WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THAT EXISTENCE IS A PERFECTION? A NEW READING OF DESCARTES' THESIS

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Summary: 1. *Introductory Remarks*; 2. *True and Immutable Natures*; 3. *The Uses of 'Perfection'*; 4. *'Existence is a Perfection'*; 5. *Conclusion*.

1. Introductory remarks

For many years, readers of the *Meditations* have argued about the thesis that existence is a perfection. Yet, despite all the attention invested in it, we still seem to lack a clear grasp of its meaning. Since Gassendi's objections, it has been traditionally interpreted as saying that existence, like extension, is a determination of things, a property that makes them be specifically such (either essentially or accidentally). In modern terms, existence is thus conceived as a *first-order* property, i.e. a property of individual things which is thought of *universally*, or according to what many individuals may have in common. More recently, some scholars have rejected this account and defended alternative ones. As we shall see, however, neither Gassendi's interpretation nor any of the alternatives advanced so far is convincing.

To fill this important gap, I should like to offer a new elucidation of the thesis. I will do so by analyzing it in its proper context. Given that Descartes says existence is a perfection to point out that existence belongs to the supremely perfect nature, section 2 is devoted to expound Descartes' conception of natures in the *Fifth Meditation*, while section 3 deals with his use of the term 'perfection.' Based on this, section 4 argues – against both traditional and alternative readings – that in the *Fifth Meditation* the thesis has a twofold meaning: On one hand, regarding any finite nature qua possible, it means that existence may determine it as a *second-order* property, i.e. a property of first-order, universal properties. On the other, regarding the infinite nature qua possible, it means that existence determines it as an *individual* property, i.e. a property conceived of as belonging to only one individual thing that is represented as a distinct individual (in the flesh, as it were).

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2. True and Immutable Natures

Descartes' conception of natures, both in the *Meditations* and other works, has been the subject of long debates among scholars, which comprise too many texts and too many aspects of his philosophy for us to go into here.[1] Therefore, I will only analyze and discuss the key passages of the *Fifth Meditation* that are strictly relevant to our investigation. Here is Descartes' opening treatment of natures:

> And I think that here what must first and foremost be considered is that I find within me innumerable ideas of things, which even if perhaps do not exist anywhere outside me, cannot be said, however, to be nothing; and although in some sense they can be thought by me at will, they are not invented by me, but have their own true and immutable natures. So that when I imagine a triangle, for example, even if perhaps such a figure does not exist anywhere in the world outside my thought, or has ever existed, there is in fact nevertheless a determinate nature or essence or form of the triangle, immutable and eternal, which has not been invented by me, nor depends on my mind.[2]

Descartes introduces natures by noting that he has ideas of certain things, e.g. the triangle, each of which has its own nature. In order to clarify natures, or things having a nature insofar as they have a nature, he makes a series of brief contrasts with other items.[3] Let us review them one by one.

The first contrast is between natures and existing things: 'I find within me innumerable ideas of things, which even if perhaps do not exist anywhere outside me […].' The phrase 'even if perhaps' is meant to be inclusive, i.e.

[1] There are at least three important debates: One about the criteria for recognizing natures (see J. Carriero, *Between Two Worlds: A Reading of Descartes's* Meditations, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2009, pp. 296-306); another about natures' ontological status (see R. De Rosa, *Rethinking the Ontology of Cartesian Essences*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 19/4 (2011), pp. 605-622); and one about the roles and relations between the different kinds of nature in Cartesian metaphysics (see J.-L. Marion, *What is the Method in the Metaphysics? The Role of the Simple Natures in the* Meditations, in J.-L. Marion, *Cartesian Questions*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL 1999, pp. 43-66).

[2] R. Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. VII, Vrin, Paris 1996, p. 64. For convenience's sake, I shall henceforth refer to this work in the body of the paper as *Med.*, followed by the volume and page numbers of the Adam-Tannery edition (AT). All references to Descartes' correspondence will also be made according to the volume and page numbers of AT.

[3] Scholars debate whether the subject of the contrasts is 'ideas of things' or 'things.' See e.g. A. Kenny, *Descartes: A Study of his Philosophy*, Thoemmes Press, New York, NY 1968, p. 150; R. De Rosa, *Rethinking the Ontology of Cartesian Essences*, cit., p. 611. For now, I shall assume it is 'things' understood most broadly, as encompassing any item, so as to open the door (in principle) to all interpretations.

both existing and nonexisting things may be said to have a nature. Two points follow from this: First, things insofar as they have natures may be thought of as formally existing or else abstracting from whether they formally exist.[4] And second, Descartes is thinking of natures in the latter, more encompassing way.

Right after this, he makes another contrast, viz. between things having a nature and what is nothing: '[These things] cannot be said, however, to be nothing.' This seems paradoxical, for in one of his letters Descartes says that 'the thing itself cannot be outside our thought without its existence'.[5] So, if these things are regarded abstracting from whether they formally exist, why should they, thus regarded, not be said to be nothing?

The solution must be sought in how the term 'nothing' is being used here. Descartes is presumably employing it as a term of art, quite common among philosophers of his day. We know this because, in the *Fifth Meditation*, he uses it in opposition to 'something:' 'All of which [sc. the properties of the triangle], to be sure, are true, since I know them clearly, so they are something, not merely nothing' (*Med.*, AT VII 65). Modern readers usually think that being something amounts to formally existing, so being nothing would amount to formally nonexisting.[6] But this is most likely a mistake. Suárez explained the meaning of 'something' and 'nothing' in his *Metaphysical Disputations*:

> [S]omething [*aliquid*] is the same as that which has a quiddity; […] [the word 'something'] seems to be commonly taken in this sense now. For something and nothing are thought to be contradictorily or privatively opposed to each other; but 'nothing' means that which is not a being or has no entity; therefore, something is that which has some entity or quiddity. According to this meaning, it is clear that 'something' is […] a synonym of 'being.'[7]

This passage attests that the opposition of 'something' and 'nothing' is not between what is formally existent and what is not, but between what has an essence (or is a being) and what does not (or is not a being). Now, for Suárez, what has an essence is what is possible or apt to exist in reality, regardless of whether it actually exists; his talk of 'being' and 'entity' in this passage also refers to what is possible or apt to exist, abstracting from actual existence.[8] Therefore, nothing is that which is impossible.

[4] See also Letter to *** (1645 or 1646), AT IV 349.

[5] Letter to *** (1645 or 1646), AT IV 349.

[6] See D. CUNNING, *True and Immutable Nature*, in L. Nolan (ed.) *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 727-731, at pp. 727-728.

[7] F. SUÁREZ, *Disputationes metaphysicae,* in C. Berton (ed.) *Opera omnia*, vols. XXV-XXVI, Vivès, Paris 1861, disputation 3, section 2, paragraph 5. I shall henceforth refer to this work as *DM*, followed by disputation, section, and paragraph numbers.

[8] See F. SUÁREZ, *DM* 2.4.5: 'Secondly, I say that if "being" is taken according to the meaning of this word taken as a noun, its meaning consists in this: That which has real essence, i.e. neither fictitious nor chimerical, but true and apt to exist in reality.'

The same meaning of the opposition between 'something' and 'nothing' is found, for example, in a text of Johannes Clauberg: 'Axiom. *For something to be real it suffices that it can exist, even if in reality it does not exist.* […] *Nothing* is that which is in general opposed to something, […] it is otherwise called non-being, it is anything that has no real being [*esse reale*]'.[9]

Thus, the contrast between certain things and what is nothing is supposed to make it clear, at least to Descartes' contemporaries, that those things are possible. But given that he is regarding the same things abstracting from formal existence, the contrast with what is nothing implies that he is thinking of them – with regard to formal existence – *merely* as possible.

That this is how he wants us to think of these things is further corroborated by the next contrast, viz. between those things and what is invented or fictitious: '[A]lthough in some sense they can be thought by me at will, they are not invented by me, but have their own true and immutable natures.' Suárez also drew this contrast: '[F]or all of them [sc. substance, accidents, etc.] have in some way a true essence, i.e. non-fictitious or imaginary, but real, apt to exist beyond mere nothingness' (*DM* 2.5.16; see *DM* 2.4.15, 31.2.2). Descartes clearly thinks of the opposition between natures and fictions in the same terms. In his *Fifth Replies*, he explains that the natures of the triangle and of God differ from fictions precisely because the former are possible (they may exist either contingently or necessarily), whereas the latter are not, i.e. their existence is impossible: '[R]egarding [the ideas of chimeras] it is supposed that there can be no existence whatsoever [i.e. neither possible nor necessary]' (*Med.*, AT VII 383). Therefore, by contrasting things having natures and fictions, he affirms that those things are possible. But given that he is abstracting from formal existence, he is also asking us to think of those things – with regard to their formal existence – merely as possible.

Finally, there is one last contrast that needs to be explained, viz. between natures and what 'depends on my mind:' '[The nature of the triangle] has not been invented by me, nor depends on my mind.' There are at least two important senses in which natures do not depend on our minds. The first one concerns our ability to play with ideas. Fictions depend on our minds because whether a property belongs to a given fiction is subject to our whim. On the contrary, natures are such that, if all the attributes making up a given nature are taken into account, many properties can be inferred to necessarily belong to it.[10] This is clearly the case with the triangle, whose nature is to be a figure

[9] J. Clauberg, *Metaphysica de ente*, 3rd ed. revised and enlarged, D. Elzevir, Amsterdam 1664, §§21, 24, p. 5.

[10] The qualification that the properties being referred to here must follow from the nature as a whole, not from a subset of its attributes, is made explicit in the First Replies (*Med.*, AT VII 117-118).

that has only three angles (*Med.*, AT VII 67). If one takes all these attributes into account (being a figure, having only three angles), it can be inferred that it is necessary for the triangle to have inner angles equal to two right ones, and to have its greatest side subtend its greatest angle: '[V]arious properties can be demonstrated of this triangle, namely, that its three angles are equal to two rights ones; that its greatest side subtends its greatest angle, and the like; which I now recognize whether I want to or not' (*Med.*, AT VII 64; see also *Med.*, AT VII 117-118). Since natures have properties that necessarily belong to them, they are not dependent on our whim and, in that sense, on our minds.

The second sense of non-dependence is this: Natures do not depend on our actually thinking of them. In fact, the meditator treats the triangle as a nature, although 'it is not necessary that I ever conceive any triangle' (*Med.*, AT VII 67). Therefore, natures are possible independently of our actually thinking of them.

This second sense of non-dependence shows that the meditator focuses on natures as possible not only by abstracting from formal existence, but also from whether natures exist as actual objects of our thought. Since for Descartes these are the only two ways of existing, the meditator must be thinking of natures as possible abstracting from *any* kind of existence.[11]

In summary, Descartes' conception of natures in the *Fifth Meditation*, as far as our investigation is concerned, is as follows. Natures, or things insofar as they have natures, are thought of abstracting from any kind of existence, merely as possible. Furthermore, they should be seen as independent of our minds in a double sense: Some properties belong to them necessarily, regardless of our whim, and their possibility is not due to our actually thinking of them.

Given that the thesis 'existence is a perfection' is invoked to point out that existence belongs to the divine nature under this conception of natures, the thesis should be interpreted with respect to natures qua possible. Our goal, therefore, is to know the meaning of 'perfection' as applied to existence in relation to natures qua possible. In order to know that, we must first explore the many senses in which Descartes used the term 'perfection.' So this is the topic of the next section.

3. The Uses of 'Perfection'

Gassendi's interpretation of the thesis that existence is a perfection is based on the meaning of 'perfection.' To be sure, Descartes does say that some first-

[11] This should warn us against Caterus' assimilation of Descartes' *a priori* proof to Aquinas' version of Anselm's proof. The latter concludes that God exists from the idea of God regarded *as* existing in the intellect. See *Med.*, AT VII 98; T. Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles*, P. Marc, C. Pera, and P. Caramello (eds.), Marietti, Torino 1961, I c. 10; T. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, P. Caramello (ed.), Marietti, Torino 1952, I q. 2 a. 1.

order properties are perfections. Yet his use of 'perfection' is much more intricate, so what he means by it may vary from one context to another.

To gain more clarity, it is helpful to draw the following distinctions. First, Descartes uses 'perfection' both substantively and comparatively. He writes propositions of the form '*x* has the perfection *y*' (*Med.*, AT VII 46-47), but also of the forms '*x* has more perfection (or is more perfect) than *y*' and '*x* has as much perfection (or is as perfect) as *y*' (*Med.*, AT VII 40-41, 48). Second, the substantive and comparative uses may be applied to things either qua existent or merely qua possible. Thus, natures, either qua existent or qua possible, may be values of the variables *x* and *y*. As we shall see, *all* these uses are crucial for understanding the thesis 'existence is a perfection.' What we must do, then, is try to answer the questions of the following table.

	Nature qua Existent	**Nature qua Possible**
Substantive Use	What does '*x* has the perfection *y*' mean?	What does '*x* has the perfection *y*' mean?
Comparative Use	What does '*x* has more perfection than *y*' mean?	What does '*x* has more perfection than *y*' mean?

Let us start with the substantive use as applied to natures qua existent. Descartes calls 'perfections' properties of at least *three* kinds, namely, first-order, second-order, and individual properties.

In the *Third Meditation*, Descartes introduces his idea of God as exhibiting 'some [*aliquem*] supreme God, eternal, infinite, omniscient, omnipotent' (*Med.*, AT VII 40). This idea does not at this point exhibit an individual thing *as* a distinct individual, but only as *some* thing to which the properties listed belong. Later on, he gives a nominal definition of God: 'By the name "God" I understand a certain [*quandam*] infinite substance, independent, supremely intelligent, supremely powerful' (*Med.*, AT VII 45). Again, the idea does not represent an individual substance *as* a distinct individual, but only as something of a definite kind. This is further confirmed at the start of the second *a posteriori* proof, where Descartes refers to God as 'such being [*tale ens*]' (*Med.*, AT VII 48). At this stage of the *Meditations*, therefore, the idea of God represents something that is thought of in universal terms. Accordingly, its properties are first-order properties, i.e. its properties are regarded *universally*, or according to what many individuals may have in common.

In this context, and after proving God's existence, Descartes says God's essential properties are perfections: 'God, […] who has all those perfections' (*Med.*, AT VII 52). Hence, 'perfection' is applied to the first-order properties of the existing God.

But he also calls some second-order properties 'perfections,' i.e. properties of first-order properties. In the *Third Meditation*, while Descartes is still think-

ing of the existing God in universal terms, he says that 'the unity, simplicity or inseparability of all that which is in God is one of the most important perfections which I understand to be in him' (*Med.*, AT VII 50). Since 'all that which is in God' refers to the divine first-order properties, simplicity is a perfection as a second-order property – i.e. the necessary co-instantiation, in one thing, of all of a thing's first-order properties.[12]

Finally, Descartes treats God's individual properties as perfections, i.e. properties conceived of as belonging to only one individual thing that is represented as a distinct individual (in the flesh, as it were). At the end of the *Third Meditation*, he signals a shift in his conception of God:

> I should like to remain here for some time in the contemplation of God himself, reflect on his attributes, and intuit, admire, and adore the beauty of this immense light as much as the eye of my darkened mind will be able to bear it. For just as we believe by faith that supreme happiness in the other life consists in this sole contemplation of the divine majesty, so we now experience that, out of the same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, we can seize the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life. (*Med.*, AT VII 52)

He refers to God as *this* light. Moreover, he claims to be having the same contemplation, though less perfectly, that he expects to have in the next life, which is – as Descartes well knows – 'face to face' (1 Cor 13: 12). Therefore, he no longer thinks of God in universal terms, but as a distinct individual.

Now, in this same passage, Descartes says he is reflecting on God's attributes. These attributes are the content of his contemplation of God. Since God is thought of as a specific individual, and there can be only one existing God – for 'everything that exists apart from [God]' must be a creature (*Med.*, AT VII 40) – God's attributes are conceived as individual properties. But God's attributes are God's perfections. Hence, God's individual properties are perfections.

Now, why are all these different kinds of properties perfections? Although Descartes never gave an answer to this question directly, he provided some clues. For him, being in doubt and being in error are not perfections. The reason is that these properties are only an absence, a lack, in that of which they are properties.[13] In other words, they do not determine anything; they only

[12] Elsewhere, simplicity is the *identity* of all perfections. See Letter to Mesland (2 May 1644), AT IV 119; *Entretien avec Burman*, AT V 165-166; and *Principia philosophiae*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. VIIIA, Vrin, Paris 1996, Part I, paragraph 23, p. 14. (For convenience's sake, I shall henceforth refer to this work in the body of the paper as *Princ.*, followed by the part and paragraph numbers, and then by the volume and page numbers of the Adam-Tannery edition [AT]).

[13] Regarding doubt, see *Med.*, AT VII 45-46: 'For, why would I understand that I doubt, that I desire, that is, that I lack something […].' Regarding error, see *Med.*, AT VII 54-55:

make things not be determined in a certain way, i.e. as not knowing or as not judging properly about something, without specifying any alternative way in which they are determined. Thus, conversely, properties are perfections insofar as they determine that of which they are properties.

Accordingly, first-order properties are perfections insofar as they determine some individual thing(s). Second-order properties are perfections insofar as they determine first-order properties, instead of simply making them not be determined in a certain way. That is the case of simplicity, which determines that all of a thing's first-order properties must be instantiated together constituting one thing. Finally, individual properties are perfections insofar as they determine only one known specific individual.

Let us now focus on the comparative use of 'perfection' regarding natures qua existent. In the *Third Meditation*, something's being more or less perfect than something else means that it contains more or less reality than the latter: '[T]hat which is more perfect, that is, which contains in itself more reality' (*Med.*, AT VII 40-41). This comparative use of 'perfection' of course applies to what Descartes calls 'objective reality:' He explicitly says, while explaining what he means by 'objective reality,' that 'one can speak of objective perfection' (*Med.*, AT VII 161). Thus, to say that the objective reality of an idea is more or less perfect than the objective reality of another idea is the same as saying that there is more objective reality in the former than in the latter. Now Descartes, in his Second Replies, briefly restating a doctrine of the Third Meditation, presents a specific comparison (a hierarchy) of objective realities: "[T]here is more objective reality in the idea of substance than in [the idea] of an accident; and [there is more objective reality] in the idea of the infinite substance than in the idea of a finite [substance]" (*Med.*, AT VII 165-6; cf. *Med.*, AT VII 40).

This hierarchy of more and less perfect objective realities is the key to understanding the comparative use of 'perfection' regarding natures qua possible. In fact, in the context of the *a posteriori* proof – which is that of the passage from the Second Replies – Descartes indistinctly speaks of objective reality and nature (qua possible). According to the Third Meditation, the first *a posteriori* proof is based on this principle: "[T]hat this idea contains [*contineat*] this or that objective reality rather than another, this must undoubtedly occur through some cause in which there is at least as much formal reality as the objective [reality] that same [idea] contains [*continet*]" (*Med.*, AT VII 41). This *a posteriori* proof rests on us actually having an idea that 'contains' the divine objective reality. In the First Replies, Descartes reformulates this last point saying: "[T]hat idea contains [*continetur*] what God is [*quid sit Deus*]; and according to the laws of true logic, nothing should be inquired as to *whether it*

'[E]rror is not a pure negation, but a privation, or a lack of some knowledge which should somehow be in me […].'

exists [an sit] unless *what it is* [quid sit] is previously understood" (*Med.*, AT VII 107). The idea containing the divine objective reality is understood as an idea containing what God is, without yet solving the question whether God exists. In other words, the idea containing the divine objective reality is the idea of the divine essence or nature qua possible. Therefore, the passage quoted from the Second Replies presents a hierarchy of natures qua possible. But it *also* hierarchizes them qua existent, since Descartes, just a few lines below, attributes the three degrees of realities or natures to the *causes* of our ideas (*Med.*, AT VII 167).

The hierarchy is this: The essences of modes or accidents are less perfect than the essences of finite substances, and the latter are less perfect than the essence of the infinite substance.[14]

As many scholars have argued, the criterion for this hierarchical arrangement is the following: A thing is more perfect than another if it causes and preserves the latter, but not vice versa.[15] In fact, modes of finite substances exist and continue existing because of the finite substance to which they belong, but finite substances may continue existing without a given mode (*Princ.* I 48, 56, 61, AT VIIIA 22-30). All finite substances exist and continue to exist because of the infinite substance, viz. God (*Med*, AT VII 49, 165; *Princ.* I 51, AT VIIIA 24). The infinite substance, on the contrary, depends on nothing else. It must actualize itself through its own causal power – it must be *causa sui*: '[S]ince it has the force to exist through itself [*cum vim habeat per se existendi*]' (*Med.*, AT VII 49-50).[16]

[14] I use 'infinite' to mean something's causal independence, corresponding to Descartes' use of 'finite' when he introduces the hierarchy in the *Third Meditation* (*Med.*, AT VII 40). He also uses 'infinite' to mean something's incomprehensibility (e.g. *Med.*, AT VII 9, 46), but this goes beyond my usage.

[15] See E. M. CURLEY, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1978, pp. 130-131; L. NOLAN, *The Ontological Status of Cartesian Natures*, «Pacific Philosophical Quarterly», 78 (1997), pp. 169-194, at pp. 174-175; A. SCHECHTMAN, *Descartes's Argument for the Existence of the Idea of an Infinite Being,* «Journal of the History of Philosophy», 52/3 (2014), pp. 487-518, at pp. 489-490.

[16] See also *Med.*, AT VII 108-111, 164-165, 238-239. Jean-Luc Marion says that, within the six Meditations, God is conceived as existing by himself (*a se*), as *lacking* a cause, not as having the power to cause his own existence (*causa sui*). The latter conception, according to him, would first appear in the Replies. See J.-L. MARION, *The* Causa Sui: *First and Fourth Replies*, in J.-L. Marion, *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, C. Gschwandtner (trans.), Fordham University Press, New York, NY 2007, pp. 131-160, at p. 149. Although I think a detailed analysis of *Med.*, AT VII 48-50, would show the contrary, there is no space for it here. In any case, since conceiving God as *causa sui* is crucial for the *a posteriori* proofs (*Med.*, AT VII 239), I think it is more charitable to understand the infinite substance, already in the *Third Meditation*, in terms of self-causation. After all, Descartes himself begs his readers 'not to pass judgment on the *Meditations* until they have been kind enough to read through all these objections and the replies to them' (*Med.*, AT VII 10).

Therefore, the meaning of '*x* is more perfect than *y*' regarding natures qua existent is that *x* causes and preserves *y*, but not vice versa. The values of the variables *x* and *y* may be modes, finite substances, or the infinite substance.

This completes the analysis of the substantive and comparative uses of 'perfection' with respect to natures qua existent.[17] Let us now focus on these uses as applied to natures qua possible.

The substantive use of 'perfection' regarding natures qua possible also applies to at least *three* different kinds of properties, namely, first-order, second-order, and individual properties. These are perfections insofar as they determine natures qua possible.

First-order properties are perfections. At the start of the second *a posteriori* proof, and hence while regarding God's *realitas* or nature as possible, Descartes indifferently speaks of God's perfections and God's attributes: 'I should have given myself *all the perfections* of which I have any idea, and thus should myself be God. […] I should certainly not have denied myself […] *any of the attributes* which I perceive to be contained in the idea of God' (*Med.*, AT VII 48; my emphases). As seen above, God is still conceived of in general terms at this stage of the *Meditations*. Therefore, God's attributes are thought of as first-order properties, and 'perfection' is applied to first-order properties of a nature qua possible.

'Perfection' is also applied to second-order properties. This is clear from the second *a posteriori* proof of the *Third Meditation*, where simplicity is said to be a perfection of God, who is thought of in general terms and at first only as possible. That God is conceived of universally in this context was already seen above. That at first simplicity is attributed to God's first-order properties regarded as possible is evident because Descartes brings up simplicity while still developing the second *a posteriori* proof. (Simplicity is used to rule out that the meditator could be caused by different partial causes [*Med.*, AT VII 50]).

Finally, 'perfection' is applied to individual properties. This can be gathered from three facts: First, God is *causa sui*, which implies that God has all perfections (*Med.*, AT VII 50). Second, before concluding the *a priori* proof, this nature, which has all perfections (*Med.*, AT VII 66-67), is regarded merely qua possible, for otherwise the proof would be trivial. And third, in that same proof God is thought of as a distinct individual: 'I cannot conceive of two or more gods in the same way [sc. as having an essence to which existence belongs]'

[17] There is a comparative use of 'perfection' that is not based on causation, but which I ignore, since it has no bearing on the thesis 'existence is a perfection,' viz.: *x* is more perfect than *y*, because *x* and *y* are of the same kind, and in at least one respect *x* is determined but *y* is not, though *y* could be determined in that way given the kind of thing it is. See *Med.*, AT VII 60: '[A]nd there is, in some sense, more perfection in me because I am able to bring them about [sc. mistaken acts of will or judgment] than there would be were I not able to.'

(*Med.*, AT VII 68). If the idea of God were universal, Descartes should be able to conceive different possible individuals having a divine essence. That would imply that he can conceive many individuals having an essence to which existence belongs. But he explicitly denies this consequence. Hence, in the *Fifth Meditation*, the idea of God exhibits not a universal but a distinct individual essence, and God's perfections are regarded as individual properties.

We must now focus on the comparative use of 'perfection' in relation to natures qua possible. As seen above, the passage quoted from the Second Replies hierarchizes natures qua possible. The hierarchy is this: the natures of modes are less perfect than the natures of finite substances, and the latter are less perfect than the nature of the infinite substance.

We can understand why possible natures are thus hierarchized if we notice that the possibility of a given mode is actualized only if the possibility of a finite substantial nature is actualized, but not vice versa (*Princ.* I 48, 56, 61, AT VIIIA 22-30). In turn, the possibility of finite substantial natures is actualized only if the possibility of the infinite substantial nature is actualized, for only it has the power to create finite substances (*Princ.* I 51-52, AT VIIIA 24-25). But the infinite substantial nature must actualize itself through its own causal power (*causa sui*), depending on nothing else.[18] Therefore, natures qua possible are hierarchically arranged according to the following criterion: a nature is more perfect than another if the latter's actualization of its possibility depends on that of the former, but not vice versa.

There is one more passage to complete the picture of the comparative use of 'perfection.' Here Descartes does not focus solely on natures qua possible, but on everything we may think of.

> I do not, however, deny that possible existence is a perfection in the idea of the triangle, just as necessary existence is a perfection in the idea of God; for this makes that one [sc. the idea of the triangle] more excellent than the ideas of those chimeras, regarding which it is supposed that there can be no existence whatsoever [sc. neither possible nor necessary]. (*Med.*, AT VII 383)

If we take into account everything we may think of, fictitious things occupy the lowest echelon, for their existence is impossible. Thus, Descartes has a criterion for hierarchizing everything we can conceive, namely: that which is not possible is less perfect than that which is possible. Once this criterion is applied, we can apply the criterion made explicit above to hierarchize what is possible. The hierarchy of all that is conceivable, then, from lower to highest,

[18] The independence of the infinite nature's existence from any other nature's existence should not be confused with the independence of the infinite nature's possibility from any other nature's possibility. This latter independence is explicitly affirmed by Descartes (e.g. Letter to Mersenne [27 May 1630], AT I 152), but its relevance for the thesis 'existence is a perfection' lies beyond the scope of this paper.

is this: Fictitious things, natures of modes, natures of finite substances, the nature of the infinite substance.

Therefore, '*x* is more perfect than *y*' may mean: Either that *x* is possible but *y* is not; or that *x* and *y* are both possible, but if *y* exists, it depends on the existence of *x,* and not vice versa. The values of *x* and *y* may be fictions, the natures of modes, of finite substances, or of the infinite substance.

The questions of the previous table, then, are answered thus:

	Nature qua Existent	**Nature qua Possible**
Substantive Use	There are at least three senses: (a) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is a first-order determination of the nature *x*.' (b) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is a second-order determination of first-order properties of the nature *x*. (c) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is an individual determination of the nature *x*.'	There are at least three senses: (a) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is a first-order determination of the nature *x*.' (b) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is a second-order determination of first-order properties of the nature *x*.' (c) '*x* has the perfection *y*' means '*y* is an individual determination of the nature *x*.'
Comparative Use	'*x* is more perfect than *y*' means 'the existence of the nature *y* causally depends on that of the nature *x,* but not vice versa.' Therefore, (1) modes of a finite substance are less perfect than the latter; (2) finite substances are less perfect than the infinite substance.	'*x* is more perfect than *y*' may mean: either '*x* is possible but *y* is not'; or '*x* and *y* are both possible, but if *y* exists, it depends on the existence of *x,* but not vice versa.' Therefore, (1) fictions are less perfect than natures; (2) natures of modes are less perfect than those of substances; (3) natures of finite substances are less perfect than that of the infinite substance.

This analysis already shows that the thesis 'existence is a perfection' does not necessarily mean what Gassendi and others think. It could mean that existence is either a first-order, a second-order, or an individual property (or determination).[19]

[19] Another important result of the analysis, though less central to our concerns, is that

But before moving on to elucidate the thesis, a few distinctions concerning perfections are necessary. For Descartes, properties may be qualified or unqualified perfections. They are qualified if only finite things can have them (e.g. being material) (*Med.*, AT VII 137; *Princ.* I 23, AT VIIIA 13-14). He claims God has all perfections. But God does not have qualified perfections formally, i.e. God does not have them as finite things have them, viz. by depending on the causal efficacy of something more perfect. God has them only eminently, i.e. insofar as God can bestow them on creatures.[20]

Properties are unqualified perfections in two ways. First, they are unqualified if they can be had not only by a finite but also by an infinite thing (e.g. knowing some event). These unqualified perfections admit of *degrees*, for an infinite thing cannot have a perfection in the exact same way a finite thing has it, viz. by depending on something else's causal activity. Second, properties are unqualified perfections if they can only be had by an infinite thing (e.g. having the power to create).

In the next section, I will defend that the thesis treats existence as an unqualified perfection, albeit not exclusive to the infinite nature. Regarding finite natures, existence is a perfection as a *second-order* property, while regarding God, it is a perfection as an *individual* property.

4. 'Existence is a Perfection'

We have seen that, in the *Fifth Meditation*, Descartes thinks of natures as possible. Therefore, the elucidation of the thesis hinges on which substantive

it clarifies God's name in the *Fifth Meditation*, viz. 'supremely perfect.' This name does not mean that God has all perfections (*pace* E. M. Curley, *Descartes Against the Skeptics*, cit., pp. 142-143; E. Scribano, *Guida alla Lettura delle "Meditazioni Metafisiche"*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2010, p. 122 n. 54; L. Nolan, *Descartes' Ontological Argument*, in E. N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), [https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/descartes-ontological/], sect. 1). Nor is it a name, as Gassendi and others believe, for the maximum perfection in each different genre of things, as if there could be a supremely perfect horse (*Med.*, AT VII 325; M. Wilson, *Descartes*, Routledge, London 1978, p. 174; D. Perler, *Descartes*, Beck, Munich 2002, p. 201; G. Betz, *Descartes' «Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie»: Ein systematischer Kommentar*, Reclam, Stuttgart 2011, p. 207). In fact, Descartes explicitly says the idea of a supremely perfect body is 'put together by my own intellect,' i.e. is fictitious (*Med.*, AT VII 118). On the contrary, with this name God is conceived as a nature having the power to cause its own existence, without depending on anything else. That is, 'supremely perfect' is equivalent to 'omnipotent' and '*causa sui*.'

[20] See *Med.*, AT VII 46: '[A]ll that which I clearly perceive and know to imply some perfection, and also perhaps innumerable other things which I ignore, is in God either formally or eminently.' I interpret 'eminent(ly)' in causal terms because this word first appears when Descartes hierarchizes realities, which are arranged according to causal dependency (*Med.*, AT VII 41). For the same notion of eminency, see F. Suárez, *DM* 30.1.10, 30.1.12.

sense(s) of 'perfection' (viz. a, b, or c) he applies to existence in relation to natures qua possible.

At this point, interpreters offer no convincing solution. It is well known that, in the Fifth Objections, Gassendi interprets and fiercely criticizes the thesis. He does not ask what Descartes means by 'perfection,' but assumes that this word refers to properties that, if actual, exist 'in' things (*Med.*, AT VII 323). In modern terms, this has been understood as saying that 'perfection' refers to first-order (universal) properties that may determine things. Gassendi's reading has become traditional, to the point of being repeated as a doubtless truth.[21]

To be sure, Descartes does not explicitly contradict this reading in the *Meditations*, and even seems to encourage it. First, because he does not join Gassendi in opposing the view that existence is a first-order property or determination. Second, he appears to give support to Gassendi's reading by repeatedly assimilating the inclusion of existence in the divine nature to the inclusion of the property of having inner angles equal to two right ones in the nature of the triangle (*Med.*, AT VII 66, 383). Since the latter property is obviously first-order, it seems to stand to reason that so is existence.

However, this is clearly insufficient to establish Gassendi's interpretation. First, because even though Descartes does not join Gassendi in rejecting that existence is a first-order determination, he clearly points out that he thinks existence is a perfection insofar as it may be predicated of something.[22] Unless all properties are first-order determinations – which we have seen they are not – it is fair to say that he does not show any sympathy for the view Gassendi ascribes to him. Second, the claim that existence is included in the idea

[21] See A. KENNY, *Descartes's Ontological Argument*, in J. Margolis (ed.) *Fact and Existence*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1969, pp. 18-36; W. RÖD, *Descartes: Die Genese des cartesianischen Rationalismus*, 3rd ed., Beck, Munich 1982, p. 105; S. GAUKROGER, *The Role of the Ontological Argument*, «Indian Philosophical Quarterly», 23/1-2 (1996), pp. 169-180; K. CRAMER, *Descartes antwortet Caterus. Gedanken zu Descartes' Neubegründung des ontologischen Gottesbeweises*, in A. Kemmerling and H.-P. Schütt (eds.) *Descartes nachgedacht*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a/M 1996, pp. 123-169, at p. 127; D. PERLER, *Descartes*, cit., pp. 198-200; R. SCHÄFER, *Zweifel und Sein: Der Ursprung des modernen Selbstbewusstseins in Descartes'* cogito, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2006, p. 265; F. VON HERRMANN, *Descartes' Meditationen*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a/M 2011, p. 263; G. BETZ, *Descartes' «Meditationen über die Grundlagen der Philosophie»*, cit., p. 210; G. DICKER, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 231; E. SCRIBANO, *Ontological Argument*, in L. Nolan (ed.) *The Cambridge Descartes Lexicon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2016, pp. 544-549, at p. 546.

[22] 'Here I do not see the kind of thing you want existence to be, nor why it cannot be said to be like properties such as omnipotence, provided that the name "property" stands for any attribute, or for anything that may be predicated of something, as it should certainly be taken here.' (*Med.*, AT VII 382-383).

of God does not entail it is a first-order determination. In the Second Replies, Descartes clarifies that saying that something is contained in the nature of something is the same as saying that it is true of that thing (*Med.*, AT VII 162), which is not exclusive of first-order properties, since it also applies to individual properties. Therefore, it does not stand to reason that he must be thinking of existence as a first-order determination simply because he compares the inclusion of existence in the divine nature to the inclusion of the property of having inner angles equal to two right ones in the nature of the triangle. As he made it clear in the *Fifth Meditation*, this comparison with the triangle refers to the fact that existence belongs to God at least as necessarily as that property belongs to the triangle (*Med.*, AT VII 65-66). Consequently, the usual evidence cited in favor of Gassendi's reading is far from conclusive.

Some scholars, rightly unsatisfied with Gassendi's interpretation, have argued for alternative accounts. Jorge Secada thinks that, although Descartes' considered view is that existence is a second-order property, nevertheless the thesis 'existence is a perfection' commits him to the idea that existence is a first-order property.[23] He concludes that the thesis is just a careless way of putting things in the *Fifth Meditation*, a mistake corrected by Descartes in subsequent works.[24]

Against Secada's reading, it is simply not true that the thesis commits Descartes to think of existence as a first-order property, for there are at least two other substantive uses of 'perfection.' Furthermore, it is false that Descartes' considered view is that existence is a second-order property. As we have seen, in the *Fifth Meditation* he thinks of God as a distinct individual with individual properties, not as *some* thing conceived in terms of first-order, universal properties: 'I cannot conceive of two or more gods in the same way' (*Med.*, AT VII 68). Therefore, given that second-order properties only apply to first-order properties, he cannot think existence is a perfection of God as a second-order property.

Cecilia Wee has defended a somewhat similar reading. She argues in the following way. For Descartes, all beings or modes of being are perfections and vice versa. First-order properties are modes of being and perfections. Existence is not a first-order property; rather, it is the instantiation or coming into being of first-order properties. Such instantiation is itself a mode of being. Therefore, existence is a mode of being and a perfection, albeit not a first-order property.[25]

[23] See J. SECADA, *Cartesian Metaphysics: The Late Scholastic Origins of Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 232-233.

[24] See *ibidem*, p. 235.

[25] See C. WEE, *Descartes's Ontological Proof of God's Existence*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», 20/1 (2012), pp. 23-40, at pp. 39-40.

For Wee, 'mode of being' applies to first- and second-order properties. Yet, she never proves that second-order properties, for Descartes, may also be considered perfections.[26] But even granting this, her view, like Secada's, is wrong. Descartes cannot think existence is a perfection of God as a second-order property, for in the *Fifth Meditation* he thinks of God as a distinct individual.

Recently, Tad Schmaltz has recommended a further alternative. He says the *Fifth Meditation* leaves open the question why existence should be considered a perfection. According to him, existence is a perfection because it follows from the nature of a supremely perfect being that it exists.[27]

This is hardly satisfying. First, because Schmaltz offers no textual evidence for this reading.[28] Second, and most importantly, because Schmaltz's position entails that existence should be considered a perfection *only* in relation to the supremely perfect being. Indeed, for Descartes, this is the only being from whose nature existence follows. As we shall see, this is wrong. Existence is a perfection regarding *all* natures qua possible.

The meaning of the thesis will become clear if we analyze it in its proper context, the *Fifth Meditation*. We know that here Descartes treats existence as a perfection specifically in relation to natures qua possible. But these natures are conceived of differently.

As we have seen, the divine nature is thought of as a distinct individual in the *Fifth Meditation*. Now, Descartes says he understands 'that it belongs to [the divine] nature that it always exists, at least as much as that which, regarding some figure or number, I demonstrate to also belong to the nature of its figure or number' (*Med.*, AT VII 65). Here Descartes thinks of existence *as* a necessary property of God's nature. But nothing besides God can exist in this manner. Therefore, he is not thinking of existence in general terms, as a first-order property that may be had by different individuals, but specifically as a property of the individual God, i.e. as an *individual* property.

On the other hand, all finite natures qua possible are conceived of universally, or according to what many individual things may have in common. These natures are of material or thinking substances, or else of the modes of material or thinking substances, such as shapes or sensations.

Regarding the two natures of finite substances, Descartes said: 'Extension in length, width, and depth constitutes the nature of corporeal substance, and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. […] [I]t is possible

[26] See *ibidem*, pp. 36-37.

[27] See T. SCHMALTZ, *The Fifth Meditation: Descartes' Doctrine of True and Immutable Natures*, in D. Cunning (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes'* Meditations, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014, pp. 205-222, at pp. 216-217. For a similar reading, see G. RODIS-LEWIS, *L'œuvre de Descartes*, Vrin, Paris 1971, p. 326.

[28] See T. SCHMALTZ, *The Fifth Meditation*, cit., p. 221 n. 30.

to understand extension without shape or movement, and thought without imagination or sensation' (*Princ.* I 53, AT VIIIA 25). Descartes does not mean to say that material substances may completely lack shape or movement, or that thinking finite substances may completely lack imagination or sensation. (Angels are not at issue here). What he means, instead, is that these substances may have different shapes, movements, imaginings, or sensations while still sharing the same nature. In other words, material and finite thinking natures are both conceived of universally. Thus, these natures are thought of as *first-order* properties or determinations.

The same is true of the natures of the modes of these substances. Descartes says, for example, that a given local motion is an accident of a right-angled triangle, which is a mode (surface shape) of bodily substances (*Princ.* I 59, AT VIIIA 28). But nothing in the nature of the right-angled triangle forbids that there could be another shape with this same nature but moving in a different direction. So, the natures of material modes qua possible are thought of universally – including only essential properties and *propria* while abstracting from accidents. The same could be said about other modes of bodies, for they are all subject to motion or rest (*Princ.* II 23, AT VIIIA 52-53).

Descartes also seems to have thought of the natures of the modes of thinking finite substances universally, or as first-order properties. Indeed, in his *Meditations*, not only does he speak of '*the* nature' of ideas (*Med.*, AT VII 42; my emphasis), but also offers a general account of judgment (*Med.*, AT VII 56-58). Further, in his *Passions of the Soul*, he provides general notions of the soul's different functions, viz. volitions, perceptions, imaginings, sensations, and passions.[29]

Thus, if existence is predicated of finite natures and is a perfection of them, it must be as a *second-order* property. Clearly, Descartes does predicate existence of these natures; for example, when he says that 'perhaps no such figure [sc. the triangle] exists' (*Med.*, AT VII 64). In this context, the *Fifth Meditation*, where he predicates existence of finite natures qua possible, existence must be a second-order property.[30]

[29] See *Les passions de l'âme*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. XI, Vrin, Paris 1996, pp. 342-350.

[30] This may explain why Descartes, in his *Principia*, affirms that the existence of creatures, though neither an essential attribute nor a *proprium* (*Princ.* I 51-52, AT VIIIA 24-25), nevertheless does not belong to them as a mode (*Princ.* I 56, AT VIIIA 26) – which entails that existence is not a first-order or an individual determination of creatures. Presumably, he thinks so because he is regarding creatures as finite natures qua possible, and their existence as a second-order determination.

It should be noted that this is not an anachronistic reading. Treating existence as a second-order property of natures was not new in Descartes' time. Suárez affirms that existence may be predicated of possible essences (*DM* 31.7.7). But possible essences are just

But why should existence be considered a perfection? As we have seen, not all properties are perfections; some are privations or negations. A property is a perfection if it determines that of which it is a property, instead of simply making it not be determined in a certain way. Does existence determine God's individual nature? Does it determine the first-order properties making up finite natures?

To answer this question, we need to understand Descartes' notion of existence. We can do this by focusing on the hierarchies of possible and existing natures. Existence is the property that determines possible natures as being not just possible, i.e. as not merely occupying one of the echelons of the hierarchy of possible natures. Existence determines that possible natures also belong to the hierarchy of existing natures. Now, if a nature is to belong to the hierarchy of existing natures, it must do so by being the nature of an individual thing, since universals are just mental items (*Princ.* I 58-59, AT VIIIA 27-28). Furthermore, any individual occupying an echelon of the hierarchy of existing natures is caused and preserved, either through itself alone (in case it is the infinite substance); or by the infinite substance alone (in case it is a finite substance); or by the infinite substance and some finite substance (in case it is a mode). Accordingly, to say that existence determines a given possible nature as also belonging to the hierarchy of existing natures is to say that existence determines that nature as the nature of an individual thing which is involved in one of these three causal relations: It is caused and preserved either by itself alone; or by the infinite substance alone; or by the infinite substance and some finite substance.

Thus, since existence determines natures, it is a perfection. On one hand, it is a second-order perfection for finite natures qua possible, although it is not the same perfection for all finite natures: For the natures of finite substances, it is the perfection of belonging to an individual that is caused and preserved by the infinite substance alone; for the natures of modes, it is the perfection of belonging to an individual that is caused and preserved both by a finite substance and the infinite substance. On the other hand, since in the *Fifth Meditation* the infinite nature qua possible is represented as a distinct individual, and its existence is conceived as necessary, without it being possible for anything else to exist necessarily, existence is an individual perfection for that nature: It is the perfection of being this specific individual which alone causes and preserves itself. Consequently, in the *Fifth Meditation*, existence is a perfection according to the second *and* third senses (viz. b and c) of the substantive use of 'perfection' regarding natures as possible. Since all natures qua possible could have the perfection of existence, the latter is a perfection regarding *all* natures (*pace* Schmaltz).

universal properties, which may be expressed as essential and necessary predicates of any individual with the essence in question (*DM* 31.6.15). That is, with respect to possible essences, existence is a second-order property.

This interpretation of Descartes' notion of existence merits at least three brief remarks. First, the notions of causation and preservation are not prior to the notion of existence, as if the former elucidated the latter but not vice versa. Descartes rejected the very attempt of defining existence in this manner.[31] Instead, the ideas of causation, preservation, and existence mutually elucidate each other. In the *Fifth Meditation*, the first two notions provide a more distinct sense of existence, but in the *Third* the elucidation goes the other way around: Existence helps us understand causation and preservation by contrasting the *modus essendi* of preserving causes with that of objects of ideas: '[J]ust 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, or at least the first and most important ones, by their very nature' (*Med.*, AT VII 42).

Second, the conception of existence laid out depends on the notion of an individual thing. However, Descartes never attempts to give a full account of the individuation of things, both thinking and material. This is a gap that needs to be filled if he is to have a complete understanding of existence.[32]

Third, and finally, this notion of existence invites the obvious question: Is this notion unified in any way, or does it simply consist of a triple disjunction? I cannot answer this problem here, but I think it is crucial to raise it and try to solve it.[33]

[31] See R. DESCARTES, *Regulae ad directionem ingenii*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. X, Vrin, Paris 1996, pp. 425-427; *La recherche de la vérité par la lumière naturelle*, in C. Adam and P. Tannery (eds.) *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. X, Vrin, Paris 1996, pp. 523-524; *Princ.* I 10, AT VIIIA 8.

[32] For a recent discussion of Descartes on the individuation of bodies, see V. ALEXANDRESCU, *The Double Question of the Individuation of Physical Bodies in Descartes*, in V. Alexandrescu (ed.) *Branching Off: The Early Moderns in Quest for the Unity of Knowledge*, Zeta Books, Bucharest 2009, pp. 69-94.

[33] Let me, however, provide a sketch of what I think the answer would look like. Those who are familiar with medieval and late scholastic discussions of the analogy of being will notice that Descartes' notion of existing being is unified by an analogy of exemplarity. The divine existing nature as *causa sui* is the primary *analogatum*; existing finite substances are secondary *analogata*; and existing modes are tertiary *analogata*. The idea of the divine nature as *causa sui* is included in our idea of existing finite substances, and the general idea of existing finite substance is included in the idea of existing modes. This notion of existing being according to the analogy of exemplarity seems corroborated, first, by Descartes' many statements about the priority of the idea of God; and second, by his view that finite things are distinct from God not because they have something God does not have, but because they *lack* something God has. See *Med.*, AT VII 45-46, 68, 365; Letter to Clerselier (23 April 1649), AT V 356: 'I say that the notion I have of the *infinite* is in me before that of the *finite*, since in conceiving *being* [l'être] alone, or *that which is* [ce qui est], without thinking whether it is finite or infinite, it is the *infinite* being that I conceive; but, to be able to conceive a *finite* being, I have to subtract something from this general notion of being, which, therefore, must precede.' Although seemingly unified, the analogy of exemplarity is insuf-

It might be objected that, although this understanding of existence is present in the *Meditations*, it is not the one found in the *Fifth Meditation*. Geneviève Rodis-Lewis, for example, has said that the *a priori* proof is 'stripped of […] degrees of being'.[34] In fact, at the beginning of the *Fifth Meditation*, as in the first stages of the *Third*, Descartes conceives existence indistinctly as 'being outside me' or 'outside thought:' '[W]hether any such things exist outside me;' 'even if perhaps do not exist anywhere outside me;' 'exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought' (*Med.*, AT VII 63-64; cf. *Med.*, AT VII 35, 38, 40, 42).

In reply, it should be noted that, notwithstanding Descartes's rather indistinct notion of existence at the start of the *Fifth Meditation*, he does make it more distinct in the *a priori* proof by recourse to the three causal relations just mentioned. For in conceiving God as the supremely perfect nature, he places the latter in the hierarchy of natures qua possible (at least until the argument is finished). But this hierarchy is conceived by reference to the hierarchy of natures qua existent, as the very criterion of hierarchizing natures qua possible makes plain, viz. a nature is more perfect than another if the latter's actualization of its possibility depends on that of the former, but not vice versa. Hence, the notion of existence found in the *a priori* proof is that of existence as determining natures as the natures of individual things involved in one of the three causal relations.

This means that existence is an unqualified perfection, albeit one that admits of degrees, since, as we saw in section 3, no perfection may be equally had by the infinite and the finite. Descartes distinguished at least two degrees of existence, viz. contingent and necessary. (He could have distinguished three, one according to each echelon in the hierarchy of existing natures).

All natures are said to have at least possible existence: '[P]ossible existence is contained in the concept or idea of all things which are clearly and distinct-

ficient, for the unifying link between the *analogata* is causation, but their causal relations are themselves not univocal: '[T]he [formal] cause [sc. God's self-causation] is different from the efficient cause [sc. God's causation of creatures].' (*Med.*, AT VII 236). So, Descartes must provide a unified notion of causation if he is to unify his notion of existing being. This he briefly does in the First and Fourth Replies, where he repeatedly describes God's self-causation as analogous to God's causation of creatures. See *Med.*, AT VII 109, 240, 241. More specifically, he invokes an analogy of proportionality between the cause and what is caused, such that God's power is to God's existence as God's existing power is to finite substances, and (although Descartes does not state this last step explicitly) God's existing power is to finite substances as finite substances are to modes: '[God as *causa sui*] stands in the same relation to himself as an efficient cause does to its effect;' 'God stands to himself in a relation analogous to that of an efficient cause' (*Med.*, AT VII 111, 244). Descartes' notion of existing being is therefore *doubly* analogical.

[34] G. Rodis-Lewis, *L'œuvre de Descartes*, cit., p. 322.

ly understood' (*Med.*, AT VII 116).[35] However, finite natures are contingent: '[C]ontingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing' (*Med.*, AT VII 166). The reason is that God is 'independent' (*Med.*, AT VII 45), and hence free to create or not to create. Therefore, regarding the natures of creatures, 'we do not understand that it is necessary that actual existence be conjoined with their other properties' (*Med.*, AT VII 117).

On the contrary, only God has necessary existence: '[B]ut nowhere, except in the idea of God alone, is necessary existence contained' (*Med.*, AT VII 116). Although Descartes does not explicitly define 'necessary existence,' he strongly suggests that a nature has necessary existence insofar as the perfection of existence belongs to it simply because of the nature it is, and hence necessarily (see F. Suárez, *DM* 28.1.8, for a similar notion of necessary existence). Indeed, in the First Replies, he starts the *a priori* proof saying that the supremely powerful nature is at least possible, and while regarding it qua possible, or simply as the nature it is, he recognizes that it must exist always (*Med.*, AT VII 119). Following this recognition, he concludes: 'And thus we understand that necessary existence is included in the idea of a supremely powerful being, not by a fiction of the intellect, but because it belongs to the true and immutable nature of that being that it exists' (*Med.*, AT VII 119). This is the highest degree of the perfection of existence, and since God alone is supremely powerful, it is found only in God.[36]

5. Conclusion

If what I have said here is correct, the meaning of the thesis 'existence is a perfection' is much more complex than is usually realized, and far from what Gassendi and others have told us. Indeed, when the thesis is read against the background of the *Fifth Meditation*, many elements appear relevant to understand it: the distinction between natures qua existent and qua possible; the substantive and comparative uses of 'perfection'; as well as Descartes' causal conception of the hierarchy of natures. After analyzing this manifold context, we have concluded that the thesis – contrary to both Gassendi's traditional interpretation and to the alternatives advanced so far – has a twofold meaning. Regarding any finite nature qua possible, it means that existence may determine it as a second-order property, namely, as belonging to an individual thing which is either caused and preserved by the infinite substance alone (if it is the nature of a finite substance), or is caused and preserved both by the infinite

[35] Sometimes Descartes uses 'possible existence' meaning contingent existence. See *Med.*, AT VII 166.

[36] Consequently, Schmaltz's reading, which entails that existence is a perfection only for the supremely perfect nature, ultimately confuses the perfection of existence with that of necessary existence.

substance and a finite substance (if it is the nature of a mode). Regarding the infinite nature qua possible, it means that existence determines it as an individual property, that is, as belonging to the known specific individual which alone causes itself. Thus, existence is an unqualified perfection that admits of degrees, viz. contingent and necessary existence.[37]

Abstract · What Does it Mean to Say that Existence is a Perfection? A New Reading of Descartes' Thesis · *The paper aims to clarify the meaning of the well-known Cartesian thesis 'existence is a perfection.' Since Gassendi's objections, it has been traditionally interpreted as saying that existence, like extension, is a first-order property that determines things to be specifically such (either essentially or accidentally). But Descartes never accepted this interpretation and – the paper argues – the texts do not support it. On the other hand, some scholars who reject Gassendi's reading have not advanced a convincing alternative. This article seeks to provide such an alternative by analyzing the thesis in its proper context, the* Fifth Meditation. *First, it expounds Descartes' notions of nature and perfection. Then, it argues – against both traditional and alternative readings – that the thesis has a twofold meaning. Regarding any finite nature qua possible, it means that existence may determine it as a second-order property. Regarding the infinite nature qua possible, it means that existence determines it as an individual property.*

Keywords: *Descartes, existence, perfection,* a priori *proof.*

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