

other. If we are going to understand Descartes' argument, we must be clear about how he uses these terms and keep his use firmly in mind.

It is easier to begin with formal reality. Something has formal reality if it is, in our terms, actual or existing. If there really are giraffes and angels, then giraffes and angels have formal reality. You also, because you exist, have formal reality. And when you form an image of a giraffe in your mind, that image also has formal reality—that is, it actually exists as an image in your mind. So any idea actually present in a mind is formally real. This means that (if there are giraffes) both the idea of a giraffe (when being thought) and the giraffe you are thinking of are formally real. They are distinct realities, but related: The one represents the other.

What you are thinking about when you entertain an idea has subjective reality, reality "for you." Giraffes and angels have subjective reality whenever you think of them, but there are ideas whose objects have only subjective reality: the tooth fairy, for instance, or unicorns. These, of course, are examples of ideas "produced by us." But if we look carefully, we can see that they have not been invented out of nothing. The idea of a unicorn comes from the ideas of a horse and a single horn. And (though Descartes has not proved it yet) it may be that horses and horns are formally real. Already he remarks (p. 331) that although one idea may be derived from others, this cannot go on to infinity: There must eventually be a cause for these ideas; and the reality of that cause must be more than "merely subjective." If this were not so, we would have gotten something "from nothing." And the light of nature assures us that this is impossible. There is an old Latin saying: *ex nihilo nihil fit*, or "from nothing, nothing comes."

Descartes does not, of course, make these distinctions for their own sake. There is a problem he is trying to solve: Given that I can be certain that I exist (together with all my ideas), can I be certain of the formal existence of anything else? Although thoroughgoing skepticism may have been refuted (we do know something in the *cogito*), we have not got beyond solipsism. **Solipsism** is a view that each of you (if there is anyone out there!) must

state for yourself in this way: "I am the only thing that actually (formally) exists; everything else is only real for me."

Another step in solving that problem is to note that there are *degrees of reality*: some things have more reality than others. This is the cardinal principle of the Great Chain of Being.* Descartes gives two examples, framed in terms of subjective reality (p. 331), though the same is true for formal reality, as well.

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- Q26. Why does the idea of *substance* contain more subjective reality than that of *modification* or *accident*? (Think of a fender and the dent in it.)†
- Q27. Why does the idea of infinite substance have more subjective reality than that of finite substance?
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On the basis of these distinctions, Descartes formulates a *causal principle*: There must be at least as much reality in the cause as there is in the effect. A cause is said to be *formally real* when it has the same degree of reality as the effect it produces; it is said to be *eminently real* when it has even more reality than its effect.

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- Q28. What examples does Descartes offer to illustrate this causal principle?
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Once more Descartes canvasses the various kinds of ideas he finds in himself as a thinking thing. He is looking for some idea of which he himself could not possibly be the cause. Such an idea must have a cause (since nothing comes from nothing). If (1) he is not the cause, and (2) there is a cause, then (3) he knows that he is not alone in the universe. Something else exists!

Descartes thinks his meditations to this point give him the materials with which to prove that

*See pp. 235–237.

†I owe this nice example to Ronald Rubin, the translator of these *Meditations*.