR on the supposition of the ontological argument. The cosmological proof thus "infers from the previously given unconditioned

⁹ Descartes makes this claim using his claim on epistemological knowledge: "If the objective reality of any of my ideas is found to be so great that I am certain that the same reality was not in me, either formally or eminently, and that therefore I myself cannot be the cause of the idea, then it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world, but that something else, which is the cause of this idea, also exists" (Descartes 78).

necessity of some being” that was established in the ontological proof, “to the unbounded reality of [God]” (A604/B632).

Kant establishes that P1 of Descartes’ argument is just a way for the cosmological proof to start with experience “so that it is not carried out entirely a priori or ontologically” (A605/B633). However, this empiricism only takes a singular step as empiricist claims do not help us understand the nature of God as God exists outside of the unified experience of the world.

The conclusion based on the use of the PSR in P3 through P2 arrives at a conclusion P6. Here, Kant develops two worries.

1. The first worry is one of four deceptive principles that Kant finds in the cosmological proof. Kant claims that the PSR “inferring contingent to cause” only has “significance in the world or sense” (A607/B635). Thus, the “intellectual concept of the contingent cannot produce any synthetic proposition” (A607/B635). Kant considers causality to be solely within the world of sense, and thus, does not believe that Descartes’ version of the PSR can extend beyond the world of sense as this PSR is used to argue rationally for a synthetic conclusion, namely that God exists.¹⁰
2. P6 develops the claim that the cause of one’s idea of the infinite must exist outside of oneself and thus asserts the concept of a necessarily existent being without “establishing this [necessity of existence] in any determinate being”

¹⁰ In Kant’s main objection to the ontological proof, and in my chapter “Kant’s Refutation of Ontological Proof of God,” I show how Kant proves that the claim “God exists” is synthetic. Please see this proof if you would like additional clarification on the matter as the fact that this conclusion is synthetic is assumed here.

(A613/B641). From here, the proof assumes that the thing that exists necessarily is God. Thus, the proof assumes that there must be only one thing that exists and that this thing must be God. Here, the cosmological proof assumes what the ontological proof set out to prove, namely that God necessarily exists. Thus, the cosmological proof, by assuming what was proven in the ontological proof, falls into the same pitfalls as those of the ontological proof for the existence of God.

Kant's Summary and Refutation of the Teleological Proof of God

The teleological argument for the existence of God, or as Kant calls it, the physico-theological proof, is the third and final nestled proof of what Kant considers to be the only possible three proofs for the existence of God.¹¹

I paraphrase the teleological proof below based on Kant's interpretation of the proof:

- P1. There exists an order to all things in the sensory world
- P2. This order does not come from particulars in and of themselves
- P3. Thus, this order must exist outside of particulars
- P4. PSR: There exists sublime and wise cause for this order
- P5. PSR specified: If all parts are unified, the cause of the parts must be unified as well
- P6. The unity of the "reciprocal relations of the parts of the world as members of an artful structure, inferred with certainty wherever our observation reaches, but beyond that with

¹¹ Although Descartes does not offer a teleological argument for the existence of God, I will briefly outline this argument and discuss Kant's criticism of it. This argument is one of three transcendental arguments that Kant attempts to disprove.

probability in accordance with principles of analogy” allows us to infer the unity of the cause

P7. The cause of this unity must exist necessarily

P8. God exists.

(A625/B653).

Although based on the grounds of order in the sensible world rather than the knowledge of the existence of one existing particular, the teleological proof quickly jumps to a rational PSR, and thus falls into the same trap that the cosmological argument does: that of the issue of a rational PSR to prove an empirical conclusion as well as the issue that the ontological proof faces as both the cosmological argument and the teleological argument as a subset of the cosmological argument, fall victim to.

Kant grants that one may observe that all sensible things are artfully connected as the definition of the beauty of this connection is vacillates widely, and thus Kant cannot attack this moving target (A624/B652). The issue with the PSR is the same in nature that we saw in the cosmological argument, namely that “reason would not be able to justify to itself an attempt to pass over from a causality with which it is acquainted to obscure and unprovable grounds of explanation, with which it is not acquainted” (A626/B654). Finally, the teleological proof falls into the same trap as the ontological proof when from the general “concept of absolutely necessary of the first cause” it arrives at a “thoroughly determinate or determining concept” which, through its synthetic nature, necessarily makes a claim on reality (A626/B653).¹²

¹² Like I stated in footnote 9, in Kant’s main objection to the ontological proof, and in my chapter “Kant’s Refutation of Ontological Proof of God,” I show how Kant proves that the claim

To avoid these pitfalls, one could try to make the teleological proof transcendental by proving “merely contingency of the form but not of matter” and thus made no claim on matter and thus the sensible world (A627/B654). However, to remain transcendental, this proof “could at most establish highest architect of the world who would be limited to suitability of material with which he worked but not a creator of the world to whose idea everything is subject” (A627/B654). However, even this potential architect of the world would have to be determinate. And, because there is “no determinate concept” of a God and further that “only the all of reality is thoroughly determinate in its concept,” this riff on the classic teleological argument would not work. Thus, we see, per Kant, all potential proofs for the existence of God, fail.

“God exists” is synthetic. Please see this proof if you would like additional clarification on the matter as the fact that this conclusion is synthetic is assumed here.

Kant's General Refutation of Spatio-temporal Proofs of God

In the Fourth Antinomy, Kant attempts to prove that God cannot be proven by way of the sensory world, and thus cannot be proven in space or time. Kant seem to believe that it is the nature of God to exist outside of space and time, and thus, that trying to prove God in space-time will always be a failed effort. If the definition of God lies outside of space-time, it is impossible to prove God in space-time. Kant proves this assertion by proving that God does exist in the world of sense in the thesis of the Fourth Antinomy, and then as easily proving that God does not exist in the antithesis of the Fourth Antinomy, to show that God cannot be proven nor disproven spatio-temporally, and thus any proof that attempts to do so is misguided.

Thesis:

The thesis of Kant's Fourth Antinomy claims the existence of God in the positive. Kant first assumes that there exists a world of sense in which things change that we understand to be the case as we experience that things change (A454/B482). Thus, in the "world of sense" (the reality that we perceive), there exists change. To have these changes, which we perceive to have so know they exist in the world of sense, there must exist a medium by which things change. Here is where Kant introduces his PSR. To perceive things changing, things must change. Through the condition for something's change, the thing changes (A452/B482). Kant believes that change must be caused by something preceding it, or the condition of the change, and thus change is not brute. The condition of a change must precede the change in time (i.e. the thing that causes a change must come before the change itself) and thus, this series of changes must exist in time (A454/B482). Thus, Kant claims that a temporal series is necessary for the possibility of the world of sense, as we know that things change in the world of sense.

In this world of sense, Kant uses the PSR to claim that there must be a condition for every alternation, and thus that there must be a complete series of alterations. These alterations thus assume a complete series of alterations with a final, unconditioned God as the ultimate condition to this temporal, causal chain (A454/B482). The unconditioned God, as something that is unconditioned, must exist necessarily for any singular change to exist because of it. Thus, the unconditioned God must be the beginning of the time-series of causes (A454/B482). And, since the beginning of a time series must also exist in time, if changes happen in time and the unconditioned God is the first object in this causal chain, then the unconditioned God exists in time. If the unconditioned God exists in time, it must also exist in appearance (A454/B482). Thus, a God must exist, in time, and in sense. Kant proves that God, as the final cause in the causal time-series, exists in sense perception.

When remarking on the thesis that God exists in time and thus in our perceivable world, Kant explains how this proof fails. This proof is what Kant deems a cosmological proof: this proof is grounded in a series of premises about the perceivable world, and thus, the PSR that is derived from these series of first assumptions is a regress in accordance with the laws of causality (A458/B486). Therefore, if one starts a proof on empirical evidence, one cannot end it transcendently, or by making claims about that which does not exist through epistemology or through perception. Thus, because this PSR must lead to the highest condition through a continuous process with the same type of relation for each thing in the series, the “highest condition can only conclude the regress in accordance with the laws of sensibility” (A458/B486).

We understand through the thesis of the Fourth Antinomy that when using a cosmological thesis to begin a proof that aims to prove existence of God, we cannot use a singular PSR to explain the existence of God outside the bounds of the PSR that is used to prove

the existence of God in the first place. In this case, the cosmological proof grounds the PSR in that which is perceivable. If, in this example, we claim the cause for alterations to necessarily be in time and thus be in the world of perception, changing the PSR to lead us to a God that is outside of the spatio-temporal world negates the PSR in its totality. If the conditions of the PSR changed arbitrarily, or without reason, in the proof, then the PSR itself would be negated (A458/B486). Thus, Kant shows in the thesis to the Fourth Antinomy that to use the PSR when starting with cosmological assertions, one must end the PSR (with an ultimate, unconditioned cause) within the same cosmological boundaries so that the causes themselves are by nature consistent.

Through this reasoning, we are thus presented with quite a large issue: if we start with cosmological assertions, and build a PSR off these cosmological assertions, we can only discover a conclusion that is itself cosmological. However, Kant claims, and we know it to be true, that the nature of a God as infinite must not exist in time, and thus, must not be cosmological as something that is infinite cannot exist in time. Here, we are met with a contradiction and realize we have failed to prove God spatio-temporally. We thus understand this proof not to work as it leads us to contradiction.

Antithesis:

After failing to prove the existence of God through cosmological grounding of the PSR, Kant shows how one can as easily prove that “there exists no absolutely necessary being anywhere, either in the world or outside of the world as its cause” as the antithesis to his cosmological thesis for the existence of God (A453/B481). In this proof, Kant begins by allowing one to assume that either

- a) there exists God in the world, or,
- b) the world itself is God.

In this proof, Kant begins the proof with the ontological by assuming the theoretical existence of God. If God does indeed exist, then either in the “series of its alterations,” there would be

- a) a beginning cause which in itself is unconditioned and necessary, or,
- b) the series itself would be infinite – it would not have an unconditioned and necessary beginning (A455/B483).

If a) is the case, this conflicts with the PSR as understood in the thesis as everything in time must have a cause. If God exists in time, it must have a cause (A455/B483). If God exists outside of time, then it cannot be the cause of other events, and thus would not be a part of this cosmological PSR. If b) is the case, and the series itself is infinite, for there to exist a God, then the world itself is God (A459/B487). Case b could never be the case as it presents with a contradiction. If each cause itself is contingent, and thus there is no ultimate or necessary and unconditioned cause, then the total series of causes could not be necessary and unconditioned (A461/B489). This is true because if all parts that produce a whole are contingent and no parts are necessary, then there is no way for the whole to be necessary: things are made up of their parts and cannot not exist with a different nature than its parts.

Now that we have proven that God cannot exist through a theoretical proof inside the world, or as the world, assume, theoretically that God exists outside of the world (A460/B488). If this third case, call it case c, is indeed the reality of the situation, then God would still have to begin the causal chain of events in the world. However, this statement implies that God would have to begin the causal chain that exists in time. However, we assumed at the beginning of the

proof that God is outside of time. Thus, a God outside of time could not begin a causal chain in time. Similarly, and as displayed in case b, a final case, call it case d, in which God exists as the sum-total of the world outside of the world presents us with a glaring contradiction (A460/B488). The “sum-total” of causes cannot at once exist as the world and outside of the world (A460/B488). Thus, cases all theoretical, ontological cases (a, b, c, and d) are shown to yield contradictions.

Metaphysical Implications of the Failure of the Transcendental Proof

Through understanding both spatio-temporal and transcendental proofs of God, one becomes closer to the issue that one faces when attempting to prove the existence of God¹³. Spatio-temporal proofs that reside completely in the realm of space-time will always fail to prove God as necessarily existing outside of space-time as it is not possible for a line of reasoning restricted to space-time to prove the necessary existence of something outside of space-time. To do this, one would have to assume a causal principle that extends out of space-time or would have to diminish the nature of God to existence within space time. The first option is fallible as a) any PSR cannot prove reason from sense perceptive existence to a concept – from space-time to outside of space-time and b) even if the PSR did exist outside of space-time, there is no way for us to have knowledge of this existence, and thus, we cannot prove that the PSR exists or does not exist outside of space-time which leads us to skepticism surrounding the use of PSR outside of space-time. If we are skeptical of the PSR outside of space-time, we should not consider it a valid tool for proving the existence of God outside of space-time.

Thus, we are left with the refutations of the transcendental proofs, in which we arise at a singular main issue existing in all attempts to prove the existence of God. In all transcendental proofs of the existence of God, we conclude that God must exist from God's own concept and thus that God is self-causing. The final premises of each transcendental proof have the same general structure:

P1. If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being has to exist

¹³ When I speak about proving the existence of God, I assume that God must be proven with all relevant qualities of a God including but not limited to perfection, necessary existence, omnipotence, infiniteness, omniscience, omnipresence, et cetera.

P2. Thus, an absolutely necessary being has to exist (a being that given its concept, must exist)

If think about a being causing itself from its concept, or somehow self-causing into existence, we immediately understand that this notion is absurd. Thus, to arrive at an absurd notion, there must exist an issue with P1, the premise that motivates P2. The issue with P1 seems to be the implication of a PSR that was derived in space-time then extending beyond space-time.

Therefore, the issue with P1 could be epistemological; that we do not know if a PSR can extend outside of space-time and thus can never know if God can cause its existence from its concepts, or metaphysical; that it is absurd for the PSR to extend outside of space-time and thus is absurd for God to cause its own existence.

(A) The structure of the epistemological worry seems to be:

P1. We only know the PSR as a transcendental principle inferring from the contingent to a cause inside space-time

P2. For God to exist, God must cause itself outside of space-time per the PSR

P3. We cannot have knowledge of anything outside space-time including if the PSR can extend beyond space-time

P4. Thus, we cannot know if God self-causes and thus exists

(B) The structure of the metaphysical worry seems to be:

- P1. God exists is a substantive claim about reality and not about our concepts
- P2. God exists is therefore a synthetic claim: it is true in virtue of the facts of the reality of the world upon which the claim depends rather than being true in virtue of the concept of God
- P3. God exists cannot be true in virtue of the concept of God

Now, let us assume, as it seems to be, and as Nicholas Stang promotes in *Kant's Modal Metaphysics* that “Kant’s claim is that ontological arguments presuppose a false metaphysical view about the source or ground of necessary existence... As Kant puts it succinctly in his lectures on metaphysics, ‘God himself cannot know his own existence through concepts.’” (Stang 29). Thus, we can assume that the metaphysical worry (B) is Kant’s worry.

If (B) is Kant’s worry, then it is never the case that a proof that first tries to prove God and then infers the existence of God will prove God. We saw these three types of proofs fail in this paper. Secondly, I also do not think it is the case that Kant is implicitly trying to get the philosopher to give up on the mission of proving the existence of a God. Like we saw in Kant’s appeal before attacking transcendental proofs, Kant thinks that the practical commitment to the idea of a God is not only useful in one’s life, but necessary for one’s concept of reality, for one’s concept of reality, and thus for concepts such as one’s own free will. If the reasonable solution to (B)’s metaphysical worry is to give up completely on the pursuit to prove the existence of God, then much of Kant’s philosophy would be in grave danger.

Thus, there must be a third solution to this issue. Although I am uncertain of the way to evade this issue, one potential path I could see is to assume God’s essence, but not to assume that

God's essence causes God's existence. For example, if we assume that God causes everything in space-time, but that both space-time in actuality and God in essence are infinite, then it could be the case that God did not need to cause (the substance in) space-time, i.e. the perceivable world or God itself, and thus did not need to exist. There could be an avenue here by which God's existence is made possible through the actuality of space-time, and thus that God's "existence" is promoted through a relation that is wholly integrated with God, but exists in some way, independent of God itself.

To separate the necessary existence of God from the essence of God either logically or actually would allow us to remove the metaphysical absurdity that arises in (B). This however, is an active endeavor: the search for a proof of the existence of God.

Conclusion

Kant persuasively shows that spatio-temporal proofs for the existence of God do not hold up against common criticisms. He further shows that all transcendental proofs for the existence of God are a) nestled in one another, b) are all dependent on the ontological proof as the basis for all other possible transcendental proofs. Thus, when the ontological proof fails via absurdity, all other transcendental proofs fail. This leaves us with no positive proof for the existence of God, yet with the passionate, inherent desire, and grave need, to discover one. Thus, we continue to search for a proof of the existence of God with the knowledge of the failures of past proofs. One potential path of proof for the existence of God that I motivate is the essence of a God with its logical or actual existence outside of the essence of God, however somehow related infinitely in time and space to the essence of God.

Appendix

Exhibit A

Descartes' Thought Classification Underpinning Cosmological Proof

Descartes grounds his cosmological argument for the existence of God in a series of classifications of thoughts. Descartes uses these thought classifications to illuminate which types of thought are relevant for the cosmological and ontological proofs.

Descartes develops a first classification of thoughts by “group[ing] all [his] thoughts into certain classes, and ask[ing] in which of them truth or falsity properly relies” (Descartes 71). The four classifications that he develops are ideas, volitions (desires), affects (emotions), and judgements (Descartes 71).

Descartes first makes a claim on ideas. Descartes claims that one can think of ideas as “images of things” in the mind (Descartes 70). Ideas could be of oneself, of any object such as a horse, a house, a stuffed animal, the sun, or a dog, or can be ideas that one may not directly perceive such as the idea of God. Ideas in and of themselves cannot be considered correct or false as ideas have no bearing on, and make no claim on reality: one can have the idea of a unicorn in their head all Tuesday afternoon, and then wake up Wednesday morning with the thought of the neighbor’s pony etched precisely in their memory without having the first idea be false and the second correct, as neither the idea of the unicorn nor the idea of the neighbor’s pony make any claim on the reality of the idea, i.e. whether the unicorn or the pony exist.

Volitions or affections in and of themselves can be thought of as extensions of ideas and thus do not carry with them truth or falsity just as ideas in and of themselves do not carry with them truth or falsity. One may desire to own a unicorn as she may desire to own her neighbor’s pony, and although the latter desire may be more practical, the former is not a false desire – one can desire whatever they want, whether attainable or not. Likewise, affection cannot be

determined to be true or false. I may like a unicorn over my neighbor's pony (maybe I find it more enchanting, beautiful, or consider unicorns easier to ride), but this affection again does lay claim on what is real: liking something does not assume its existence. On the other hand, one may desire the neighbor's pony even though it is old, ugly, mean, and not nearly as exciting as a unicorn would be. However, her desire for the pony is legitimated in her feeling of desire, not in the reality of the comparison between the two things, and thus, is not deceptive.

Judgements, on the other hand, relate ideas not to one's personal penchants or desires, but to what one considers to be true about the world around them. Judgements relate ideas to reality by "judg[ing] the ideas which are in [a person] are similar to or in conformity with certain things outside [that person]" and thus can be considered true or false (Descartes 71-2). If I judge that the sun is hot today, or that a unicorn exists in front of my eyes, I can be correct or false in both: Maybe the summer sun is beating down on me and my perception is true, maybe I do not conceive that unicorns do not exist, and in my excitement and love for these fictitious animals, falsely perceive my neighbor's pony with a birthday hat on as the pet I have desired for so long. With judgements, I can be deceived, or rather deceive myself.

Descartes then claims that the sources of ideas fall into three categories: innate, adventitious (from outside), and fictitious (those that are wholly produced by a person). Innate ideas are those that I form from my own nature, for example, I understand myself as a thinking being as I think. Ideas that are fictitious are those that I contrive by myself that I know not to be real, such as the idea of a centaur. Adventitious ideas are those that originate from external stimuli. I might see a rock and thus think of a rock, or feel cold and thus have the thought that I am cold. Adventitious ideas do not have to be willed by a person, but Descartes asserts that "it

does not follow that they necessarily proceed from things existing outside of me” and even if they did that “it does not therefore follow that they must resemble these things” (Descartes 72-3).

Finally, Descartes lays out a third way of classifying thoughts based on the assumption that ideas are not “merely modes of thought” and instead that ideas differ greatly from one another as “one idea represents one thing and another idea another thing” (Descartes 73).

Descartes claims that different ideas have varying levels of objective reality. Objective reality can be thought of as a representation of the amount of formal reality that the thing that is being represented through this idea contains. Descartes promotes three different levels of formal reality: infinite substances contain the most formal reality, finite substances, and then modes (properties of things) contain the least amount of formal reality out of the three categories. Thus, “the idea that enables me to understand [God] ... clearly has more objective reality within it” than ideas of finite substances or ideas of modes (Descartes 73).

After laying out these different forms of ideas, Descartes introduces contrasting ideas of natural impulse and natural light (Descartes 73). Natural impulse are ideas that are not willed by oneself, but instead are brought on by external objects. It is not clear that natural impulses are true or not. Natural light on the other hand, are ideas that allow one to understand things as being true or false. Descartes defines natural light as the highest form of reason that people must determine the truth and falsity of claims of the world around them (Descartes 73). Conclusions reached by way of this highest form of reasons are known by people without a doubt.

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