

ADAM DROZDEK

Duquesne University Pittsburgh, PA, USA

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8639-2727>

drozdek@duq.edu

Charles-Claude Genest: Cartesianism and Theology

1. Cogito – 2. God – 3. The world – 4. The human being – 5. Theology

Charles-Claude Genest (1639–1719) was a Catholic priest interested in philosophy and he considered it to be his pastoral duty to prove the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, which he attempted in his versified work, *Principles of philosophy*¹. As he stated, we should follow an infallible authority which does not depend on human reason, but there is a great advantage to prove by reason the existence of God and the immortality of the soul; the councils encourage philosophers to do it, whereby they greatly help faith by destroying the obstacles that oppose faith (xxviii–xxix)². He chose Descartes as his philosophical guide³, “a man from among us”, from among the French, “Since by his Method we can be instructed / About a better known way leading to the Truth” (8) and, stronger yet, “Through his system the Author of the Universe communicates himself” (9). Also, as indicated in the title of Genest’s work, he largely followed Descartes’ own *Principles of philosophy*. However, to what extent did Genest follow Descartes and

¹ Very little is known about the life of Genest, see Lettres de l’abbé d’Olivet au president Bouhier, in: [Paul] Pelisson, [Pierre-Joseph] d’Olivet. 1858. *Histoire de l’Académie française*. Paris: Didier, vol. 2, 369–384; cf. Kurt Feeß. 1912. *Charles Claude Genest. Sein Leben und seine Werke*. Köln: Greven & Bechtold, ch. 1; Philippe Wolfe. 1978. „Les lettres inédites de Charles Genest à Mlle de Scudéry“. *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 78, no. 6: *La lettre au XVIIe siècle*, 1006–1007.

² Parenthesized references are page numbers in abbé [Charles-Claude] Genest. 1717². *Principes de philosophie, ou preuves naturelles de l’existence de Dieu et de l’immortalité de l’ame*, Amsterdam: Emanuel du Villard.

³ To whom Genest frequently referred as M.D.C: Monsieur Des Cartes.

how helpful was to him Cartesian philosophy in proving the existence of God and the immortality of the soul?

1. Cogito

Like Descartes, Genest decided that to know any other beings, he should start with his own self, and he soon arrived through the Augustinian detour (“I doubt, therefore I am”), to the most famous Cartesian dictum, “I think, therefore I am”; in his words: “I doubt, therefore, I think; / I seek if I exist; whereby I instruct myself, / One has to exist to think; or: I think, [therefore] I am” (17/§ 1.7)⁴, whereby my soul, my spirit, is this thinking being and our thinking is our essence (18/§ 1.7). The soul is of a different nature than the body (20) and thinking cannot be attributed to it (§ 1.8), although a rather corporeal ring has the statement that “a subtle Wind, light Flame ... make our Thought” (19), which may simply be a reference to a cause of a thought, since “Our Thought, or our Soul, is moved / By an Impression that an Organ has received, / Observing an Effect imprinted on the Senses, / It judges that it is formed / By alien and sensory Subjects” (19). Often the soul is thought to be corporeal since people do not remember when it acted in separation from the body, but the body is only the soul’s instrument (22).

The body is another nature connected to the soul, the nature which can divide itself, move, and whose changing traits the soul can observe. The spirit senses, chooses, discerns (23), reflects on what is being sensed, has self-knowledge, understands, and reasons. This agrees with Descartes’ idea that thinking includes understanding, willing, imagining, and also sensing (§ 1.9).

Descartes struggled with the problem of infinity. The human spirit is finite and thus it cannot comprehend infinity. On the one hand, humans can imagine for any extension a larger one, and thus extension is considered indefinite. This may be considered a counterpart of the Aristotelian potential infinity, with actual infinity being beyond human grasp and worthy only of being a divine attribute. Descartes even used Aristotle’s example of divisibility and spoke about infinite vs. indefinite divisibility of bodies, which in the Cartesian non-atomic universe was admissible (§ 1.26-27, 2.21). Genest agreed with this distinction adding that thereby “an indistinct Pride” is banned (45) so that people should not investigate whether the world is finite or infinite (46).

⁴ References after the slash indicate a part number followed by a section number of René Descartes’ *Principes de la philosophie* (Latin edition 1644, French edition 1647).

2. God

Both Descartes and Genest made an immediate transition from the existence of the soul to the existence of God. Genest said, “I sense you in myself, oh, an infinite Power! / Everywhere present, acting in all places, / You who animates Beauties and regulates the Harmony / Of the Earth and the Heavens / ... The Author of Nature, instruct us about its laws” (25); that is a grand object of philosophy and to reach His heights is to seek God by observing His work since God reveals Himself everywhere and everything certifies Him. First, my existence: only an omnipotent and all-wise Sovereign Spirit could create the human thinking soul (26/§ 1.20) that is eternal, uncreated, incorporeal, immutable (27/§ 1.22-23). Our idea of God who is infinite and perfect could not come from our limited spirit (29/§ 1.18, 26), our limited spirit could not embrace God’s grandeur and His infinity, and yet nothing is better known than His existence, nothing is sensed better than His power (32/§ 1.24).

This appears to be almost an afterthought. However, for Descartes this was the main argument, namely, that the soul finds in itself an idea of God, a Being that is omniscience, omnipotent and “extremely perfect”, who necessarily and eternally exists (§ 1.14), and there is no other idea that includes a necessary existence (§ 1.15). The proof is purely conceptual. Genest took a slightly different tack. He began with looking into himself, in particular, into what he senses, which immediately evoked his emotional, prayerful response. Descartes rather looked into the concept he possessed and coldly accepted it. In the end, the difference between Descartes and Genest is not big, since they both made the self the starting point of their grand theological statements.

The cogito starting point appears to be just that, a starting point of investigation, but not the foundation of philosophy, as viewed by Genest. And thus, for cosmogony, there is an alternative that the world was created or it was made by accident from the obscure chaos (12), but the latter possibility is for Genest an insane error. The orderliness of the world presupposes its author (13) and “When it is acknowledged that the eternal Principle, / Not conceiving it well, is first presupposed, / Then all uncertainty disappears at the end” (14): certainty is gained when God is set as the starting point of philosophy. This statement is strengthened by the traditional observation that no body moves by itself, so, if there is motion, “this is an infallible proof of the [existence] of the motive Spirit” (14). In other words, the divine prime Mover needs to be presupposed to make sense of motion in the world, in particular, if this is an orderly motion. And so, the universe has its origin from God: He willed and there it was (34). Epicurus’ chance does not exist and all leads to the first cause

(35). The exercise of God's power requires no effort; nothing is hidden from His view, the order comes only from Him; He constructed the world and He governs it (36). The Cause of causes remains unknown and known only through its attributes, understood only through its effects (41).

3. The world

The essence of matter is its extension (§ 2.4); the space, an inner place, and a body in this place are all the same and distinguished from one another only conceptually, according to Descartes (§ 2.10). There is also an outer place (§ 2.13) and the surface (*superficie*) of the body can be taken for its outer place (§ 2.15). Genest spoke about the interior place of a body as its proper substance and all its mass; the place called its exterior is a simple surface (*surface*); from this it follows that the universe is a plenum (*plein*), with no void (44/§ 2.16). That is, there is no void, no space without a body. Reason does not accept the existence of nothingness (45). As rather undiplomatically summarized, the belief in the void is “the error of a Child, of a stupid Ignoramus” (46).

The motion is the transport of a body B which makes the bodies that surround B to join other bodies which give way so that B can have its new place (54), which is a fairly close rewording of Descartes' definition stating that the motion of an object is its movement from its immediate neighborhood into some other neighborhood (§ 2.25). Genest mentioned a circular motion of a body (57) to which it is forced by other bodies (58), but Descartes made it clear that the circular motion is necessitated by the plenum: a body B1 can move if a body B2 makes room for it, but some body B3 has to make room for B2, etc., back to B1 (§ 2.33). This, in fact, leads to the idea of vortices: at the beginning, God divided all matter into portions and each portion moves around its center (§ 3.46). And thus, “By the same incessantly turning Wheel / One Body pushes another, & it never attracts it” (121).

With this in mind, God created uniform matter and then He divided the naked matter into cubes of various sizes, not spheres, to maintain the continuity of matter (74). Somewhat contradictorily, Descartes said that the portions of matter were at first all equal and yet not all were round and they with time all became round (§ 3.48; cf. § 3.46). If spheres are formed by friction, the space is filled right away by rounded cubes (74), or, better, by tiny bodies with shapes accommodated to the spaces between round bodies or even with no determined size and form (§ 3.49); these bodies gradually become rounded and fast moving (§ 3.50). This is the first element that forms the sun and the stars (75/§ 3.52). The second element is the

spheres that make space liquid (77/§ 3.24). The third element consists of matter broken into gross pieces of irregular forms (77) and was used to form humans, air, planets, comets, and palpable bodies (113/§ 3.52). In the cosmogonic process, vortices are formed that divide matter (83). They turn around their own centers without mixing one with another (84), and thus, the heaven is divided into several vortices (§ 3.67).

Motion is possible because of matter's divisibility; thus, the existence of motion "is an infallible proof / That Matter is divisible" and "divisible without end" (47), which is a divisibility into "indefinite and innumerable parts" (§ 2.34), incomprehensible as this division is to humans (§ 2.35). Each body must be moved by another body, which leads to the first mover, the Author of nature who animates the world and imprints motion on the world and maintains the amount of motion in the world constant (55/§ 2.36). This means that each body has a tendency to remain in the same state: the body at rest to remain at rest, the body in motion to continue its motion (55/§ 2.37). Also, a body moving along the straight line continues moving that way (57/§ 2.38).

4. The human being

Genest believed that the existence of the universe would be meaningless if there were no beings that could appreciate its harmony and beauty. That is why God, to finish His work, created "Etres connoissans," humans endowed with reason and senses to contemplate and meditate on it all. And thus, the beauty of the world would be nothing if it were not sensed, by which sensing it is vivified (216). This prominent status was given to humans, so that foolish is a view of some "partisans of animals" who think that "a frog in the midst of a Swamp / Sees, like us, the Heaven that turns above our Heads" and believes that nature "Was created to serve it and made to please it" (219).

Genest spent some time describing human physiology and anatomy following Descartes who provided only a very cursory description in his *Principles*. This description should show that "the Body, vile and material, / is a magnificent Edifice / That, in summary, shows this inexpressible Artifice / Of its immortal Worker" (217). For example, we learn from Genest that "As the Spirits have their source in the Brain, / Since they take their course through nerves from there, / These are very strong indications / That the Brain is the only seat of the Senses. / From there our Sentiments take their Origin" (260/§ 4.189, 196). "That which makes us sense is of other Nature / Than the subtle Spirits, this ardent liquid, / That the Brain refines and which ends in

the Heart” (261). In particular, sounds struck membrane, the first organ of hearing. From the membrane, internal air carries the sound to the brain where the auditive nerves unite and announce through various trembling the sound to the soul where they cause various emotions (227-228). The nerves coming from all sensory organs come together in one place in the brain to unite in one image (263); this place is the pineal gland (264), the seat of the soul made famous by Descartes, but not mentioned in his *Principles*. Excited blood can affect spirits in the brain which, in turn, affect optic nerves causing illusions (269). Sensations are felt even if a limb was amputated (272) which shows that sensation is not in the limb (§ 1.67).

The soul never loses its essence even if it appears to malfunction in the body (288), just as the sight is not lost even though we can poorly see in the darkness of night (289). The thought moves the body, through the state of the body the soul can move itself. The soul and the body act on one another (290). The heart shrinks when a person suffers, expands at pleasure, and the soul united to the body is instructed by the heart what to choose, whether feel fear or desire (291/§ 4.190). In all this, the actions of the spirit are free (291). The body is not free, a subject of laws. Through an overexcited sense, the soul submits itself to the body, but if it wants, it can detach itself from it following more noble pursuits, so that its desires become purified, and the soul elevates itself to God (292).

The last accent seems to be most important for Genest who, in the title of the book and the title of the fourth chapter of the *Principles*, spoke about proving the immortality of the soul. And yet, this chapter is theologically disappointing since this proving aspect is practically absent. Genest stressed the spirituality of the soul fairly often. The human soul is not material like the soul of animals, the latter being called the soul only by the abuse of the word because animals move, but even metals and stones, loadstones, that is, can move (222). Genest argued that ideas are formed in the soul (273) and ideas are immaterial (277). Perceived objects in humans occupy no space (280); these are immaterial images (xxi); that is, images are purely spiritual (244). The soul is united with the body as long as the body breathes, but when the body is damaged, the soul cannot control it and leaves it eventually (287–288). But the strongest argument for the immortality of the soul is the statement that the soul is simple, with no parts, and thus it is unchangeable, unlike bodies that have parts and can disintegrate (24). The argument from simplicity is already found in Plato and was also restated by Descartes.

5. Theology

At the time of the exploding scientific research, Genest stated that “this great spectacle” of nature should be seriously treated as the source of essential knowledge. “The physics, which is regarded so negligently, is the basis of all our knowledge; it should begin to instruct us about what we are and about the connection that ties us through the Senses to all the Beings of the Universe” (ix). However, “one cannot speak rationally about Nature without knowing the Author of Nature. This is the only foundation on which certainty can be based” (xiv). But first, the principles of knowledge should be investigated. This brings Genest to the Cartesian starting point of establishing the existence of the self. Genest was not opposed to that even agreeing with the Cartesian innatism and deriving the knowledge of God from inborn concepts (xv, 308, 313). However, Genest went beyond it and infused nature with theological significance. Descartes hardly ever mentioned God in his analyses of physics, astronomy, human anatomy, and other issues from natural philosophy. In his view, it is presumptuous to try to guess the reason why God created the world (§ 3.1), whereby, a teleological view of nature from a theological perspective was ruled out. Genest, on the other hand, saw nature as an important source of the knowledge about God and purposiveness of natural phenomena was an important element of this investigation and of seeing God as exercising His providential care over the world. With this, Genest took a cue from physico-theology which started in the second half of the 17th century and became a prevailing theological paradigm pretty much throughout the entire 18th century. With this, Genest was a defender of Descartes, but did not entirely embrace Cartesianism. As he stated, he was not a zealous defender of Descartes; some consider Descartes’ theory a novel of nature, the history of an imaginary world (xxii), but Genest said that he never saw a novel so beautiful and so closely resembling the truth (xxiii). However, in the physico-theological spirit, he stated that God was the Author of nature.

This huge Machine is so well designed, / It moves through Springs (*Ressorts*) so regular, so constant, / Acting all together, united, at the same time; / So that if some other Law by an imposed Power / Forced the Universe to take another Course, / As soon as it were free, it would always resume / This Construction exposed to our eyes; / We would see these different Orders being reestablished; / We would see again these numerous Stars, / Which pierce the dark Veils of the thick Night; / Earth, Water, Airs would return to their stations, / [And so would] the Heavens, the Sun, & the Wandering Stars (136).

God used matter with weight and measure and with His power balanced all agents in the universe, He filled the earth and water with innumerable seeds, and He should be praised for it. “God shows us in everything his Art and his power / Since he so directs general Mass / As to show that his grandeur is the final Cause” (281). All the beauty in the world makes us see God and His perfections (282).

Physico-theology, helpful as it may be in approaching theological issues, was only of secondary importance for Genest. As fleetingly mentioned in his *Principles*, we should follow an “infallible authority that does not depend on human reasoning” (xxviii-xxix). Elsewhere, when rebutting Luther, Genest expressed this point much more clearly. In his view, Luther capriciously dictated

What should be kept, what should be rejected. / In this divine Faith in which all is grand, terrible, / Where for the moral eyes all is inaccessible, / He wanted to consult powerless accounts / Of a limited Reason⁵ and of our feeble senses.

The infallible authority can be found in the Church since the Holy Spirit makes the Church infallible, the Church that “is always present, it is always visible; / It should always shine on the Mountain / ... Its Author founded it, unique, universal, / Constant, incorruptible, immutable, eternal”. What disorder it would be if everyone could decide what are sacred mysteries. A humble heart is sufficient, submissive soul; sacred doctors already meditated for us. “The church wants only our obedience / And we are happy that her authority / Removes vain liberty from our Spirits”⁶. This sentiment was rather weakly expressed in the *Principles* when Genest said that he was ready to embrace any physical theory and provide good reasons “to renounce, as I will do all my life, all opinions which do not conform to the decisions of the Church” (xxiii). And thus, as befits a Catholic priest, Genest believed that his Church has the last word in the matters of theology and a physical theory should conform to this theology.

Incidentally, Genest chose a versified format to present his views, which he considered to be a novelty in France, and, as to this style, he set himself as a follower of Empedocles and Lucretius (8). And yet, versification of philosophy can be a perilous undertaking: “A Philosopher should write in good prose, / That explains, illuminates, demonstrates everything; / And this is not the case when speaking in

⁵ Reason not only is limited, but it also can be dimmed, abbé Charles Claude Genest. 1707. *Dissertations sur la poésie pastorale, ou de l'idylle et de l'églogue*. Paris: Jean Baptiste Coignard, 10.

⁶ [Charles-Claude] Genest. 1686. *Épistre à M. D. L. B.* [de La Bastide, sur son retour à la foi catholique]. Paris: Pierre le Petit, 3, 4, 6.

Verse: / All is forced, confused, obscure, backwards” (347). Apparently, Genest was certain he could not be imperiled by such a rebuke which only refers to a rhymester (*poëtereau*) or poetaster (*poëtastre*) motivated by pride (346)⁷. Genest’s countrymen assessed his work warmly as given in good and solid spirit in verses that are sweet, natural, and smooth⁸; Genest explained the loftiest metaphysical matters in sublime and clear terms⁹; his poetry is elegant, with ingenuous turns, speaking about the most difficult topics with happy facility and ease; he is the French Lucretius surpassing the Roman Lucretius by the truth of philosophy he teaches by elevating the reader to God¹⁰; Genest treats philosophy with the nobleness of poetry and with all the clarity that a reader may demand¹¹. Genest was honored on a larger scale by Barthold Heinrich Brockes, a fellow poet, who translated the *Principles* in its entirety into German and included it as the third volume in his own nine-volume versified religious work, *Irdisches Vergnügen in Gott* (1728)¹². And then – almost nothing. Genest is today largely forgotten, hardly mentioned even in the history of literature books, and surely not in the history of philosophy compendia. The reason appears to be Cartesianism which was on its way out in his times as a physical theory. Three decades before Genest’s *Principles*, the main work of Newton came out, and was sprung largely onto the French scene with its popular rendering by Voltaire some two decades after the *Principles*. Genest attached himself too closely to Descartes and to his void-free physics of vortices, the physics which soon gave way to the physics of Newton, thereby making dubious Genest’s claim that “Through his [Descartes’] system the Author of the Universe communicates himself” (9). In a way, notwithstanding his intentions, Genest’s *Principles* are more about Cartesian physics than about theology in spite of the subtitle¹³. Theology

⁷ [Charles-Claude] Genest. 1712. Des Cartes. In *Les divertissemens de Seaux*. Trevoux: Etienne Ganeau. Vol. 1, 346, 347.

⁸ *Histoire critique de la république des lettres, tant ancienne que moderne* 14 (1717), 406.

⁹ *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* 1717, 362.

¹⁰ *Memoires pour l’histoire des sciences & des beaux arts* 1717, 328–329.

¹¹ *Journal des sçavans* 1717, 3.

¹² It is true that Brockes followed fairly closely Genest’s original, as stated by Chométy, which is quite a feat considering that this is a translation of poetry in one language into poetry in another language; however, it seems to be a tad too much of a poetic flourish in saying that “the German translation of the *Principles of philosophy* reenchanting the Cartesian science and gave the reader a desire to abandon oneself to the delight of the poetic spectacle of nature”, Philippe Chométy. 2009. „Les *Principes de Philosophie de l’abbé Genest* en vers allemands (1728) de Barthold Heinrich Brockes“. *Cahiers Roucher-André Chénier* 28 : 215.

¹³ To the extent that, as aptly summarized, Genest was to Descartes what Lucretius was to Epicurus, Philippe Chométy. 2009. Prolongation poétique des idées cartésiennes, des *Principes de philosophie* de Genest à l’*Anti-Lucrèce* de Polignac. In *Les Lumières en mouvement*. Ed. I. Moreau, 133. Lyon: ENS.

comes out rather unimpressively and the proof of the immortality of the soul is theologically disappointing. Physico-theological elements of the *Principles*, theologically promising, are too weak to carry the work throughout the 18th century. In that respect, Fénelon's classic on the proof of the existence of God and Pluche's massive *Spectacle of nature* fared incomparably better.

*

Bibliography

- Chométy Philippe. 2009. „Les Principes de Philosophie de l'abbé Genest en vers allemands (1728) de Barthold Heinrich Brockes”. Cahiers Roucher-André Chénier 28: 209–225.
- Chométy Philippe. 2009. Prolongation poétique des idées cartésiennes, des Principes de philosophie de Genest à l'Anti-Lucrèce de Polignac. In *Les Lumières en mouvement*. Ed. I. Moreau, 127–155. Lyon: ENS.
- Genest [Charles-Claude]. 1717². *Principes de philosophie, ou preuves naturelles de l'existence de Dieu et de l'immortalité de l'ame*. Amsterdam: Emanuel du Villard.
- Genest Charles Claude. 1707. *Dissertations sur la poésie pastorale, ou de l'idylle et de l'éplogue*. Paris: Jean Baptiste Coignard.
- Genest [Charles-Claude]. 1686. *Épistre à M. D. L. B.* Paris: Pierre le Petit.
- Genest [Charles-Claude]. 1712. Des Cartes. In *Les divertissemens de Seaux*, 345–348. Trevoux: Etienne Ganeau.
- Feeß Kurt. 1912. *Charles Claude Genest. Sein Leben und seine Werke*. Köln: Greven & Bechtold.
- Pelisson [Paul], [Pierre-Joseph] d'Olivet. 1858. *Histoire de l'Académie française*, Paris: Didier.
- Wolfe Philippe, 1978. „Les lettres inédites de Charles Genest à Mlle de Scudéry“. *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* 78, no. 6 : *La lettre au XVIIe siècle*, 1006–1021.

*

Abstract: Charles-Claude Genest was a Catholic priest who in his versified work, *Principles of philosophy*, proposed evidence of the existence of God and of the immortality of the soul. In this undertaking he used as his philosophical foundation the ideas of Descartes, in particular, his cogito principle, the ontological argument for the existence of God, and his physical theory of vertices and the plenum. However, Genest used in his arguments to a much larger extent physico-theological ideas than Descartes did.

Keywords: Genest, Descartes, physico-theology.

Streszczenie: Charles-Claude Genest: kartezjanizm i teologia. Charles-Claude Genest (1639–1719) był księdzem katolickim, który w swoim wierszowanym dziele *Zasady filozofii* zaproponował dowód na istnienie Boga i na nieśmiertelność duszy. W tym przedsięwzięciu wykorzystał jako podstawę filozoficzną idee Kartezjusza, w szczególności zasadę *Cogito*, ontologiczny dowód na istnienie Boga oraz fizyczną teorię wirów i plenum. Jednak Genest wykorzystywał w swoich wywodach idee fizyko-teologiczne w znacznie większym stopniu aniżeli Kartezjusz.

Słowa kluczowe: Genest, Kartezjusz, fizyko-teologia.

