

TAMÁS PAVLOVITS

The Infinity of God in Descartes¹

“I can not forgive Descartes: he would have got on well without God in all his philosophy; however, he was obliged to let him give a flick in order to make the world move, but after that he has nothing to do with God.”² This phrase is attributed to Pascal who was the first critic of Cartesian philosophy and especially of Descartes’s theology. Pascal’s opinion defined the reception of Cartesian theology for a long time: Descartes’s God was considered to be the God of philosophers, i.e., a concept in a philosophical system with several different epistemological and cosmological functions, but not the God of the religion, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In the Western philosophical tradition Descartes was considered as the head of rationalism and a great metaphysical thinker, and he was strongly criticised as such. However, in contemporary phenomenology we find a new interpretation of Descartes’s theology, in particular in the thinkers of the theological turn. Émmanuel Lévinas (Lévinas 238) and Jean-Luc Marion (Marion 124) consider Descartes’s concept of God as a possibility for speaking about the transcendence of God in a philosophical context. In this paper I would like to start from Descartes’s considerations and show how the infinity of God guarantees the transcendence of God in his thinking. The “infinite” and the “perfect” seem to be the most important names for God in Descartes. Firstly, I will analyse his concept of the infinite, secondly, I present contemporary criticisms against this concept of the infinite, especially by Gassendi and Hobbes, and finally, I show how Descartes responds to the objections and how he describes an authentic mental relation with God.

¹ The publication of this paper has been supported by the European Union and co-funded by the European Social Fund. Project title: “Broadening the knowledge base and supporting the long term professional sustainability of the Research University Centre of Excellence at the University of Szeged by ensuring the rising generation of excellent scientists.” Project number: TÁMOP-4.2.2/B-10/I-2010-0012. My research has also been supported by the OTKA project № 81165. Further, I would like to thank Professor Vlad Alexandrescu for inviting me to the University of Bucharest where I presented a previous version of this paper.

² See Marguerite Périer, *Mémoires sur Pascal et sa famille*, in: Pascal (1963), 1105. Louis Lafuma published this phrase in his edition of *Pensées: Pascal* (1964), fr. 1001, under “Propos attribués à Pascal.”

I. Descartes's idea of the infinite

In his terminology, Descartes distinguishes between the indefinite and the infinite. “We should never enter into arguments about the infinite. Things in which we observe no limits – such as the extension of the world, the division of the parts of matter, the number of the stars, and so on – should instead be regarded as indefinite” (Descartes 1985, 201; AT XVIII-1, 14-15). The indefinite has a negative definition: all is indefinite in which we do not find a limit. On the other hand, the infinite, which is a name of God, has a positive definition: “For in the case of God alone, not only do we fail to recognise any limits in any respect, but our understanding positively tells us that there are none” (Descartes 1985, 202, AT XVIII-1, 15). This definition shows that, for Descartes, only the positive infinite is really infinite, but the negative or quantitative infinite, which can be known by the absence of limits, is not really infinite. Descartes reserves the adverb or noun of ‘infinite’ for God, and that means that nothing is really infinite except for God. So the infinite becomes an attribute or name of God.

Descartes puts an emphasis on this attribute in the 3rd meditation. After grasping the truth of the *cogito*, the mind begins to examine its ideas, and it finds among them the idea of God. The idea of God is the idea of the infinite in which infinite and perfection are the same, and which unifies all the possible perfections. “By the name ‘God’ says Descartes I understand a substance that is infinite, independent, all-knowing, all-powerful, and by which I myself and everything else, if anything else does exist, have been created [...] I understand God to be actually infinite, so that He can add nothing to His supreme perfection” (Descartes 1984, 31; AT VII 45). Because this idea is absolutely perfect, it is perfectly infinite. This idea serves as the basis for the argument for the existence of God, therefore Descartes examines it very carefully.

Firstly, he claims that we have to carefully distinguish between the idea of the infinite that is a positive idea and the idea of indefinite that we have by the negation of the limit. Descartes argues that if we define something by the negation of an other thing, the idea in question can not be true, because we can not know it clearly and distinctly. In this case the idea is materially false, because it expresses something that perhaps does not exist. Descartes's example of this is the definition of heat and cold, because ‘heat’ can be defined by the negation of ‘cold,’ and ‘cold’ by the negation of ‘heat.’ But the idea of the infinite is not formed in this way: “Nor should I imagine that I do not perceive the infinite by a true idea, but only by the negation of the finite [...] on the contrary, I see that there is manifestly more reality in infinite substance than in finite” (ibid.). Because the idea of the infinite is not the negation of the finite but an idea of which we conceive positively that it admits no limit, it can not be materially false. On the contrary, it is absolutely clear, distinct and true: “it is utterly clear and distinct, and contains in itself more objective reality than any other idea; hence there is no idea which is in itself truer or less liable to be

suspected of falsehood. This idea of a supremely perfect and infinite being is, I say, true in the highest degree” (ibid.). The idea of the infinite is not only a true idea, but it contains all the truth: “This idea is, moreover, utterly clear and distinct; for whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive as being real and true, and implying any perfection, is wholly contained in it” (Descartes 1984, 32; AT VII 47). Among the ideas the mind finds obscure ones and clear ones, but the idea of the infinite is the clearest of all the ideas.

Another important attribute of the idea of the infinite is that it precedes all the other ideas in the order of knowledge. For Descartes the idea of the infinite represents the first knowledge in the mind: “I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself” (Descartes 1984, 31; AT VII 45). Descartes argues that we do not understand the concept of perfection from the concept of imperfection but on the contrary, the imperfection and the finitude are comprehended from the idea of perfection and the infinite. The imperfection of myself, i.e., my finitude, is comprehensible only because we can compare that with the perfection and the infinite the idea of which is in the mind. Descartes explains this with the fact that imperfection is the negation of perfection, and the finite is the negation of the infinite, and not in reverse: the perfection and the infinite are not the negation of, respectively, the imperfection and the finite. Should we accept the second solution, we could not speak about the idea of the perfect infinite. So the idea of the infinite is absolutely clear and distinct (the clearest and the most distinct of all ideas), and it has an absolute priority in the order of knowledge.

If we observe that the idea of the infinite is the clearest idea which contains all the truth, it can be surprising that the human mind is unable to comprehend it. The mind can not comprehend the infinite because of its own finitude. The infinite is incomprehensible but this does not mean that we are unable to understand it. In an early letter to Mersenne Descartes wrote: “I know that God is the author of everything [...]. I say that I know this, not that I conceive it or grasp it; because it is possible to know that God is infinite and all powerful, although our soul, being finite, cannot grasp or conceive him” (27 May 1630; Descartes 1991, 25; AT I 152). Descartes distinguishes between *conceiving* or *grasping* something on the one hand and *knowing* something on the other. In order to explain this he uses a metaphor: “In the same way we can touch a mountain with our hands but we cannot put our arms around it as we could put them around a tree or something else not too large for them. To grasp something is to embrace it in one’s thought; to know something, it is sufficient to touch it with one’s thought” (ibid.). In the *Meditations* Descartes uses the terms ‘comprehend’ and ‘understand’ to express the difference between conceiving or grasping something and knowing something. So comprehension and understanding are two different activities of the mind. On the one hand, comprehension is the activity when the mind fully grasps its object, and when it

is able to embrace it, like when we are able to put our arms around an object “as we could put them around a tree” (ibid.). Descartes designates this with the terms “*comprehendo*” or “*comprendre*.” On the other hand, understanding (i.e. *intelligere, concevoir*) is an other activity in which the mind is unable to embrace its object, but it can touch it, i.e., it knows with certitude that the object exists. The idea of the infinite can not be comprehended, only understood: “It does not matter that I do not grasp the infinite, or that there are countless additional attributes of God which I cannot in any way grasp, and perhaps cannot even reach in my thought; for it is in the nature of the infinite not to be grasped by a finite being like myself. It is enough that I understand the infinite [...] This is enough to make the idea that I have of God the truest and most clear and distinct of all my ideas” (Descartes 1984, 32; AT VII 46).

The idea which is the clearest and most distinct and which contains all possible truth includes a paradox.³ Its name also refers to that. According to the Cartesian definition, the idea is “the form of any given thought, immediate perception of which makes me aware of the thought” (Descartes 1984, 113; AT VII 160). Because the form is by definition finite, the concept ‘infinite form’ is contradictory. It follows from this that the idea of the infinite is contained in the mind in a paradoxical way: although it is the clearest idea, it refuses to be comprehended; although it is the first of all knowledge, the mind is unable to grasp it. Despite all this it is the most important idea in the Cartesian system, because it is situated at the centre of Descartes’s metaphysics and serves as a basis for the argument for the existence of God.

II. Criticisms of Descartes

Descartes’s concept of the infinite was criticised by all the important thinkers of the early modern age. It is interesting to see that not only the empiricist philosophers like Gassendi or Hobbes, not only the anti-Cartesians like Pascal, but certain theologians like Mersenne, and the rationalist thinkers like Malebranche or Leibniz also reject or, at least, disapprove of this description of the idea of the infinite in the mind. In order to comprehend the Cartesian concept of God we need to examine the criticisms of this concept.

The most important criticism can be found in Gassendi’s *Disquisitio metaphysica*. Gassendi refuses to accept the Cartesian distinction between comprehension and understanding and says that if we are unable to comprehend the infinite, it can only be a name the signification of which we do not know: “But first of all, the human intellect is not capable of conceiving of infinity, and hence it neither has nor can contemplate any idea representing an infinite thing. Hence if someone

³ See Jeangène Vilmer, 497-521.

calls something 'infinite' he attributes to a thing which he does not grasp a label which he does not understand. For just as the thing extends beyond any grasp of it he can have, so the negation of a limit which he attributes to its extension is not understood by him, since his intelligence is always confined within some limit" (Descartes 1984, 200; AT VII 286). According to Gassendi, the limitation of the finite human mind is absolute and therefore it is impossible to have a perfect representation of the infinite. Gassendi argues that all the perfections which seem to be absolutely contained in the idea of God come from the finite things, and therefore they are not absolutely perfect: "although every supreme perfection is normally attributed to God, it seems that such perfections are all taken from things which we commonly admire in ourselves, such as longevity, power, knowledge, goodness, blessedness and so on. By amplifying these things as much as we can, we assert that God is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good, supremely blessed and so on" (ibid). From the attribution of the human and finite qualities to God Gassendi concludes that the idea of the infinite has not more objective reality than the other ideas and, consequently, the argument for the existence of God is untenable.

Hobbes comes up with the same objection. He says that the idea of God can be necessarily formed on the basis of visible things: "We have no idea or image corresponding to the sacred name of God. And this is why we are forbidden to worship God in the form of an image; for otherwise we might think that we were conceiving of him who is incapable of being conceived. It seems, then, that there is no idea of God in us" (Descartes 1984, 126-127; AT VII 179). Like Gassendi, Hobbes does not accept the distinction between comprehension and understanding. If we do not understand something, that means that we do not have an idea of that thing. The idea that we have of God does not represent its object and, consequently, this idea can not be perfectly infinite: "By the term 'God' I understand a substance [...] This substance, moreover, is infinite (that is, it is impossible for me to conceive or imagine any supposed limits or extremities without being able to imagine further limits beyond them). And it follows from this that what arises in connection with the term 'infinite' is not the idea of the infinity of God but the idea of my own boundaries or limits" (Descartes 1984, 131; AT VII 186). Hobbes draws the same conclusion as Gassendi: "If, as seems to be the case, we do not have an idea of God (and it is not proved that we do), then the whole of this argument collapses" (Descartes 1984, 129; AT VII 183).

The basis of the criticism is the same in Gassendi and Hobbes alike: the origin of all human knowledge is in the sensory experience, and all knowledge is formed by the imagination. In this case the finite forms have priority in the mind. Consequently, if we form an idea of the infinite it is realised necessarily by the increase of finite quantities. But in this way we never arrive at the perfect or positive infinite. Our idea of the infinite always remains negative or potential and this idea is unable to represent God. Because we do not have any other way to conceptualize the infinite

in the mind than the imagination, we do not have any idea which can serve as the basis of the argument for the existence of God.

III. Descartes's response

Despite all this criticism, Descartes follows two ways to show that the idea of the perfect infinite, i.e., the concept of God, exists in the mind. The first is an argumentative way, the second is the way he proposes in the pages of his *Meditations*, which I call the meditative way. First, let us see the argumentative way.

According to the empiricist definition, the idea of the infinite is formed in the mind by the increase of finite quantities. When we speak of God and say that he is eternal, and his power, wisdom and goodness are infinite, we apply to him the finite quantities and qualities increased to infinite. When we are doing this, we do not have the positive idea of the infinite. Descartes responds that the increase of finite quantities and qualities to an infinite degree would be impossible without the idea of the absolute. The mind is able to perform this operation only because it has the idea of the perfect infinite in advance. "How could we have a faculty for amplifying all created perfections (i.e., conceiving of something greater or more ample than they are), were it not for the fact that there is in us an idea of something greater, namely God?" (Descartes 1984, 252; AT VII 365). The capacity for increasing the created and finite perfections supposes the existence of the absolute in the mind.

According to Descartes, the human mind not only receives this capacity from the infinite, but it also has an idea of it. Another argument of his concerns the problem of representation. That is how the idea of the infinite represents its object. Gassendi objects to Descartes by saying that the idea of the infinite is not a true idea because it can not represent the infinite perfectly. The idea of the infinite represents the infinite only imperfectly, because it is able to represent only one of its parts. Gassendi suggests that one of the parts of the infinite is finite, and because the finite is not in proportion with the infinite, the representation of this idea is necessarily false. Descartes responds that the idea of the infinite represents its object perfectly, not only one of its parts but its totality: "it is evident that the idea which we have of the infinite does not merely represent one part of it, but really does represent the infinite in its entirety. The manner of representation, however, is the manner appropriate to a human idea; and undoubtedly God, or some other intelligent nature more perfect than a human mind, could have a much more perfect, i.e., more accurate and distinct, idea" (Descartes 1984, 253; AT VII 367). The idea of the infinite represents the infinite perfectly. It is a true idea which is adequate for its object. However, it is an idea of the human mind, and if it seems to be imperfect this is due to the mind and not the idea. Descartes gives an example: "Similarly we do not doubt that a novice at geometry has an idea of a whole triangle when he understands that it is a figure bounded by three lines, even though geometers are

capable of knowing and recognizing in this idea many more properties belonging to the same triangle, of which the novice is ignorant.” (ibid.) In the mind of the novice and the geometer there is the same idea of the triangle, but the novice can recognise in it less truth than a geometer because his mind does not have the same ability to know it as the geometer. Similarly: the idea of the infinite is the same in the human and in the divine mind. The difference concerning its knowledge comes from the ability of the human mind and not of the idea. The idea is perfect but the human mind is not perfect enough to comprehend it. In this definition, we can perceive the necessity of the distinction between understanding and comprehension. According to Descartes, the idea of the infinite is true, because it represents its object perfectly. Consequently this idea is absolutely clear and the most distinct. When we recognise that, we understand the infinite, i.e., we “touch” it in our thinking. But its finitude prevents the human mind from comprehending the idea of the infinite which transcends the mind because of its truth.

We can see that the idea of the infinite has a special structure in the mind. When Descartes claims that this idea is absolutely adequate, i.e., it represents its object perfectly, he suggests that there is no distance between the idea and its object. In other words, when we touch this idea in the mind, we can really see the perfect infinite, but necessarily in a human way. Because we see that in a human way, it is important to distinguish between the understanding and the comprehension of this idea.

When Descartes responds to the objections of Gassendi and Hobbes, he criticises them for failing to distinguish between the ideas that we comprehend with the imagination and the ideas that we understand with pure conception: “And yet [says he to Gassendi] I have already made it clear that I will have nothing to do with those who are prepared to use only their imagination and not their intellect” (Descartes 1984, 251; AT VII 364), and he objects to Hobbes that he “wants the term ‘idea’ to be taken to refer simply to the images of material things which are depicted in the corporeal imagination; and if this is granted, it is easy for him to prove that there can be no proper idea of an angel or of God. But [...] I am taking the word ‘idea’ to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (Descartes 1984, 127; AT VII 181). Descartes claims that if somebody is not willing to clear their minds of sensation and the imagination, they can never find the perfect idea of the infinite. Descartes objects to his critics by saying that they refuse to try this.

Descartes not only refers to this inside experience but also shows the way how to access it. This is not a logical but a meditative way. The *Meditations on First Philosophy* presents not only arguments but it is also a “spiritual exercise” as Pierre Hadot puts it (Hadot 2002). I think that one of the most important productions of the meditative procedure is the elaboration of the mental condition in which the mind becomes able to “touch” the infinite. The three first meditations aim to distinguish between the imagination and pure conception not only in theory but in practice, too. This is the most important product of doubt in the first meditation. Descartes

writes to Mersenne regarding the first meditation that “I should like my readers not just to take the short time needed to go through it, but to devote several months, or at least weeks, to considering the topics dealt with, before going on to the rest of the book. If they do this they will undoubtedly be able to derive much greater benefit from what follows” (Descartes 1984, 94; AT VII 130). This time is the precondition to being able to distinguish between the imagination and the conception in the mind not only in theory but also in practice. The second meditation begins with this famous remark: “I will now shut my eyes, stop my ears, and withdraw all my senses. I will eliminate from my thoughts all images of bodily things, or rather, since this is hardly possible, I will regard all such images as vacuous, false and worthless” (Descartes 1984, 24; AT VII 34). Descartes claims that it is hardly possible (*quia hoc fieri vix potest*) to eliminate the operation of the imagination in the mind but it is not impossible. He writes only at the beginning of the fourth meditation that “The result is that I now have no difficulty in turning my mind away from imaginable things and towards things which are objects of the intellect alone and are totally separate from matter” (Descartes 1984, 37; AT VII 53). So he insists that we need to clear our mind of the finite images to be able to get access to the idea of the perfect infinite. In this way he shows that the inside experience of this idea is possible, but it is not easy to arrive at it.

In a letter to Clerselier concerning the objections of Gassendi, Descartes refers to this experience. As we have seen, Gassendi and Hobbes claim that the idea of the perfect infinite does not exist in the human mind. Descartes argues that this assertion does not prove the non-existence of this idea in the mind, but only that they have not tried to follow the way Descartes showed. In order to demonstrate that the idea of the infinite is an object of a possible inside experience it is enough to know that certain persons had this experience when they read the *Meditations*: “If one single person honestly says that he has seen or understood something, we should believe him in preference to a thousand others who deny what he says simply because they have not been able to see or understand it. Similarly, in the case of the discovery of the antipodes, the report of a few sailors who had circumnavigated the earth was believed in preference to the views of those thousands of philosophers who did not believe the earth was round” (Descartes 1984, 274; AT VII 201). So Descartes argues that the inside experience of the perfect infinite is a possible experience even if it is hard to attain. However, this argument supposes that all human minds have the same structure.

The possibility of the inside experience of the infinite does not free the idea of the infinite from being paradoxical. The idea of the infinite is finite and infinite at the same time. It is finite because it is contained in the human mind but it is infinite because it represents the infinite adequately. This paradox is also expressed in the description

of the relation between the mind and the infinite. When Descartes says that the idea of the infinite is a perfect representation of the infinite he recognizes that the finite and the perfect infinite can “touch” each other. This fact means that we are able to understand the infinite without comprehending it. But the common point between the finite and the perfect infinite is contradictory. This contradiction forms part of the inside experience of the infinite. We can understand the infinite clearly and distinctly and see all the truth in it, while this idea refuses to be comprehended. It is a borderline experience. This experience contains the experience of human finitude and the experience of divine infinitude. This experience grounds the possibility of human knowledge but prevents the possibility of the comprehension of God. This is the sign of the transcendence of God in Descartes’s thinking.

Works cited

- Descartes, René (1985), *The Philosophical Writings*, Volume I, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Descartes, René (1984), *The Philosophical Writings*, Volume II, The Meditations, Objections and Replies, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Descartes, René (1991), *The Philosophical Writings*, Volume III, The Correspondence, translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hadot, Pierre (2002), *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, Paris: Albin Michel.
- Jeangène Vilmer, Jean-Baptiste (2009), “Le paradoxe de l’infini cartésien,” in *Archives de philosophie*, 2009/3 – Volume 72, 497-521.
- Lévinas, Emmanuel (2001), “La philosophie et l’idée de l’infini,” in *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris: Vrin, 229-249.
- Marion, Jean-Luc (1992), “Le phénomène saturé,” in J.-L. Chrétien, M. Henry, J.-L. Marion, P. Ricoeur, *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Paris: Criterion.
- Pascal, Blaise (1963), *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. L. Lafuma, Paris: Seuil/L’Intégral.
- Pascal, Blaise (1964), *Oeuvres complètes*, éd. J. Mesnard, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, Volume I.