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THE CREATION OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS
AND THE NATURE OF GOD IN DESCARTES

A Dissertation Presented

by

DANIEL P. KAUFMAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Philosophy

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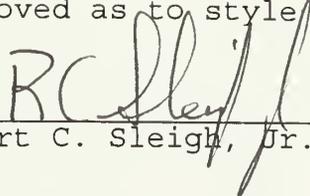
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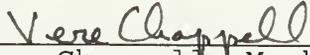
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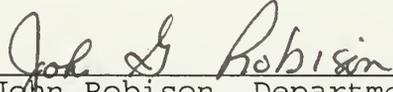
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Dedication

To my very favorite people in the whole wide world:

Joel Kaufman
Kathleen Ryan Kaufman
Brian Kaufman
Amy Wolf

In memory of:

Jonathan Barrett
David Kaufman
Kathleen 'Mame' Ryan
Nugget

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Finally, and most importantly, I need to thank my Mom and Dad. Even though they rarely know what I'm talking about, they have always been supportive of my decision to work on philosophy. I thank them most of all.

ABSTRACT

THE CREATION OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS
AND THE NATURE OF GOD IN DESCARTES

SEPTEMBER 2000

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Descartes held the seemingly bizarre doctrine that the eternal truths are freely created by God. This 'Creation Doctrine' has been the subject of great misunderstandings and ridicule from philosophers and theologians from the seventeenth century to the present.

This dissertation is a sympathetic interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine. After first briefly examining some alternative views concerning the relationship between the eternal truths and God, I argue that Descartes is committed to the Creation Doctrine because of his acceptance of traditional theological views concerning the nature of God, in particular, God's simplicity and freedom. I then argue that Descartes' Creation Doctrine, contrary to the claims of some recent commentators, does not entail any bizarre modal theses. For instance, the fact that God could have willed that the eternal truths are false does not entail that there are no necessary truths. I conclude by offering an interpretation of Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths.

We will see that the Creation Doctrine (i) is theologically well-grounded, (ii) does not affect ordinary modal claims, and (iii), in fact, guarantees the necessity of the eternal truths.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AT Descartes, René. 1996. Oevres de Descartes, eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin. (cited by volume and page number)
- CSM Descartes, René. 1985. The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, volumes I & II, eds. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (cited by volume and page number)
- CSMK Descartes, René. 1991. The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, volume III, eds. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (cited by page number)
- CM Spinoza, Baruch. 1925. Cogitata Metaphysica. In Spinoza Opera, ed. C. Gehardt. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. (cited by section number)
- DM Suarez, Francisco. 1861. Disputationes Metaphysicae. In Opera Omnia. Paris: Vives. (cited by disputation, section, and paragraph number)
- SCG Thomas Aquinas. 1975. Summa Contra Gentiles, trans. A. Pegis (Book I), J. Anderson (Book II), V. Bourke (Book III). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. (cited by book, chapter, and section number)
- ST Thomas Aquinas. 1964-1981. Summa Theologiae, trans. Blackfriars. New York: McGraw-Hill. (cited by part, question and article number)
- Theodicy Leibniz, G.W. 1985. Theodicy, trans. E.M. Huggard. LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court.

INTRODUCTION

In a series of three letters to Mersenne in 1630, Descartes first presented his idea that the eternal truths are freely created by God.

The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on him entirely no less than the rest of his creatures. (AT I 145; CSMK 23)

In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (AT I 149; CSMK 24)

I know that God is the author of everything and that these [eternal] truths are something and consequently that he is their author...[F]rom eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them. (AT I 152; CSMK 25)

I will call this view, following Margaret Wilson and Edwin Curley,¹ 'the Creation Doctrine'. Although the Creation Doctrine does not appear in the body of Descartes' most famous work, the Meditations of 1641, it does appear in the Fifth and Sixth Replies; and it was held by Descartes until at least 1648, and perhaps after.²

The Creation Doctrine can be characterized by three theses, each stronger than the preceding one; and each thesis serves to distinguish Descartes' position from an alternative position:

Dependence Thesis: Like everything else, the eternal truths depend on God.³

Although Descartes employs the notion of dependence for several purposes in his writings, most noticeably in

explaining degrees of reality,⁴ in each case, the notion of dependence is something like the following:

x depends on y =_{df.} it is not possible that x exists without y, and it is possible that y exists without x.

Descartes states this in many passages in his works.⁵ The Dependence Thesis is a rather weak thesis, and one that is not peculiar to Descartes. It simply amounts to saying: If, per impossibile, God did not exist, the eternal truths would not be true. As Descartes states, "we must not say that if God did not exist nevertheless these truths would be true" [si Deus not esset, nihilominus istae veritates essent verae] (AT I 149-50; CSMK 24)

Descartes' argument for the Dependence Thesis in the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne is quite simple:

1. The eternal truths are something.⁶ (AT I 152)
2. Everything depends on God.
3. Therefore, the eternal truths depend on God. (AT I 152; CSMK 25)

The Dependence Thesis serves to distinguish the Creation Doctrine from the position of those who hold that the eternal truths would be true even if, per impossibile, God did not exist. Exactly who held such a view is the subject of the next chapter.

The Dependence Thesis entails that there is no standard of truth independent of God. That is, the eternal truths are true because of God; God does not will or know them because they are true. As Descartes states: "nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be

otherwise, and so on. On the contrary...it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise." (AT VII 432; CSM II 291)

Efficient Cause Thesis: God is the efficient cause of the eternal truths.

As Descartes states in response to Mersenne: "You ask me by what kind of causality God has established the eternal truths. I reply: by the same kind of causality as he created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause [efficiens et totalis causa]." (AT I 151-2; CSMK 25)⁷ An efficient cause of an effect E can be superficially characterized as that which brings about E; it is what we normally would think of as a cause simpliciter.

The Efficient Cause Thesis serves to distinguish the Creation Doctrine from the view that God is the 'formal' or 'exemplar' cause of things.⁸ Although exemplar causes have a long history in the middle ages, even dating back to Seneca's 65th Epistle, a particularly clear explanation of them is found in the seventeenth-century writer Théophraste Bouju:

To these four kinds of causes we have just spoken of, the Platonists add a fifth, which they call exemplar or idea; for insofar as God is the universal artisan of all things and only makes things wisely and perfectly, understanding what he makes and why he makes it, there must be ideas, intelligible notions or forms, in his divine understanding, of the things he makes. This exemplary form is also found in the understanding of men; for in this way the natural agent has in himself the natural form by which he produces his effect and renders it similar; similarly the agent who acts through the understanding has in himself the intelligible form of what he is making resemble it.

Thus the doctor tries to introduce health to his patient in accordance with the idea he has of it, and the architect to construct a house materially similar to the one in his thought. (quoted in Ariew and Grene, (1995) p. 91)

The divine ideas, insofar as they are considered as a 'blueprint' or model of those things that God will create, are exemplars.⁹ Aquinas uses a human analogy to explain this:

Thus the likeness [similitudo] of the house pre-exists in the mind of the architect. This can be called the 'idea' of the house; because the architect intends to make the house similar to the form which was conceived in his mind. Now since the world is not made by chance, but is made by God acting as an intellectual agent...it is necessary that there be a form in the divine mind to whose likeness the world is made; and in this consists the meaning [ratio] of 'idea'. (ST Ia 15.1.res)

Descartes was certainly familiar with the concept of an exemplar cause. Weak evidence for this is Descartes' familiarity with the writing of Eustachius a Sancto Paulo. Eustachius wrote of exemplars in a traditional manner: "What the Greeks call 'Idea', the Latins call 'Exemplar', which is nothing else but the explicit image or species of the thing to be made in the mind of the artificer."¹⁰ Stronger evidence is provided by Descartes himself, in the Third Replies: "I used the word 'idea' because it was the standard philosophical term used to refer to the forms of perception belonging to the divine mind..." (AT VII 181; CSM II 127) However, there is no reason to think that Descartes intended the Creation Doctrine to be a rejection of the exemplar-view, although it is clearly an (unintended?) consequence of the Creation Doctrine.

The Efficient Cause Thesis is stronger than the Dependence Thesis in the sense that the former entails the latter but not vice versa. For instance, according to Descartes, the modes of a substance depend on the substance, but the substance is not an efficient cause of its modes.¹¹ So, while the Dependence Thesis merely holds that the eternal truths are ontologically dependent on God, the Efficient Cause Thesis holds that the eternal truths are causally dependent on God.¹²

Free Creation Thesis: God freely creates the eternal truths.

This thesis is the most characteristic thesis of the Creation Doctrine, and the one which, to borrow a phrase from David Lewis, has produced the most incredulous stares.¹³ The Free Creation Thesis entails that for any eternal truth P, God could have willed that not-P. Thus, as Descartes states, "he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal - just as free as he was not to create the world." (AT I 152; CSMK 25) As we'll see throughout this dissertation, the Free Creation Thesis of the Creation Doctrine produces incredulous stares precisely because it is thought to entail that the eternal truths are not necessary truths. We'll see in Chapter Four that this is false.

Before we continue, we should be clear about what exactly the eternal truths are for Descartes. In the Principles of Philosophy, Descartes lists "the proposition[s] Nothing comes from nothing, ... it is

impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time; What is done cannot be undone; He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks" as examples of eternal truths (AT VIII 23-4; CSM I 209). And in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes adds mathematical truths to the set of eternal truths.¹⁴ So, included in the set of eternal truths are strictly logical truths (e.g., it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time), conceptual truths (e.g., He who thinks cannot but exist while he thinks), 'synthetic a priori truths (e.g., Nothing comes from nothing), and the truths of mathematics.¹⁵ All of these kinds of truths may be called, to use Plantinga's locution, 'truths necessary in the broadly logical sense'.¹⁶

The fact that Descartes believes both that the eternal truths are freely created by God and that the eternal truths are necessarily true, has led to widespread criticism, and even ridicule, of the Creation Doctrine. In the seventeenth century, Leibniz stated that the Creation Doctrine "unknowingly destroy[s] all of God's love and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing the exact opposite." (AG 36) Moreover, Leibniz believed that the Creation Doctrine rendered God unfree.¹⁷ Also in the seventeenth century, Spinoza conceded that "this opinion, which subjects all

things to a certain indifferent will of God," is preferable only in relation to the view that God's will is determined by independent factors.¹⁸

Moreover, among the propositions condemned during the Fifteenth General Congress of the Jesuits in 1706 was the following Cartesian proposition: "The essence of each thing depends upon God's free will, so that in another order of things he was free to create, the essence and properties, for example, of matter, mind, circle, and so on, would have been other than they are at present."¹⁹

In a recent paper, Jonathan Bennett has catalogued the less-than-flattering adjectives used by twentieth-century scholars to characterize the Creation Doctrine.²⁰ Among them are Nicholas Jolley's 'strange' and 'peculiar', Louis Loeb's 'peculiar' and 'curious', and Edwin Curley's 'incoherent'.²¹ Perhaps the most flattering thing said about the Creation Doctrine, until now, is Alvin Plantinga's concession that "Descartes' view is neither unintelligible nor incoherent. The most we can fairly say...is that his view is strongly counterintuitive."²² So, Descartes' Creation Doctrine has not only been thought to be silly in some way, but also, in some cases, dangerous to theology and philosophy.

In this dissertation, I make a start toward an adequate and sympathetic understanding of Descartes' Creation Doctrine. In fact, I hope to show that the Creation Doctrine is a plausible view of the relationship between God

and the eternal truths, given the theological constraints Descartes accepts. One may object that this does not amount to showing that the Creation Doctrine is plausible simpliciter because the theological constraints under which Descartes formulates the Creation Doctrine could be crazy. I agree, but the theological constraints Descartes accepts are not crazy; in fact, they are traditionally-held doctrines concerning the nature of God, his simplicity, and freedom. What I want to suggest is that Descartes' Creation Doctrine is a truly honest account of the eternal truths. It is honest in that Descartes accepts a traditional view of God as simple and free, takes it very seriously, and accepts the consequences this view of God has for a theory of the eternal truths.

In the first chapter, I examine alternatives to the Creation Doctrine, in order to understand why Descartes cannot accept any of them. In the second and third chapter, I discuss Descartes' reasons for holding the Creation Doctrine and rejecting the alternatives. The reasons are the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity and Descartes' understanding of divine freedom. The fourth and fifth chapters are devoted to examining the relationship between the two following propositions, both of which were held by Descartes:

- (1) The eternal truths are freely created by God.
- (2) The eternal truths are necessary.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that (1) and (2) are not incompatible despite the fact that prima facie (1) eliminates the possibility of (2). In the fifth chapter, I examine Descartes' strategy for explaining the necessity of the eternal truths, that is, his explanation of (2). What will emerge is a picture of the Creation Doctrine that, despite its prima facie weirdness, is not a silly or dangerous view. It is a view that preserves divine simplicity and divine freedom and does not affect the modal status of the eternal truths. In this respect, it is a rather desirable view for traditional theists.

A note on method: Throughout this dissertation, I compare Descartes' thoughts with philosophers who either held a view contrary to Descartes' view or who influenced Descartes' thought on the subject at hand. In most cases, the philosophers with whom I compare Descartes are Christian philosophers from the eleventh century through the sixteenth century. Earlier this century, the claim that Descartes is the 'father of modern philosophy' was prevalent; and scholars placed emphasis on an alleged, radical break between medieval scholasticism and the prominent philosophers of the seventeenth century. There were notable exceptions, of course, such as Etienne Gilson's Index scholastico cartesien (1913). But for the most part, Descartes was seen as beginning fresh in philosophy. This phenomenon is perhaps most noticeable in undergraduate

courses on the history of early modern philosophy, in which Descartes is presented as a revolutionary, fighting against the tyranny of the scholastic philosophers.

Recently, however, important scholarship has been done emphasizing not Descartes' break with the scholastic philosophy in which he was trained at La Flèche, but rather his indebtedness to scholastic philosophy. Examples of this are found in the works of Roger Ariew, Marlene Rozemond, Norman Wells, Eileen O'Neill, Timothy Cronin, Jorge Secada, and others.²³ I see myself as joining these scholars' program.

The influence of the philosophers of the Middle Ages and sixteenth-century scholastics such as Suarez on Descartes is most obvious in his metaphysics and philosophical theology. We are rightly disposed to think that Descartes' scientific and epistemological projects are novel. However, his metaphysics and philosophical theology bear the unmistakable imprint of the scholastics. We need look no further than the Third Meditation a posteriori proof of the existence of God to see this. The scholastic notions of esse objectivum, realitas objectiva, eminent containment, and material falsity are prevalent in that argument. Other examples of scholastic influence are abundant in Descartes work: For instance, the account of error in the Fourth Meditation in terms of privation is simply the scholastic account of sin, applied to the problem of error.²⁴ And Descartes' theory of distinctions, employed prominently in

his Sixth Meditation argument for the real distinction of mind and body, is inherited directly from Suarez. As we'll see, the influence of his predecessors is especially noticeable in Descartes' discussion of the creation of the eternal truths - the topic of this dissertation.

Another note on method: This dissertation, despite employing some methods of contemporary analytic philosophy, is an example of what Robert Sleigh has called 'exegetical history of philosophy'.²⁵ Although I believe that Descartes' Creation Doctrine is a viable strategy for contemporary theists, my aim is not to defend the truth of the Creation Doctrine as a philosophical position, using Descartes merely as a guide. Rather, my aim is, as Benson Mates puts it, "to discover and set forth, as accurately, objectively and completely as possible, the philosophical views" of Descartes.²⁶ Sleigh recognizes that there are two components of doing exegetical history of philosophy: (i) the fact-finding component (what the historical figure said), and (ii) the explanatory component (why he said what he said).²⁷ I've already begun the fact-finding component in the first few pages of this Introduction, and the remaining facts will be filled out in the course of the dissertation, especially Chapters Four and Five. Chapters Two and Three are devoted almost exclusively to the explanatory component.

It should be said at the outset that there is very little text in which Descartes discusses the Creation Doctrine. However, almost every text in which it is discussed contains a wealth of information about it. For that reason, I will refer repeatedly to the same texts to discuss different aspects of the Creation Doctrine.

Endnotes

¹Wilson (1978), Curley (1984), (1998)

²See the 29 July 1648 letter to Arnauld (AT V 223-24; CSMK 358-9). I say 'perhaps after' because there is neither any textual evidence to support the contention that he gave up the Creation Doctrine after 1648, nor any textual evidence to support the contrary claim.

³See AT I 145; CSMK 23, AT VII 435; CSM II 293.

⁴See AT VII 165-6; CSM II 117, AT VII 185; CSM II 130, and Kaufman (forthcoming).

⁵See, for instance, AT I 145; CSMK 23, AT I 149-150; CSMK 24-5, AT VII 380; CSM II 261, AT VII 435-6; CSM II 293-4, AT V 160; CSMK 343.

⁶The issue of the ontological status of the eternal truths in Descartes is controversial. For three interesting approaches to this issue, see Chappell (1997), Nolan (1997), Schmaltz (1991).

⁷See also AT VII 436; CSM II 294.

⁸Held by many medieval philosophers, including Aquinas (ST Ia 15) and Henry of Ghent (Quodlibeta IX q. 2 B).

⁹A divine idea of something, which God could create but does not, is not an exemplar, according to Aquinas; rather, it is a ratio. The difference is explained by Aquinas in ST Ia 15.3.res: "Plato postulated the ideas as principles of the knowledge of things and of their coming into existence; and an idea as postulated in the divine mind has both functions. As a principle of the production of things [principium factionis rerum] it may be called an 'exemplar', and belongs to practical knowledge; and as a principle of knowing [principium cognoscitivum], it is properly called a ratio, and can belong also to speculative knowledge. As exemplar, it is related to all the things produced by God at some time. As a principle of knowledge, it is related to all the things God knows, even though they never come into existence." As Wippel states: "divine ideas or divine rationes obtain even for possibles in the purest sense, that is, for those that will never be realized in fact. But divine ideas in the sense of exemplars obtain only for those that will indeed enjoy actual existence." (1981) p. 733.

¹⁰Summa Philosophica Quadripartita Physica III.1.iii. Quoted in Ariew and Grene (1995) p. 94

¹¹See AT VII 165-6, 185; CSM II 117, 130.

¹²In some cases, however, an x will depend both ontologically and causally on a y. For instance, finite substances are ontologically and causally dependent on God.

¹³This claim was recently supported by direct empirical evidence. When some of the material in this dissertation was presented at Cornell, the audience, composed exclusively of medievalists, simply could not fathom that anyone could believe the Free Creation Thesis.

¹⁴Actually, in this letter, Descartes refers to "the mathematical truths which you [i.e., Mersenne] call eternal." There is no reason, however, to think that Descartes would deny mathematical truths the status of eternal truths.

¹⁵See Alanen and Knuuttila (1988) p. 14.

¹⁶Plantinga (1974) ch. 1. An anonymous commentator objected that many propositions that we would call necessary are not eternal truths for Descartes. The example he or she presents is: If Descartes is having a bad hair day, then Descartes is having a bad hair day. Although Descartes never mentions an example like this, he does mention another tautology, ' $\sim(P \ \& \ \sim P)$ '. So, there is simply no reason to think that he would deny ' $P \rightarrow P$ ' the status of being an eternal truth.

¹⁷See Theodicy §186: "But is the affirmations of necessary truths were actions of the will of the most perfect mind, these actions would be anything but free, for there is nothing to choose...That was preserving only the name of freedom." At the time of the Theodicy Leibniz held that there are three conditions (individually necessary and jointly sufficient) for free action. (1) The agent, whose intellect is naturally prior to their will, is presented with alternative choices, (2) the action is spontaneous, i.e., the source of the action is within the agent, and (3) it is not per se necessary that the chosen course of action obtain. According to Leibniz, Descartes' God would not satisfy condition (1). See Sleigh (1990) p. 80-1.

¹⁸Ethics p33s2.

¹⁹Rochemonteix (1889) vol. 4, pp. 89-93. Quoted in Ariew, et al (1998) p. 258-9. Descartes believed that the essences of things are dependent on God's free will; and the eternal truths are truths concerning essences.

²⁰Bennett (1994).

²¹See Bennett (1994) p. 639.

²²Plantinga (1980) p. 124.

²³Ariew (1999), Rozemond (1998), Wells (1961), (1965), (1982), O'Neill (1987), Cronin (1960), (1966), Secada (2000). The publication of Ariew et al's Descartes' Meditations: Background Source Materials (1998), which contains substantial portions of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholastics Francisco Suarez and Eustachius a Sancto Paulo, indicates a recent scholarly interest in Descartes' scholastic influences.

²⁴See AT VII 53-55, 59-61; CSM II 37-39, 41-42, and Aquinas De Malo 3.1-2.

²⁵Sleigh (1990) p. 2.

²⁶Quoted in Sleigh (1990) p. 2.

²⁷Sleigh (1990) p. 3-4.

CHAPTER 1

ALTERNATIVES TO THE CREATION DOCTRINE

Introduction

To fully understand Descartes' reasons for holding the Creation Doctrine, it is helpful to have an understanding of alternative accounts of the relation between God and the eternal truths, accounts Descartes opposes. In the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes states the view of the eternal truths which he opposes:

As for the eternal truths, I say again that they are true or possible because God knows them to be true or possible, but not that they are known by God to be true as if they were true independently of him...If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge which God has of it. So, we must not say, then, that if God did not exist, nevertheless those truths would still be true [si Deus non esset, nihilominus istae veritates essent verae]. (AT I 149-150; CSMK 24)

The view, which Descartes is explicitly opposing, holds that the eternal truths are true independently of God, and God knows them because they are true. Descartes, as we know, holds that the eternal truths are true because God wills (and, by the real identity of God's intellect and will, knows) them to be true. Because everything real (i.e., non-privative) depends on God,¹ and the eternal truths are something,² according to Descartes, the eternal truths depend on God, not only for their being but also for their truth. That is, as we've seen, Descartes held the 'Dependence Thesis. It is important to realize that the

Dependence Thesis is not something peculiar to Descartes; in fact, most philosophers from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries held the Dependence Thesis in one form or another.

However, Descartes certainly seemed to believe that someone held the view that the eternal truths are true independently of God. What isn't clear is who Descartes thought held this belief. Discovering who Descartes thought held this view is difficult business. The matter is made worse by the fact that Mersenne's side of the correspondence (with respect to the Spring 1630 letters on the eternal truths) is lost; so, we can only speculate about the person who has come to be known as 'Descartes' Unnamed Adversary' in these letters.³

Three questions dictate the nature of our speculation:

- (i) Who actually held the view Descartes opposes? (ii) Who did Descartes believe to have held the view he opposes?
- (iii) Who, if anyone, both actually held the view Descartes opposes and was believed by Descartes to have held such a view?. An answer to the first question will provide Descartes' Doctrinal Adversary. An answer to the second question will provide Descartes' In-Mind Adversary. And an answer to the third question will provide Descartes' Precise Adversary.

These questions are difficult to answer. The first question is difficult to answer because no philosopher seems willing to come forth and proclaim that he held the view

Descartes opposes; in fact, the parties typically charge their opponents with holding this view. The second question is difficult to answer because it involves knowing the philosophers whose work Descartes would have known at the time of the 1630 letters to Mersenne. Despite our knowledge of the works Descartes read at La Flèche, Descartes constantly downplays his familiarity with the works of his philosophical predecessors. Thus, we can be reasonably confident of Descartes' familiarity with only a few explicitly mentioned philosophers: Eustachius a Sancto Paulo (AT III 232; CSMK 156),⁴ Augustine (AT VII 219; CSM II 154),⁵ Aquinas (AT III 274; CSMK 166, AT III 360; CSMK 179), Duns Scotus (AT VII 120-1; CSM II 85-6), Suarez (AT VII 235; CSM II 164), Toletus (AT III 185; CSMK 154), Rubius (AT III 185; CSMK 154). But in most of these cases, the depth of Descartes' familiarity with these philosophers is not certain, nor is it clear whether Descartes was familiar with these philosophers (with the exception of Aquinas and Suarez) at the time of the 1630 letters to Mersenne.⁶ The third question inherits and compounds the difficulties of the first two.

For my part, I am not particularly interested in the answer to the first question for its own sake. This is why I don't take Wells' contention that Descartes' unnamed adversary could be one of several Thomists (John Capreolus, St. Cajetan, Henry of Ghent) seriously.⁷ After all, if the point of examining the position that Descartes opposes is to

shed light on the Creation Doctrine (and, as far as I am concerned, it is), then it is not helpful to find someone, possibly unfamiliar to Descartes, who held the alternative view. I will be satisfied to find a candidate for Descartes' In-Mind Adversary as long as he is also a prima facie Doctrinal Adversary. That is, the candidate for being the In-Mind Adversary must at least seem to hold the position Descartes opposes. The minimal condition for being the In-Mind Adversary is simply that Descartes was familiar with him; and the minimal condition for being familiar to Descartes is that the philosopher is mentioned by Descartes. If someone satisfies these conditions, then he will be a candidate for being Descartes' In-Mind Adversary. I think that this is all we are likely to get.

In the first section of this chapter, I examine two likely candidates for Descartes' unnamed adversary, based on my criteria. In the second section, I will examine a moderate, alternative account of the eternal truths and their relation to God, one which is not explicitly denied by Descartes.

Descartes Unnamed Adversary: The Usual Suspects

The path to Descartes' Unnamed Adversary is well-worn ground. Starting in the early twentieth century with Gilson and other French scholars, and continuing to the late twentieth century with Cronin, Curley, Frankfurt, and Wells, scholars have attempted ad nauseam to locate the historical

source of the position Descartes opposes. Given the fact that almost every paper on Descartes on the eternal truths deals in one way or another with the question of the unnamed adversary, I don't wish to rehash the issue in any great detail. Thus, my discussion will be brief.

Descartes, as we have seen, explicitly contrasts his Creation Doctrine with the view expressed by (b):

- (b) The eternal truths are true independently of God in such a way that if, per impossibile, God were not to exist, the eternal truths would still be true.

Descartes, of course, rejects (b) because it violates the Dependence Thesis. Although there are several philosophers who appear to have held (b), I am only interested in those philosophers who prima facie held (b) with whom Descartes is known to have been familiar.

Before looking at the usual suspects, it is crucial to notice that Descartes' Creation Doctrine concerns the truth of the eternal truths; it does not concern the type of esse they have. This fact is commonly overlooked, particularly by those interested in locating Descartes within a tradition, stemming from the middle ages through Suarez, concerned with the ontological status of the essences of creatures (and the eternal truths concerning those essences) prior to their 'creaturely actualization' by God. Although the Creation Doctrine will have some consequences for the ontological status of eternal truths and essences, this is not Descartes' primary concern when he discusses the Creation Doctrine and the eternal truths. Descartes is

concerned with answering the question: 'What makes the eternal truths (necessarily) true? Given the scarcity of texts in which he even comes close to addressing it, it is clear that Descartes is much less interested in the question: 'What type of esse do the eternal truths have?'⁸ This distinction between the truth and esse of an eternal truth is important because, as we'll see, there are philosophers who held that the eternal truths are true independently of God; but these same philosophers held that the esse of an eternal truth is dependent on God.

Suarez

We know that Descartes was familiar with Suarez because he makes reference to Suarez in the Fourth Replies when justifying his use of the term 'material falsity': "I found the word 'materially' used in an identical sense to my own in the first philosophical author I came across, namely Suarez, in the Metaphysical Disputations part IX, section 2, number 4." (AT VII 235; CSM II 164) We also know that Descartes would have been familiar with Suarez from his days at La Flèche,⁹ and it is widely thought that Descartes' central concepts of esse objectivum and eminent and formal causation in the Third Meditation were inherited from Suarez.¹⁰ Moreover, Descartes' theory of distinctions bears too strong a resemblance to Suarez's to deny the influence of the latter on the former.

It is most commonly believed that Suarez is the philosopher whom Descartes opposed for holding (b).¹¹ If there is a 'smoking gun' text in Suarez, it is the following:

Again, those enunciations [i.e., eternal truths] are not true because they are known by God, but rather they are thus known because they are true [Rursus neque illae enuntiationes sunt verae quia cognoscuntur a Deo, sed potius ideo cognoscuntur, quia verae sunt]; otherwise no reason could be given why God would necessarily know them to be true. For if their truth came forth from God Himself, that would take place by means of God's will; hence it would not come forth of necessity, but voluntarily. Also, because in regard to these enunciations, the divine intellect is related as purely speculative, not as operative. But the speculative intellect supposes the truth of its object, it does not produce it. Therefore, enunciations like this...have eternal truth, not only as they are in the divine intellect but also in themselves and prescinding [praescindendo] from it. (DM XXXI.xii.40, emphasis mine)

The contrast between the first line of this quotation and Descartes' statements in his 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne is striking. Suarez's statement in the first line of the quoted passage is in direct opposition to Descartes' statement that "they [i.e., the eternal truths] are true or possible because God knows them to be true or possible." (AT I 149; CSMK 24) And Suarez's statement that the eternal truths "have eternal truth, not only as they are in the divine intellect, but also in themselves and prescinding from it," is in direct opposition to Descartes' insistence that the eternal truths are not "known by God to be true as if they were true independently of him." (AT I 149; CSMK 24)

In the passage above, Suarez is arguing against two parties: (i) those who think that the necessary truth of the eternal truths depends on the divine will and (ii) those who think it depends on the divine understanding. According to Suarez, the eternal truths cannot proceed from God's will because they would then not be necessary, but contingent, as the effect of a voluntary act. On the other hand, the eternal truths cannot be true merely because they are in the divine intellect for two reasons: (i) Because the divine intellect, in this case, presupposes the truth of its objects, i.e., it is 'speculative'. (ii) In criticizing the view that the eternal truths are true because they are the objects of the divine intellect, Suarez argues that this view doesn't sufficiently explain the difference between eternal truths and those truths that are merely contingent. As Suarez states:

Nor is it enough, were someone to answer with St. Thomas...that, with the destruction of the existence of creatures, these enunciations are true, not in themselves, but in the divine intellect. For, in this way, not only enunciations of the type wherein essential properties are predicated have eternal truth in the divine intellect, but also all accidental or contingent ones which are true. (DM XXXI.xii.40)¹²

Suarez here levels a powerful criticism: If being an object of the divine intellect were sufficient to make something an eternal truth, then every object of the divine intellect would be an eternal truth. However, God has understanding of all things, including contingent things. Therefore, being an object of the divine intellect is not sufficient to make something an eternal truth.

In order to avoid these difficulties, Suarez puts forth the view that the eternal truths are in the divine intellect, but they do not depend on God for their necessary truth. That is, Suarez's own view of the eternal truths seems to me to be that the esse of the eternal truths (and the essences they concern) depend on God. Before the creation of creatures, their essences have no real esse in themselves.¹³ Here Suarez disagrees with Henry of Ghent (d. 1293) , Master in Theology at Paris shortly after Aquinas, who famously held that prior to the creation of creatures in esse existentiae, their essences had a diminished but real esse called 'esse essentiae'. Henry argued that unless the essence of creatures had esse essentiae, they would be no different than impossibles and chimeras.¹⁴ If, Suarez argues, the eternal truths had some kind of esse in themselves, then God's creation would not be ex nihilo. In an objection to the Thomist John Capreolus (c. 1380-1444), Suarez states: "God would not have created all things from nothing but would have transferred them from one (kind of) esse to another (kind of) esse." (DM XXXI.ii.3, my gloss)¹⁵ So, the essences and eternal truths have no esse in se prior to the actualization of creatures, according to Suarez. The only type of esse they have is esse potentiale in causa in God; but this is not any kind of esse in se.¹⁶ It has also been suggested by Norman Wells that Suarez thinks that eternal truths have esse objectivum in the divine intellect, but this kind of esse is not something had intrinsically by

the thing itself; rather, it is an 'extrinsic denomination'.¹⁷ In any case, the eternal truths have no esse in themselves, but only in the divine intellect and in the divine power to cause them. That is, this extrinsic esse does depend on God.

But Suarez doesn't think that the truth of the eternal truths depends on God. Take the eternal truth expressed by (A):

(A) Man is an animal.

According to Suarez, the copula 'is' can be understood in two ways: call them 'the existential sense' and 'the essential sense'. If the copula is being understood in its existential sense, then (A), if true, entails the existence of its terms; hence, because the referents of the terms require an efficient cause of their existence, (A) is not eternally true in the existential sense, but only true when the referents of the terms are caused to exist. However, if the copula is being understood in its essential sense, (A) doesn't entail the existence of its terms. When understood in the essential sense, (A) is really a disguised conditional:

(A*) If man exists, then he is an animal.

(A*) entails nothing about the actual existence of its terms; thus, the truth of (A*) (which is an interpretation of (A)) does not depend on any efficient cause. It is in this sense that (A) is necessarily true, even if no man exists, and even if there is no efficient cause able to

produce man (i.e., God).¹⁸ Thus, there are eternal truths which do not depend on God for their truth.¹⁹

Norman Wells has argued that the common opinion that Suarez is Descartes' unnamed adversary is false. Wells points out that the the complex structure of DM XXXI can easily mislead one into thinking that Suarez holds (b), when in fact, it is certain Thomists (Henry of Ghent, Paulus Socinas, John Capreolus) who hold (b).²⁰ He argues that the widespread misreading of Suarez as a Doctrinal Adversary of Descartes has arisen from the fact that, in much of DM XXXI, Suarez is playing certain positions concerning essences off of one another; so, it isn't clear when he is presenting his own positive views on the subject. Although I believe Wells is mistaken about Suarez's views, even if we grant his point, it is irrelevant to the present inquiry. Let us grant, for the moment, Wells' point that Suarez is not a Doctrinal Adversary of Descartes, but the manner in which Suarez presents his own views allows for a natural misreading. In that case, it would not be shocking to think that Descartes himself could have been misled by Suarez. Hence, Suarez could be Descartes' In-Mind Adversary. Moreover, even if Wells' is correct, Suarez is a prima facie Doctrinal Adversary. In any case, the texts from Suarez which I quoted above are as close as we'll get to a smoking gun, i.e., someone with whom Descartes was familiar and who seemingly held (b).

Duns Scotus

A position similar to Suarez's concerning the esse and the truth of the eternal truths is held by Duns Scotus: the esse of the eternal truths is dependent on God, but their necessary truth does not depend on God.²¹ We know that Descartes was (at least a little) familiar with Duns Scotus, although the extent to which he knew Scotus' works is unclear. In fact, the only mention Descartes makes of Scotus is in reply to Caterus concerning Scotus' famous 'formal distinction'. (AT VII 100, 120-21; CSM II 72-3, 85-6) Given that Caterus provides Descartes with an account of Scotus' formal distinction in the First Objections, it isn't clear that Descartes was familiar with Scotus' ideas on anything before Caterus brought them to his attention. On the other hand, Roger Ariew has made a convincing case that Scotistic thought was prevalent in Paris during Descartes' life.²² The prevalence of Scotism doesn't entail, however, that Descartes knew Scotus' work.

Regardless of the depth of Descartes' familiarity with Scotus, there are passages in which Scotus clearly holds something like (b).²³ The following are smoking-gun texts:

The man is a possible being by logical potency, because it is not repugnant and the chimera is an impossible being by opposite impossibility because it is repugnant...This logical possibility could remain separately in power by its own nature even if there were, per impossibile, no omnipotence to which it would be an object.²⁴

[T]herefore, that is simply impossible with which esse is incompatible per se, and which is initially of itself such that it is incompatible with esse, and

not due to some relationship to God, affirmative or negative; instead, esse would be incompatible with it if per impossibile God were not to exist. (Ord I 43.q.un. 7)

Much of Scotus' view of modality and its relation to God occurs in his criticism of Henry of Ghent. In his Quodlibetal Questions, Henry argued that God's ability to do x is prior to the possibility of x (i.e., x is possible because God can do/make x); but the impossibility of x is prior to God's inability to do/make x (i.e., for any x that God cannot do, God cannot do x because x is impossible.).²⁵ Scotus takes the opportunity to tease apart the issues of what God can do and what is possible. Scotus' view is that qua something that God can actually produce, an essence is first (i.e., in the first instant of nature) produced in esse intelligibile as an object of the divine intellect and then (in the second instant of nature) in esse possibile as something able to be actually created by God.²⁶ That is, in order to be a possible object of God's omnipotent will, something must be produced in esse intelligibile and esse possibile in God's intellect.²⁷ But the logical possibility of a thing does not depend on this production in God's intellect, but only on non repugnantia terminorum.²⁸ This non repugnantia terminorum is precisely the logical possibility of the thing regardless of its being produced in esse intelligibile by God.²⁹ So, although the esse of the eternal truths depends on God, their logically necessary or possible truth does not. In fact, Scotus thinks that it is precisely this logically necessary or possible truth which

enables God to produce them in esse intelligibile and esse possibile and perhaps in esse actuale. As Scotus states:

From all this it is apparent that God's potency is not the precise reason why something is makeable and producible, but along with it is required that there be no formal incompatibility among its parts. (Lect I d.43 q.un.n. 17)

Admittedly, this account of Scotus is contentious.³⁰

However, it seems to be the only plausible way to make sense of the 'smoking gun' texts quoted above in which he states that modal truths would be true even if, per impossibile, God did not exist. That is, the truth of the eternal truths are independent of God's production of their being; and it is their truth which makes them able to be produced by God (although it is their production in the divine intellect which makes them able to be actually created by God).

In addition to Suarez, Scotus is a figure with whom Descartes was (at least a little) familiar and who is at least a prima facie Doctrinal adversary.³¹ So, we can feel fairly confident in saying that these two philosophers represent the best candidates for being Descartes' unnamed adversary.

Given that Descartes holds the Dependence Thesis, he obviously cannot accept the position expressed by (b). However, we cannot conclude, that Descartes is therefore committed to the Creation Doctrine. In fact, the great majority of philosophers and theologians, from the thirteenth century through the seventeenth century, opposed the position expressed by (b); this does not entail that the

majority of philosophers and theologians held the Creation Doctrine. As Curley (1984) points out, (b) and the Creation Doctrine do not seem to exhaust the alternatives open to Descartes. For instance, it may be suggested that Descartes could hold the Dependence Thesis without holding that the eternal truths depend on God's will and are freely created. Moreover, the fact that Descartes explicitly contrasts the Creation Doctrine with (b), a view that denies only the Dependence Thesis, would seem to indicate that Descartes could have helped himself to any position on the matter that did not deny the Dependence Thesis. And in fact, there is a moderate position situated somewhere between the Creation Doctrine and (b) that was widely held in the centuries before Descartes and even later in the seventeenth century by Leibniz. This view holds, with Descartes, that the Dependence Thesis is true, but it differs from Descartes precisely in denying that the eternal truths depend on God's will and are freely created. This moderate alternative holds that the eternal truths are dependent on God, but not on God's will, but rather his intellect. This view was so widely held that Leibniz states that "the eternal truths, which until the time of Descartes had been named an object of the divine understanding, suddenly became an object of the will." (Theodicy § 186) So, in order to understand why Descartes accepts the Creation Doctrine despite the availability of a moderate alternative, we must understand

why Descartes cannot accept the moderate alternative. The locus classicus of this moderate position is found in Aquinas; so, that is where we will begin.

A Moderate Alternative: Aquinas and Leibniz

Aquinas held the Dependence Thesis concerning the eternal truths, but he spelled it out differently from how Descartes did.³² He held that it amounted to (c):

- (c) The eternal truths depend on God's understanding (but not his will) in such a way that if, per impossibile, God did not exist, the eternal truths would not be true.

Aquinas presents his statement of (c) when considering a point made by Augustine:

It would seem that created truth is eternal. For Augustine says that nothing is more eternal than the ratio of circularity and that two and three are five. But the truth of these things is created truth. Therefore created truth is eternal. (ST Ia 16.7)

Aquinas replies that "God alone is eternal"; thus, either truths about things other than God are not eternal or they are eternally true in God. Because truth is essentially mind-dependent, according to Aquinas, insofar as truth involves the conformity of what is in the mind to the thing being understood (ST Ia 16.1), the truth of a proposition can be eternal only if there is an eternal mind. As Aquinas states:

If no intellect were eternal, no truth would be eternal. But since the divine intellect is eternal, truth has eternity in it alone. Nor does it follow from this that anything other than God is eternal; because truth in the divine intellect is God himself. (ST Ia.16.7.res)

From this it is clear that Aquinas thinks that eternal truths have some sort of being in the divine intellect; and in virtue of being in the divine intellect and being understood by God, the eternal truths are true. As Aquinas states in reply to Augustine's point: "the ratio of circularity and that two and three are five possess eternity in the divine mind." (ST Ia 16.7. ad 1)

This account raises a worry expressed by Suarez: Eternal truths are necessarily true, but being in the divine mind cannot be sufficient for the necessity of the eternal truths; after all, God understands contingent truths as well, i.e., they are in the divine mind as well.³³ So, it seems that Aquinas must either hold that merely being in the divine mind is not sufficient for the necessity of a truth, or he must hold that there is no difference in the modal status between an eternal truth and a (so-called) contingent truth.³⁴

Aquinas does provide an account of how necessary truths differ from contingent truths, although it is not explicitly stated. In SCG I.67, he states the what differentiates necessary truths from contingent truths is that God knows the former to be necessary and the latter to be contingent. However, the context in which this explanation is found concerns causal necessity and not logical or metaphysical necessity.³⁵ Thus, this answer is not particularly helpful in differentiating the logically or metaphysically necessary from the logically or metaphysically contingent.

Later, in the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth century, Leibniz argued that the eternal truths depend on the divine understanding. In the Monadology, he states:

It is also true that God is not only the source of existences, but also that of essences insofar as they are real, that is, or the source of that which is real in possibility. This is because God's understanding is the realm of the eternal truths or that of the ideas on which they depend; without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible. (§43,AG 218)

Thus, Leibniz also holds the Dependence Thesis. However, just as Aquinas does, Leibniz understands it in the sense given by (c). This is also clear in Theodicy §184, in which Leibniz writes that

one must not say with some Scotists, that the eternal truths would exist even though there were no understanding, not even that of God. For it is, in my judgement, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal truths, albeit God's will have no part therein. (emphasis mine)

It should be noted that Leibniz is here discussing the esse of the eternal truths, not their truth. The kind of esse that the eternal truths have is esse-in-the-divine-understanding; and they have esse because they are in the divine intellect. The eternal truths are not true, because they are in the divine intellect; rather, they are true because of the essences of the things contained as ideas in the divine understanding, although these ideas could not exist without God³⁶ What is clear is that Leibniz certainly

thought that the eternal truths depend on God with regard to their esse and their truth; and God's will has no role with regard to either.

The advantages that Leibniz thinks he gains from such a view are: (i) the Dependence Thesis remains intact. (ii) it preserves his account of freedom, both human and divine, in which one of the necessary conditions for freedom is that the action performed is chosen from among given possibilities.³⁷ And (iii), because God's will plays no part in determining which truths are necessary, there is no way an eternal truth can be false; the eternal truths are simply 'given' in the divine intellect.

So, given that (c) is an alternative available to those accepting the Dependence Thesis, why can't Descartes hold the moderate view expressed by (c)? In the 3 June 1630 letter to Mersenne, after stating the Creation Doctrine, Descartes explicitly mentions two reasons for the Creation Doctrine, reasons which eliminate the possibility of accepting (c):

You ask also what necessitated God to create these truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal - just as free as he was not to create the world...You ask what God did in order to produce them. I reply that from all eternity he willed and understood them to be, and by that very fact he created them...In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually. (AT I 152-3; CSMK 26)

In this explanation, we get a statement of Descartes' reasons for the Creation Doctrine: First, God's freedom requires that the Creation Doctrine is true, and second, the

Doctrine of Divine Simplicity requires that the Creation is true. What isn't clear at this point is exactly how divine freedom and divine simplicity eliminate the moderate alternative, (c), from Descartes' consideration, and how they require that the Creation Doctrine is true. To this, we now turn in the next two chapters.

Endnotes

¹See AT VIII 14; CSM I 201: "There is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything. When I say 'everything' I mean all things: for God does not will the evil of sin, which is not a thing."

²See AT I 152; CSMK 25.

³See Wells (1961), Cronin (1960) (1966).

⁴In 1640, when Descartes asks Mersenne to recommend a general book on scholastic philosophy, Mersenne recommends Eustachius a Sancto Paulo's Summa philosophica quadripartita (1609), which Descartes states to be "the best book of its kind ever made." (AT III 232; CSMK 156) Eustachius (1573-1640) was a professor at the Sorbonne.

⁵Although Mersenne and Arnauld both discuss Augustine with Descartes, there is no reason to suppose that Descartes was particularly familiar with Augustine's works with the exception of the passages sent to him by Mersenne in 1641. (AT III 283; CSMK 168). Even eight years after the letter to Mersenne, in which Descartes first presents his Creation Doctrine, Descartes claims that he has not "managed to obtain the works of the Saint [i.e., Augustine]." (AT II 435; CSMK 129) Although in a 21 April 1641, letter to Mersenne, Descartes seems to have some familiarity with Augustine. (AT III 360; CSMK 179)

⁶See Ariew (1999) p. 29.

⁷Wells (1960), (1961), (1981)

⁸The only texts in which Descartes explicitly discusses the ontological status of the eternal truths are AT VIII 22-3; CSM I 208 and AT I 152; CSMK 25; and even these texts are particularly uninformative. For some interesting attempts to answer this question and related questions see Chappell (1997), Nolan (1997), and Schmaltz (1990)

⁹Ariew states that "Descartes was familiar with [Suarez's] work - that Suarez's Disputationes Metaphysicae was the handbook in metaphysics for Descartes's teachers." (1999) p. 39. Cf. Gilson (1913).

¹⁰Cf. Normore (1986), O'Neill (1987)

¹¹See Alanen (1985), Curley (1984) (although Curley admits that this may be a misreading of Suarez), Cronin (1966), Gaukroger (1995), Dear (1988).

¹²Cf. Wells (1981) p. 161 and Alanen (1985) p. 159.

¹³See DM XXXI.ii.1: "First, it is to be established that the essence of a creature or the creature de se, before it is made by God, has in se no true real being, ...but is altogether nothing."

¹⁴Suarez was by no means alone in criticizing Henry's esse essentiae. Many other philosophers, including Scotus, objected to Henry's theory as well. See Wippel (1981), Henninger (1989), and Cross (1999)

¹⁵See Wells (1981) p. 76-7. Scotus also levels this objection against Henry of Ghent's esse essentiae account. Cf. Cross (1999).

¹⁶Cf. DM XXXI.ii.2, and Wells (1981) p. 77-8,

¹⁷Wells (1981) p. 80-1. This understandably should remind us of Caterus' view of esse objectivum in the First Objections. See AT VII 92-3; CSM II 66-7.

¹⁸See Alanen (1985), Bolton (1998), Cronin (1966), Curley (1984), Wells (1981).

¹⁹DM XXXI.xii.44 & 45: "This entire controversy (as it seems to me, at least) consists in the different signification of the copula 'is', by which the terms in these enunciations are connected, for it can be taken in two ways. First, to indicate a connection, actual or real, of the terms existing in the thing itself, so that, when it is said 'man is an animal', it is an indication that it is really so. Secondly, it only indicates that the predicate is of the nature of the subject, whether the terms exist or not. In the first sense, the truth of the propositions undoubtedly depends on the existence of the terms...[T]he truth of these enunciations depend on an efficient cause, on which the existence of the terms depend...[B]ut then propositions are true in another sense, even though the terms do not exist; and in the same sense they have necessary and eternal truth, because, since the copula 'is', in the stated sense, does not indicate existence, it does not ascribe actual reality to the terms in themselves. So, for its own truth, it does not require existence or actual reality...because propositions in this sense are reduced to a hypothetical or conditional sense. For, when we say man is animal, while abstracting from time, we say nothing else than that this is the nature of man, that is is impossible for man to come to be without being an animal. Consequently, just as this conditional proposition is eternal: 'if it is man, it is animal,' or 'if it runs, it moves,' so too, this is eternal: 'man is an animal,' or 'running is motion.' From this it also follows that these connections, in this sense, do not have an efficient cause."

20. Wells (1961) p. 189: quoting Paulus Socinas: "Si per impossibile Deus non esset, et nulla causae agens, hominem esse animal esset verum, ergo hoc complexum non est a causa agente." Wells (1961) p. 181: "even though there is some basis for pointing to Suarez as Descartes' adversary, the position opposed by Descartes in his doctrine on the eternal truths is more exactly found in the tradition of the...Thomistae."

²¹Cf. Alanen (1985) p. 177-179.

²²Ariew (1999).

²³Leibniz certainly thought that, perhaps not Scotus, but the Scotists held (b). See Theodicy § 184. Cf. Cronin (1966) p. 213 and Alanen and Knuuttila (1988). In a paper presented at the Cornell Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy in June 2000, Peter King supported reading Scotus as, at least, a Doctrinal Adversary of Descartes.

²⁴Ordinatio I.36.60-1, quoted in Knuuttila (1993) pp. 141-2.

²⁵As Marilyn Adams points out, Henry actually proposes two other ways of understanding the relationship between eternal truths and God. See Adams (1987) p. 1068-9.

²⁶See John Duns Scotus (1987) v.5 and Alanen (1985) p. 177.

²⁷See Alanen (1985) p. 177.

²⁸Ordinatio I.7.i, 27, quoted in Peter King's "Scotus on the Possibility of Possibilities," given at the 2000 Cornell Colloquium in Medieval Philosophy.

²⁹Because Aquinas similarly defines the absolute modalities in terms of habitudine terminorum, it is difficult to see how he can avoid Scotus' position.

³⁰This view is opposed by Wolter (1950) and Normore (1986). See Knuuttila (1993)

³¹Considering that Descartes presents his Creation Doctrine under questioning from Mersenne, it would seem natural to suppose that Mersenne was in fact Descartes' unnamed adversary. In fact, Jean-Luc Marion (1981) has suggested that this is the case. However, Peter Dear has shown conclusively, I believe, that Mersenne did not hold (or seem to hold) the view expressed by (b). See Dear (1988) p. 56-60.

³²Cf. Curley (1984) p. 583-4.

³³See ST Ia 14, SCG III.75

³⁴See DM XXXI.xii.40.

³⁵Aquinas' most detailed discussion of the difference between necessity and contingency, is found in ST IIa IIae 83.2. However, this discussion also concerns physical or causal necessity and contingency, not the logical or metaphysical modalities in which we are presently interested. For an interesting discussion of the different types of necessity in Aquinas, see MacIntosh (1998).

³⁶See Leibniz (1948) p. 365 and Robert Adams (1994) p. 191.

³⁷See Theodicy §288.

CHAPTER 2

THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE SIMPLICITY IN DESCARTES

Introduction

As we have seen in the end of Chapter One, one of Descartes' explicitly mentioned reasons for holding the Creation Doctrine is his understanding of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). Stated in its simplest form, DDS is the thesis that God is absolutely simple, i.e., there are no parts and no composition in God. Descartes mentions DDS in connection with the Creation Doctrine in several texts.¹ For instance, in the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes:

In God, willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it, and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (AT I 149; CSMK 24)

DDS was unquestionably held by most philosophers and theologians in the seventeenth century. Descartes inherits DDS from a long line of philosophical and theological predecessors including Augustine, Anselm and Aquinas; and his account does not differ dramatically from their accounts, although the consequences Descartes deduces from DDS differ greatly from those of his philosophical predecessors. In fact, Descartes takes DDS seriously enough to deduce exactly what honestly ought to be deduced from it.

In this chapter, I examine DDS as a reason for Descartes' Creation Doctrine. I will argue that Descartes must reject the moderate alternative, (c), because of his acceptance of DDS. (I will argue, in the next chapter, that the issue of Divine Freedom also (partly) explains Descartes' commitment to the Creation Doctrine.)² In the first part, I will examine Descartes' motivations for holding DDS. I do this by comparing Descartes' motivations with those of Saint Thomas Aquinas. I do this for two reasons: first, Aquinas' account of DDS is the classic statement of the doctrine; and second, Descartes' reasons for holding DDS form a subset of Aquinas' reasons. In the second part, I examine Descartes' theory of distinctions. A good understanding of Descartes' theory of distinctions is necessary for understanding his version of DDS; we must know how things can be distinct in order to know how something (e.g., God) can be simple. In the third part, I give an account of Descartes' version of DDS. The account I give may initially strike some as contentious, because it is commonly thought that Descartes introduces a radical and strict notion of divine simplicity, such that there are not even conceptual distinctions in God. I will show that Descartes' texts simply do not support such a radical version of DDS. Finally, I will show that DDS eliminates (c) as a reasonable alternative to the Creation Doctrine.

Reasons for DDS: Aquinas

Descartes' reasons for holding DDS will become clearer upon consideration of a classic statement of DDS and its motivations. The classic statement I speak of is that of Thomas Aquinas in Summa theologiae Ia 3. 7 and Summa Contra Gentiles I.18. Although Augustine (De Civitate Dei XI.10), Anselm (Proslogion XVIII and Monologion XVI and XVII), and others prior to Aquinas present DDS, Aquinas' statement of DDS seems to me to be the most fully developed account of DDS in Descartes' predecessors.

In the Summa theologiae, Aquinas presents his main argument that God must be simple because he cannot satisfy the conditions for being composite. There are several ways in which something may be composite according to Aquinas:

- For any x, x is composite iff
- or (a) x is composed of extended parts (ST Ia 3.1),
 - or (b) x is composed of form and matter (ST Ia 3.2),
 - or (c) x differs from x's nature (ST Ia 3.3),
 - or (d) x's essence differs from x's existence (ST Ia 3.4)
 - or (e) there is a difference between x's genus and differentia (ST Ia 3.5)
 - or (f) x is composed of substance and accidents (ST Ia 3.6)³

Without going into the details of Aquinas' position, it is sufficient to note that he argues that God is not such that he can satisfy any of (a) through (f).⁴ We may present Aquinas' initial reasoning as follows:

1. For any x, x can be composite iff x satisfies (a) or (b) or (c)...or (f).
2. God does not satisfy (a) or (b) or (c)...or (f).
3. Therefore, God is not composite.

And with the additional premise:

4. If x cannot be composite, then x is simple. (ST Ia 3.7,res)

we arrive at Aquinas' conclusion:

5. Therefore, God is simple.⁵

In addition to this reasoning, Aquinas provides several other reasons in favor of DDS. In the interest of brevity and relevance, I present only three of them:

Reason 1: God's aseity requires that he be absolutely independent of everything non-identical with himself (i.e., nothing else is required for God to exist), and everything non-identical with God is dependent on him (i.e., everything besides God requires him for their existence). But Aquinas thinks that the following principle is true:

S2: A composite is dependent on, or posterior to, its parts. (ST Ia 3.7.res)⁶

A brief word on S2 is in order. As Christopher Hughes notes, Aquinas employed several different, extensionally non-equivalent senses of dependence and the closely related concept of priority.⁷ However, it seems to me that the notion of priority employed by Aquinas in the present argument against divine composition is what Hughes calls 'ontological priority'. We may define it as follows:

x is ontologically prior to y =_{df.} it is impossible for y to exist without x but it is possible for x to exist without y.

Ontological priority is closely related to ontological dependence in the following manner:

x is ontologically dependent on y iff y is ontologically prior to x.

Moreover, Aquinas argues for the following:

S3: If some thing C is composed of parts p_1 and p_2 ,
then $C \neq p_1$ and $C \neq p_2$. (ST Ia 3.7.res)

If S2 and S3 are true, then God cannot be composite because he would then be ontologically dependent on something non-identical with himself. Because it is metaphysically impossible for God to depend on anything non-identical with himself, he cannot be a composite.⁸ As Aquinas states, "Every composite, moreover, is subsequent to its components. The first being, therefore, which is God, has no components." (SCG I 18) Thus, God is simple.⁹

Reason 2: Aquinas thinks that if some thing is a composite of parts p_1 and p_2 , then there is a cause which is responsible for p_1 and p_2 composing C. That is to say, a plurality of things will remain a plurality unless caused by something else to form a composite. So, if God is composite, then there is a cause of his composition. However, God, as the first cause, is essentially uncaused. Therefore, he is not composite.¹⁰

Reason 3: Every composite is potentially dissoluble or separable. But it is absurd to suppose that God can be separated into constituent parts. As Aquinas states:

Every composite, furthermore, is potentially dissoluble. This arises from the nature of composition...Now, what is dissoluble can not-be. This does not befit God, since he is through himself the necessary being. There is, therefore, no composition in God. (SCG I 18)¹¹

Aquinas is implicitly employing S3 here. He thinks that it belongs to the nature of a composite to be potentially dissoluble.¹² But if God is composite, he is dissoluble;

that is, if God is a composite C, composed of parts p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n , then C can be separated into its constituent parts p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n . But, according to S3, none of the parts are God; so, if he is separable into parts that are not him, then he can fail to exist, even if the parts exist. But God is a necessary being. Therefore, God cannot fail to exist; hence, he cannot be composite, if S3 is true.

Each of these reasons, as well as the others I have omitted, is sufficient, according to Aquinas, to show that God is not composite, and hence he is simple.¹³

Reasons for DDS: Descartes

Although it is clear from many texts that Descartes held a version of DDS, the reasons why he held it are not as explicitly and systematically stated as Aquinas' reasons are. However, Descartes does present some reasons for holding DDS, and, perhaps not surprisingly, they are all reasons that Aquinas provides.

Descartes presents a reason for DDS not interestingly different from Aquinas' Reason 1. For instance, in the Discourse on Method, Descartes states:

And as I observed that all composition is evidence of dependence and that dependence is manifestly a defect, I concluded that it could not be a perfection in God to be composed of two natures and consequently that he was not composed of them. (AT VI 35; CSM I 128-9, emphasis mine)

Although Descartes does not explicitly state that a composite is dependent on its parts in the manner stated by

Aquinas, he does tell us that it belongs to the nature of a composite to be dependent, either on its parts or on an efficient cause.¹⁴ If the former, then he is explicitly stating Aquinas' Reason 1; if the latter, then he is stating something similar to Aquinas' Reason 2: All composites are causally dependent on something else. But Descartes states that "if God exists, it is a contradiction that anything else should exist which was not created by him." (AT VII 188; CSM II 132) Thus, God cannot be dependent either on parts or on an efficient cause distinct from himself.¹⁵

In many texts, Descartes presents a reason for DDS no different from Aquinas' Reason 3: Composites are dissoluble or separable. For instance, in a passage from the Second Replies, which may remind us as much of Anselm as of Aquinas, Descartes states:

The very nature of a body implies many imperfections, such as its divisibility into parts, the fact that each of its parts is different and so on; for it is self-evident that it is a greater perfection to be undivided than to be divided, and so on. (AT VII 138; CSM II 99, emphasis mine)

Descartes reiterates this type of thinking in Principles I § 23, where he states:

There are many things such that, although we recognize some perfection in them, we also find in them some imperfection or limitation, and these therefore cannot belong to God. For example, the nature of body includes divisibility along with extension in space, and since being divisible is an imperfection, it is certain that God is not a body. (AT VIII 13; CSM I 200-1, emphasis mine)

Although these passages only claim that God is not a body because bodies are divisible, we can easily see that the

same will hold for other composites.¹⁶ That is, God cannot be a composite because composites are divisible; and Descartes believes that "the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important perfections which I understand him to have." (AT VII 50; CSM II 34, emphasis mine) Thus, so far, we have a Descartes who presents quite traditional reasons for holding DDS.

Kinds of Distinctions in Descartes

As is well-established, Descartes was heavily influenced by his education by the Jesuit scholastics at La Flèche, particularly with respect to his metaphysics and philosophical theology.¹⁷ This is especially apparent in his discussion of the different types of distinctions.¹⁸ Although Descartes follows the scholastic tradition (from Suarez) in holding that there are three types of distinction, he, as usual, puts his own spin on things.¹⁹ Descartes holds, as do Scotus, Ockham, and Suarez, that the three types of distinction are real, of reason [rationis] or conceptual, and an intermediate distinction, which Descartes calls, following Suarez, a modal distinction.²⁰

The following is not intended to be an exhaustive account of Descartes' theory of distinctions; that is well-beyond the scope of this project. I simply wish to give enough details about the theory to enable us to address the issue of DDS.

The Real Distinction

Although the most famous application and discussion of the real distinction in Descartes is found in the well-known argument for mind-body distinctness in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes presents his most fully-developed account of the real distinction in Principles I.60. He begins by explaining which kind of things are really distinct:

Strictly speaking, a real distinction exists only between two or more substances; and we can perceive that two substances are really distinct simply from the fact that we can clearly and distinctly understand [intelligere] one apart from the other. (AT VIII 28; CSM I 213)

As with all of Descartes' characterizations of distinctions, he provides a 'metaphysical' characterization and an 'epistemological guide' to the distinctions via clear and distinct perception (or, in some cases, the lack of clear and distinct perception).²¹ On the metaphysical side, we have

RD1: There is a real distinction between x and y iff x and y are different substances.²²

RD1 is not particularly informative because it doesn't provide a deep analysis of the real distinction; it merely tells us which type of things are really distinct. Moreover, RD1 is not helpful unless we know what Descartes means by 'substance'. Fortunately, Descartes tells us that "by substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence." (AT VIII 24; CSM I 210) Spinoza would later famously exploit this cartesian notion of substance to

arrive at his substance monism.²³ Descartes immediately recognizes such a worry; after all, this definition of 'substance' would entail that there is only one substance, namely God.²⁴ But Descartes allows a looser sense of 'substance' in which there can be finite, created substances.²⁵ Thus

x is a substance =_{df.} either (i) x does not depend on anything else, or (ii) x depends only on God.

Descartes contrasts substances with modes or accidents and attributes, each of which depends on something besides God, namely a substance in which to 'inhere'. Though substances have a causal dependence on God, they are independent of modes or accidents. Modes, on the other hand, are not only causally dependent on God, they are also 'substantially dependent' in that they depend on the substance in which they inhere.²⁶

The manner in which we know that x is really distinct from y is through clear and distinct perception of x apart from y and vice versa, according to Descartes. The fact that we can clearly and distinctly perceive x and y apart entails, via the Second Meditation 'truth rule' (i.e., whatever I clearly and distinctly perceive is true), that x and y can exist apart from each other. This is raised explicitly in the Sixth Meditation argument for mind-body distinctness:

The fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God (AT VII 78; CSM II 54, emphasis mine)²⁷

The separability of really distinct things is reiterated in the Principles:

For no matter how closely God may have united them [i.e., mind and body], the power which he previously had of separating them or keeping one in being without the other, is something he could not lay aside; and things which God has the power to separate, or to keep in being separately, are really distinct. (AT VIII 29; CSM I 213, emphasis mine)

Thus, Descartes holds RD2 and RD3,

RD2: There is a real distinction between x and y iff x is separable from y and y is separable from x.

where 'separability' is analyzed as follows:

RD3: x is separable from y iff x can really exist without y.²⁸

That is, in the case of a real distinction between x and y, there is a mutual separability between x and y.²⁹ In the case of the real distinction between mind and body, both the mind and body would remain complete substances even if they were separated.³⁰

However, there is a slight problem with RD2: If RD2 is true, then Descartes is committed to the thesis that there is no real distinction between God and his creatures. Because God is a necessary being and is the efficient cause and conserver of all things, nothing can be separated from God or exist independently.³¹ So, in the interest of charity, we should not attribute RD2 to Descartes, but rather RD2* and RD2**:

RD2*: There is a real distinction between a created x and a created y iff x is separable from y and y is separable from x.

RD2** : There is a real distinction between God and a created x iff God is separable from x, and x is separable from all created things.³²

The Modal Distinction

The role played by separability is just as pronounced and important in Descartes' explication of the intermediate distinction, the modal distinction. However, unlike the real distinction, in which there is mutual separability of substances, in the case of the modal distinction, there is separability, but it is not mutual, nor is it between substances. As Descartes states:

A modal distinction can be taken in two ways: Firstly, as a distinction between a mode, properly so-called, and the substance of which it is a mode; and secondly, as a distinction between two modes of the same substance. (AT VIII 29; CSM I 213-14)

The following (uninformatively) captures the two types of modal distinction:

MD1: There is a modal distinction between x and y iff (i) x is a substance and y is a mode of x or vice versa, or (ii) x and y are two modes of the same substance.

Once again, Descartes gives us an epistemic guide to recognizing the distinction in question. We can clearly and distinctly perceive a substance apart from a mode but not vice versa, and we can understand one mode apart from another mode (of the same substance), but we can understand neither without the substance of which they are both modes.³³ As Descartes states:

[The modal distinction] applies only to incomplete entities...It is sufficient for this kind of distinction that one thing be conceived distinctly and

separately from another by an abstraction of the intellect which conceives the thing inadequately. (AT VII 120;CSM II 85-6)

That is, the mode which is only modally distinct from its substance will not be conceived adequately precisely because an adequate conception of a mode necessarily involves the substance of which it is a mode.³⁴

What is important to notice about Descartes' characterization of the modal distinction is the work being done, once again, by the notion of separability: While the substance is separable from its modes, a mode is not separable from the substance of which it is a mode. In the example used by Descartes, although we can understand a body (corporeal substance) existing apart from its shape and motion, we cannot understand its shape or motion existing apart from the body.³⁵

We can now give a deeper analysis of the two types of modal distinction for Descartes:

MD2: There is a modal distinction₁ between x and y iff x is separable from y but y is not separable from x (or vice versa).

MD3: There is a modal distinction₂ between x and y iff (i) there is a substance S, of which x and y are modes, (ii) x is not separable from S and y is not separable from S, but S is separable from x and S is separable from y, and (iii) S-with-x is separable from S-with-y (and vice versa).³⁶

Modal distinctions, unlike real distinctions, merely require a non-mutual separability³⁷ between substance and mode.

The Conceptual Distinction

Descartes introduces the conceptual distinction as follows:

[A] conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. (AT VIII 30; CSM I 214)

Descartes distinguishes attributes from modes and accidents. The latter are inessential properties of a substance, and the former are essential properties of a substance.³⁸ When speaking strictly, Descartes states that among creatures there are only two ('principal', as he calls them) attributes: thought and extension, which constitute the essence of mind and body, respectively.³⁹ But when speaking more loosely, he states that other essential properties are attributes.⁴⁰

Thus,

CD1: There is a conceptual distinction between x and y iff (i) x is a substance and y is an essential property of x (or vice versa) or (ii) x and y are essential properties of the same substance.

CD2: If substance S cannot exist without attributes a_1 and a_2 , and a_1 cannot exist without S or a_2 , and a_2 cannot exist without S or a_1 , then there is a conceptual distinction between S and a_1 and a_2 and between a_1 and a_2 .

Unlike the real and modal distinction, in which there is some degree of separability involved, in a conceptual distinction this feature is lacking. That is,

CD3: x and y are conceptually distinct only if x and y are mutually-inseparable.

It is important to note that a conceptual distinction between x and y is one that is, in some sense, created by the mind.⁴¹

Descartes' inherits his understanding of the modal and conceptual distinctions is large part from Suarez. This is apparent from the fact that in one of Descartes' most sustained discussions of the modal and conceptual distinction, he basically repeats Suarez's account from the Seventh Metaphysical Disputation. Suarez states his account as follows:

Conceptual distinctions are usually considered to be of two kinds. One, which has no foundation in reality is called 'distinctio rationis ratiocinantis', because it arises exclusively from the reflection and activity of the intellect. The other which has a foundation in reality is called by many 'distinctio rationis ratiocinatae'....For this type of conceptual distinction can be understood as pre-existing in reality prior to the discriminating operation of the mind, so as to be thought of as imposing itself, as it were, on the intellect, and to require the intellect only to recognize it, but not to constitute it. (DM VII.1.4, emphasis mine)

Descartes also affirms that there are these two general types of conceptual distinction. He writes of "a conceptual distinction - that is, a distinction made by reason ratiocinatae. I do not recognize any distinction made by reason ratiocinantis - that is, one which has no foundation in reality." (AT IV 349;CSMK 280) Unfortunately, Descartes does not explain what he means by a conceptual distinction having a foundation or lacking one; in fact, his entire discussion of the conceptual distinction is grossly underdeveloped. However, if we can assume, as I do, that

Descartes' account of distinctions bears much similarity to Suarez's account, then we can catch a glimpse of what Descartes means by a 'foundation in reality' by looking at Suarez's explanation. Suarez explains what he means when he says that a distinctio rationis ratiocinatae has a foundation in reality as follows:

A distinctio rationis ratiocinatae, because it arises not entirely from the sheer operation of the intellect, but from an occasion offered by the thing itself on which the mind is reflecting. Hence the foundation that is held to exist in nature for this distinction is not a true and actual distinction between things regarded as distinct; for then not the foundation of the distinction but the distinction itself would precede mental operation. Rather the foundation must be either the eminence of the object which the mind thus distinguishes...or at any rate, it must be some reference to other things which are truly distinct in the real order, and with respect to which such a connection is excogitated or conceived. (DM VII.1.4, emphasis mine)

That is, this type of distinction is not something that obtains in the world, but there is something in the world which allows us to make a distinction. According to Suarez, in the case of conceptual distinctions in God, "we partition into concepts in line with the various effects of which that eminent virtue is the principle, or by analogy with various virtues which we find distinct in man, but which in an ineffably eminent manner are found united in the absolutely simple virtue of God." (DM VII.1.5) Take, for instance, the latter foundation for the conceptual distinction. What Suarez means is that there is a conceptual distinction with a foundation (i.e., rationis ratiocinatae) if the following obtains: there are properties or faculties, p_1, p_2, \dots, p_n ,

which are distinct in man (for instance), but which in God are identical. For instance, man's goodness, intellect, power, etc., are distinct, but in God, all of these are identical. However, we can come to have different concepts of God's goodness, intellect, power, etc., by considering their distinctness in man. In this way, the conceptual distinction between God's intellect and power has a foundation in reality because there are some things in which these faculties are not identical. In spite of Descartes' silence on this matter, he certainly does recognize the difference between a distinctio rationis ratiocinatae and a distinctio rationis ratiocinantis (although he rejects the usefulness of the latter); as such, Suarez's explanation is certainly open to him.⁴²

What goes completely unnoticed is that not only does Descartes distinguish between a distinctio rationis ratiocinatae and rationis ratiocinantis, but he also implicitly distinguishes two types of the distinctio rationis ratiocinatae: (i) those that hold between two things that are essentially connected, such as body and endurance (i.e., there is no possible state of affairs in which a body exists without enduring); and (ii) those that hold between two things that are identical, such as a body and its extension or a rational animal and a man.⁴³ A distinctio rationis ratiocinatae of type (i) is, so to speak, a 'greater' distinction, because a body is not identical to its endurance even though it is a necessary

truth that every body has endurance. A distinctio rationis ratiocinatae of type (ii) is a case in which there is a real identity between body and extension, but a conceptual distinction between them. There must be a conceptual distinction between body and extension in order to account for the fact that 'body has extension' makes sense, but 'extension has body' does not, even though body and extension are identical and the identity relation is symmetrical (i.e., if $x = y$, then $xRy \leftrightarrow yRx$). To reflect the difference between these two types of conceptual distinction, let us call conceptual distinctions that hold between essentially connected things 'conceptual distinctions₁', and those that hold between identical things 'conceptual distinctions₂'.

Descartes' Account of DDS

Now that we have both Descartes' reasons for DDS and his theory of distinctions in hand, we are in a position to see what exactly Descartes' version of DDS amounts to. In his book, Descartes and Augustine, Stephen Menn states it is commonly thought that Descartes is "proclaiming a new and radical doctrine of God's simplicity."⁴⁴ This initially seems to be the case, especially in the following passages:

In God willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to [precede] the other even conceptually [ne quidem ratione]. (AT I 153; CSMK 25-6)

It is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of

belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature or ratione ratiocinata as they call it. (AT VII 432; CSM II 291)

From these, we may think that Descartes thought that DDS amounts to the following:

DDS1: God is simple =_{df.} God is such that there are no distinctions of any kind (real, modal or conceptual) in God.

Many scholars have thought that Descartes held something like DDS1.⁴⁵ And the passages quoted above lend prima facie support to such a reading of Descartes.

However, there are three good reasons to reject DDS1 as an interpretation of Descartes' account of DDS: First, despite initial appearances, there is no textual evidence to support DDS1 as an interpretation of Descartes on DDS. In neither of the passages quoted above does Descartes state that there are no conceptual distinctions in God. He merely states that there is no conceptual priority [fruit prius] between God's intellect and will.⁴⁶ But certainly x and y can be conceptually distinct without one being conceptually prior to the other. For example, take two of a triangle's essential properties: triangularity and trilaterality. It is reasonable to suppose that even if these properties are really identical, as those who hold that necessarily co-extensive properties are identical would say,⁴⁷ they are conceptually distinct. However, what isn't clear is whether there is any conceptual priority of one over the other. It seems to me that no non-question-begging definition of

'conceptual priority' can be given such that triangularity is conceptually prior to trilaterality (or vice versa), despite the fact that they are conceptually distinct. So, not only does DDS1 lack direct textual evidence, but also we cannot even indirectly infer that Descartes held DDS1 because 'no conceptual priority' does not entail 'no conceptual distinction'.

Second, Descartes repeatedly predicates a plurality of attributes of God. Descartes states that God is 'perfect' (AT VIII 10;CSM I 197), 'omniscient' (AT VI 35;CSM I 128), 'omnipotent' (AT VII 21;CSM II 14, AT VI 35;CSM I 128, AT VIII 10;CSM I 197), 'supremely good' (AT VII 45;CSM II 35, AT VI 35;CSM I 128), 'infinite' (AT VII 45;CSM II 35, AT VI 35;CSM I 128), 'independent' (AT VII 45;CSM II 35), 'eternal' (AT VI 35;CSM I 128), 'immutable' (AT I 146;CSMK 215, AT VI 35;CSM I 128), and that he has will and understanding (AT I 149, 153;CSMK 24,26). How are we to understand the plurality of attributes predicated of God if there are no distinctions of any kind in God? It would be very difficult.

Third, whenever Descartes characterizes his version of DDS, he explicitly raises the issue of separability; that is, God is such that he does not have parts that are separable. The following passages are representative of Descartes' thinking on DDS. In the Third Meditation, he states:

the unity, simplicity, or [sive] the inseparability of all the attributes of God is one of the most important of the perfections which I understand him to have. And surely the idea of the unity of all his perfections could not have been placed in me by any cause which did not also provide me with the ideas of the other perfections; for no cause could have made me understand the interconnection and inseparability of the perfections without at the same time making me recognize what they were. (AT VII 50;CSM II 34, emphasis mine)

And in the Conversation with Burman, he states:

Whatever is in God is not in reality separate from God himself; rather it is identical with God himself [imo est ipse Deus]...[T]he distinction between God himself and his decrees is a mental one, not a real one. In reality the decrees could not have been separated from God: he is not prior to them or distinct from them, nor could he have existed without them. (AT V 166;CSMK 348, emphasis mine)

In the Third Meditation passage, Descartes is identifying the simplicity of God with the inseparability of his attributes. This is clear from the fact that Descartes states that unity, simplicity and inseparability are said to be one perfection.⁴⁸ And in the Burman passage, Descartes is stating that there cannot be any real distinctions in God, but only mental distinctions, i.e., those created by the mind, i.e. conceptual distinctions. That this is what Descartes means here is clear from what follows in that passage. He states that there is a mental distinction between God and his decrees, but that there is mutual-inseparability between God and his decrees. As we've seen, this is precisely what characterizes a conceptual distinction. Thus, Descartes holds that God is simple in the sense of having only conceptual distinctions.

Remember that there are two types of distinctio rationis ratiocinatae: those that hold between essentially connected things (i.e., conceptual distinction₁), and those that hold between identical things (i.e., conceptual distinction₂). In the passage above (AT VII 50; CSM II 34), Descartes states two things: first, willing and understanding are the same thing. I take this to mean uncontroversially that they are really identical. Second, that neither will nor understanding is conceptually prior to the other. I'll return to this issue shortly. What we can see here is that the type of conceptual distinction that holds between God's will and his understanding is what I've called a 'conceptual distinction₂'; that is, one that holds between two things which are not merely essentially connected, but are identical. However, it is consistent with what is said in the Burman passage that there is a conceptual distinction₁ between God and his decrees.⁴⁹

So, Descartes does not hold DDS1, but DDS2:

DDS2: God is simple =_{df.} God is such that there are no modal or real distinctions in God.

That there cannot be modal distinctions in God follows trivially from Descartes' insistence that God has no modes (i.e., inessential properties), but only attributes.⁵⁰ If God has only attributes, then by Descartes' definition of a modal distinction, God cannot have any modal distinctions in him. So, God either has real distinctions, conceptual distinctions or no distinctions at all. As we have seen

Descartes cannot hold that there are real distinctions in God, because there is no separability in God. Yet because Descartes allows that something may be conceptually distinct from its attributes and that two attributes of the same thing may be conceptually distinct, it is open to Descartes to hold that there are conceptual distinctions₂ in God.⁵¹

Moreover, the fact that DDS2 is consistent with there being conceptual distinctions in God helps make some sense of the 'plurality' of attributes Descartes predicates of God. In fact, this was one of the standard medieval uses of the conceptual distinction.⁵² While the divine attributes are really identical with each other and with God, they are conceptually distinct₂.⁵³ This is why Menn writes that "in fact Descartes holds that traditional position (with St. Thomas and many others) that there are rational distinctions in God, but no real distinctions or real multiplicity."⁵⁴

Because (i) the texts support a reading of DDS in which there is nothing separable in God, and (ii) a general consideration of the nature of Descartes' God as not having modes eliminates the possibility of modal distinctions in God, and (iii) allowing conceptual distinctions in God allows Descartes to predicate many things of God, DDS2 is the correct account of Descartes' version of DDS. A problem remains: How then are we to understand Descartes' statements from the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne (AT I 153;CSMK 25-6), the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland (AT IV 119;CSMK 235),

and the Sixth Replies (AT VII 432;CSM II 291), in which he states that God's intellect does not have conceptual priority over God's will? That is, if Descartes is willing to allow conceptual distinctions, in God, why does he not allow conceptual priority of intellect over will in God?

Stephen Menn makes an interesting suggestion on this point. He states:

When Descartes infers that God's act of understanding does not precede his act of willing even ratione, this is not because there is no distinction or priority in God: Descartes would grant that God's essence precedes ratione any act of God's will, and that God's knowledge of his own essence precedes ratione his knowing and willing things other than himself. Descartes' point here is that God's act of understanding things other than himself cannot precede his act of willing and creating things other than himself, since prior to this there would be nothing for God to understand except his own essence.⁵⁵

On Menn's reading, God's essence has conceptual priority over his will and his understanding only of things other than God because God's understanding and willing of things other than himself presupposes things other than God. But 'prior' (there is only conceptual priority because the eternal truths, for instance, while other than God (see AT I 152;CSMK 25), are eternal as well, i.e., there is no time at which they are not true) to God's willing them, there is nothing (other than God) for him to understand. So, with respect to the eternal truths, there cannot be even a conceptual priority of God's understanding of them because there are simply no eternal truths for him to understand.⁵⁶ At the very least, there are no eternal truths about creatures for God to understand prior to his creation of

them. This, I believe, Menn thinks is the point of the passage from the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, in which Descartes states: "In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [ratione]." The inclusion of 'creating' here indicates that the 'willing' and 'understanding' are intended to be understood with respect to things other than God, i.e., creatures. On the present interpretation, the other problematic passage from the Sixth Replies (AT VII 432; CSM II 291) should be read as follows:

It is impossible to imagine that anything [other than God] is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true...prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so...there is not even any priority...ratione ratiocinata.

So, Descartes believes that there are conceptual distinctions in God, but that there is no conceptual priority between his intellect and will with respect to his creation.

DDS and the Rejection of the Moderate Alternative

Because a conceptual distinction₂ between x and y is a creation of the mind, indicating only that the manner in which we understand x is different from the manner in which we understand y,⁵⁷ despite the identity of x and y, Descartes still holds that whatever is really true of one conceptually distinct₂ thing is really true of the other.⁵⁸ For instance, whatever is really true of a body is true of its extension and vice versa. So, even though Descartes

holds DDS2, whatever is really true of God's intellect is also really true of God's will because they are really identical, though conceptually distinct₂.

We can now see exactly why Descartes cannot accept the Thomistic or Leibnizian account of the eternal truths. On these accounts, the eternal truths are not objects of God's will. Thus,

(1) The eternal truths do not depend on God's will.

But Descartes holds DDS2; thus,

(2) Despite the conceptual distinction₂ between God's will and intellect, God's will = God's intellect = God.

So, from (1), and (2), by the transitivity of identity:

(3) The eternal truths do not depend on God.

Therefore:

(4) The Dependence Thesis is false.

Descartes could not accept the moderate alternative, (c), precisely because, when conjoined with DDS, it entails the denial of the Dependence Thesis. A denial of this thesis is, as we've seen, exactly why he cannot accept the position of Suarez and Scotus. The moderate alternative apparently does not fare any better. Although Descartes does not explicitly state this reasoning, there is nothing contained in the argument that Descartes would not accept.

Or we can go another way. Because Descartes holds that God's intellect and will are identical, and neither is conceptually prior to the other, he holds the following:

(5) x is an object of the divine intellect iff x is an object of the divine will.

From (5) and (c) we can deduce (6):

(6) The eternal truths are objects of the divine will. So, (and here is the rub) either (c) entails a denial of the Dependence Thesis or it entails that the eternal truths depend on God's will (by the identity of God's intellect and will). If the former, then it is clear why Descartes rejects (c); if the latter, Descartes gets exactly what he wants, and (c) doesn't fundamentally differ from the Creation Doctrine.

Consideration of DDS by itself, however, does not entail the Creation Doctrine. Although DDS entails that the eternal truths depend on God will (and intellect), it does not enable Descartes to move from this to the Free Creation Thesis. That is to say, it is conceivable that the eternal truths depend on God's will, but he is not free with respect to their creation. Thus, to make the move from the dependence of the eternal truths on God's will to their free creation, we must now examine Descartes' account of God's freedom with respect to the creation of the eternal truths.

Endnotes

¹AT VII 432; CSM II 291, AT VIII 14; CSM I 201.

²As we'll see, DDS entails that the eternal truths depend on God's will, but consideration of divine freedom entails that the eternal truths are freely created by God.

³See Hughes (1989) pp. 3-10.

⁴Aquinas' arguments against God's satisfying any of (a) - (f) are found in ST Ia 3. For an excellent discussion of Aquinas on this point, see Hughes (1989) ch. 1.

⁵ST Ia 3.7 res: "For God, we said, is not composed of extended parts, since he is not a body; nor of form and matter; nor does he differ from his own nature; nor his nature from his existence; nor can one distinguish in him genus and difference; nor substance and accidents. It is clear then that there is no way in which God is composite, and he must be altogether simple."

⁶As early as 1252-1256, Aquinas presented the argument based on the dependence of composites on their parts, in his Scriptum super libros sententiarum I.8.iv: "Every composite is posterior to its components: since the simpler exists in se before anything is added to it for the composition of a third. But nothing is prior to the first. Therefore, since God is the first principle, he is not composite."

⁷Hughes distinguishes 'ontological priority', 'existential priority', 'causal priority', and 'mereological priority'. (pp. 30-33) Hughes states that "if the argument from the posteriority of composita to divine incomposition is to succeed, there must be a way of being posterior to one's parts such that (i) every composite being is posterior to its parts in that way; and (ii) God could not be posterior to His parts in that way." (p. 34) Hughes argues that there is not a single sense of posteriority which can serve in both (i) and (ii). His argument is persuasive. This does not affect the present discussion, however, because I am not interested in critically evaluating Aquinas' arguments here.

⁸Cf. Adams (1987) p. 905, and Morris (1985) p. 101.

⁹Similar reasoning is found in Anselm's Monologion 17: "A composite requires, for its existence, its components and owes its being what it is to them. It is what it is through them. They, however, are not what they are through it. A composite, therefore, just is not supreme. If, then, the supreme nature is a composite of many goods, what belongs to a composite necessarily belongs to it also. But truth's

whole and already manifest necessity destroys and overthrows by clear reason this falsehood's blasphemy." (Cf. Adams (1987) p. 904-5)

¹⁰SCG I 18: "Every composition, likewise, needs some composer. For, if there is composition, it is made up of a plurality, and a plurality cannot be fitted into a unity except by some composer. If, then, God were composite, he would have a composer. He could not compose himself, since nothing is its own cause, because it would be prior to itself, which is impossible. Now, the composer is the efficient cause of the composite. Thus, God would have an efficient cause. Thus, too, he would not be the first cause - which was proved above." (Cf. Adams p. 905, De Potentia 7.1)

¹¹Cf. Anselm: "every composite thing of necessity can be actually or conceptually divided into parts." On the Incarnation of the Word V, in Anselm (1998)

¹²Cf. Hughes (1989) pp. 37-38.

¹³See Adams (1987) p. 905.

¹⁴See AT VI 35-6; CSM I 128-29, AT VII 185; CSM II 130. This would especially be the case if Descartes held, as he seems to have, that created things have temporal parts, such that the things require God's constant conservation in order to persist over time. See AT VII 109-110; CSM II 78-9, AT VIII 13; CSM I 200.

¹⁵See AT VII 78-80, 235-237; CSM II 54-5, 164-66.

¹⁶For example, the composite that is the living human being is composed of mind and body; and the lesson to be learned from the Sixth Meditation argument for the real distinction of mind and body is that the mind and body that compose a human being are separable from each other. On a related note: I take no definite stance on whether a human being (a union of mind and body) is a substance. I am inclined to believe that that it is not a substance because a human being does not satisfy the conditions for being a substance, i.e., that it is not dependent on anything else or is only dependent on God. The composite that is the human being is composed of two substances; so, it would be ontologically dependent on those substances. Thus, it is not a substance itself.

¹⁷See, for instance, Alanen (1985) and (1986), Gilson (1913), Normore (1986), Wells (1961), (1965), (1982). For the curriculum at La Flèche, see Rochemonteix (1889) and Garber (1992).

¹⁸Theories of distinctions were employed in the middle ages primarily to address issues such as universals and the Trinity. However, many employed distinctions to address the issue of a simple God's attributes. See Adams (1987)

¹⁹See Alanen (1986) p. 223-4.

²⁰See Alanen (1986), p. 226, Cross (1999), Wells (1965), and Wolter (1990) ch. 1. Scotus' 'formal distinction' and Henry of Ghent's 'intentional distinction' are perhaps the most famous examples of the intermediate distinction. See Wolter (1990) and Adams (1987).

²¹For instance, in the discussion of the distinctions in Principles I, Descartes states "we can perceive that...", "The first kind of modal distinction can be recognized...", and "The second kind of modal distinction is recognized..." (AT VIII 28-29; CSM I 213-4)

²²Here Descartes differs noticeably from Suarez who did not restrict real distinctions to being between substances. Suarez also held that there is a real distinction between form and matter, substantial form and active potency, and quantity and substance. See DM 7.1.1 and Dutton (1993) p. 249.

²³In the Ethics, Spinoza defines 'substance' in a very cartesian manner: "by substance I understand what is in se and is conceived per se, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed." (E1.d3)

²⁴Of course, this is a worry for Descartes, but not for Spinoza.

²⁵See Principles I 51: "In the case of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence...In the case of created things, some are of such a nature that they cannot exist without other things, while some need only the ordinary concurrence of God in order to exist. We make this distinction by calling the latter 'substances' and that former 'qualities' or 'attributes' of those substances." (AT VIII 24; CSM I 210) And "when we call a created substance self-subsistent we do not rule out the divine concurrence which it needs in order to subsist. We mean only that it is the kind of thing that can exist without any other created thing; and this is something that cannot be said about the modes of things, like shape and number." (AT III 429; CSMK 193-94)

²⁶Cf. AT VII 185; CSM II 130.

²⁷Cf. AT VII 169-170, 227; CSM II 119-120, 160.

²⁸Cf. AT VII 220-2; CSM II 155-156.

²⁹ See AT VII 162; CSM II 114. This point is noticed by Lilli Alanen (1986) p. 227-28. She points out that making mutual separability a necessary condition for real distinction distinguishes Descartes' account of a real distinction from those of Duns Scotus and Ockham, who only held that there needs to be non-mutual separability for a real distinction to hold. For instance, they seem to think that a person's form is really distinct from its matter and that a person's sensory soul is really distinct from its intellectual soul. See Adams (1987) p. 17, and Rozemond (1998) pp. 3-9, and Dutton (1993).

Wolter (1990) thinks that Suarez is in agreement with Scotus and Ockham with respect to this issue: "For [Scotus, Ockham and Suarez], the real distinction is that which exists between individuals, be they substances or some individual accident or property. It [i.e., a real distinction] invariably implies the possibility of separating one really distinct thing from another to the extent that one of the two at least may exist apart from the other." (p. 28, emphasis mine) A problem arises: Alanen thinks that Descartes "used a theory of distinctions...largely taken over from Suarez (1986, p. 223, cf. Gilson 1913, p. 87) But if Wolter is right, then Descartes' account of the real distinction does not closely resemble that of Suarez because (Wolter's) Suarez only requires a non-mutual separability for a real distinction, whereas Descartes, as we've seen, requires mutual separability for a real distinction. I think that Wolter is simply mistaken about Suarez. In DM 7.1 and 7.2, Suarez states that in cases of non-mutual separability, there is only a modal distinction, but not a real distinction. However, Suarez does join Ockham and Scotus in believing that an individual's matter and form are really distinct (DM VII.1)

³⁰Cf. AT III 567; CSMK 214, and Wells (1965) p. 3.

³¹Cf. AT VI 35-6; CSM I 129: "their being must depend on God's power in such a way that they could not subsist for a single moment without him." This point is noticed by Marilyn Adams, but with respect to Ockham. See Adams (1987) p. 18.

³²See AT VII 188; CSM II 132.

³³In the case of a modal distinction between two modes, m1 and m2, of the same substance S, we can conceive of S with m1 and not m2 and S with m2 and not m1; but we cannot conceive either m1 or m2 without S. Cf. AT VIII 29-30; CSM I 213-214, AT VII 78; CSM II 54.

³⁴Cf. AT VIII 355; CSM I 301, and Wells (1965) p. 5-6.

³⁵AT VIII 29-30; CSM I 213-214.

³⁶Condition (iii) simply means that it is possible for S to exist with x and without y and vice versa. Cf. AT IV 349; CSMK 279-280.

³⁷See Wells (1965) p. 5, 11.

³⁸See AT IV 348-9; CSMK 279-280, AT VIII 26; CSM I 211.

³⁹See AT VIII 25; CSM I 210.

⁴⁰Cf. AT IV 349-50; CSMK 280-281, and Alanen (1986) p. 231.

⁴¹See AT IV 349; CSMK 280.

⁴²There is no reason to think that Descartes would have explained 'the foundation' of the distinctio rationis ratiocinatae any differently from Suarez. Not only is Descartes' division of the conceptual distinction exactly like Suarez's, he even employs the exact same example (Peter's being identical to himself) to illustrate the distinctio rationis ratiocinantis. See Suarez, DM VII.1.5 and Descartes, AT IV 350; CSMK 280-1.

⁴³For Descartes' claim that extension is body, see Principles I 63 (AT VIII 30-31; CSM I 215).

⁴⁴Menn (1998) p. 348.

⁴⁵Alanen, Cronin, and perhaps Curley.

⁴⁶I thank Lex Newman for bringing this crucial point to my attention.

⁴⁷For instance, David Lewis, in section 1.5 of Lewis (1986). It should be noted that Lewis holds that this would not be true on some understandings of what properties are.

⁴⁸The Latin reads: "Nam contra, unitas, simplicitas, sive inseparabilitas eorum omnium quae in Deo sunt, una est ex praecipui perfectionibus quas in eo esse intelligo."

⁴⁹The Burman passage is problematic because it later asserts that "although [God's] actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary." This seems to contradict the spirit of the Creation Doctrine. For instance, in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes states: "And even though [encore que] God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he

willed them necessarily." (AT IV 118) Without simply dismissing the Burman passage, as I'm tempted to do, I propose two ways to make it consistent with the Creation Doctrine. (1) As we'll see in the next chapter, the Creation Doctrine only requires that God's willing of the eternal truths is not determined by anything independent of God's will. So, as long as the necessity of God's willing mentioned in the Burman passage has nothing to do with independent determinations of God's will, the Creation Doctrine is unscathed. (2) Descartes may simply be committing a fallacy. Earlier in the Burman passage, Descartes states: "he necessarily made the decrees he did, since he necessarily willed what was best, even though it was of his own will that he did what was best." (AT V 166; CSMK 348) If Descartes does think that God wills necessarily, then he is reasoning fallaciously from 'necessarily, if God wills x, then x is the best' and 'x is best' to 'necessarily, God wills x'. In any case, Descartes probably should not have said what he did, or perhaps Burman merely misreported Descartes' statements.

On a different note, the Burman passage also contradicts Descartes' early statement that the eternal truths are not connected to God's essence. (AT I 152; CSMK 25)

⁵⁰AT VIII 26; CSM I 211. This seems to commit Descartes to the view that God has no properties contingently. So, even the property of creating Adam would be essential to God, i.e., it is not possible for God to exist without creating Adam. This is problematic. The solution is to distinguish between God's intrinsic properties, all of which are essential properties (i.e., attributes), and his relational properties, some of which are inessential.

⁵¹Cf. AT VII 383; CSM II 263. Interestingly enough, this is the account given by Spinoza in his Cogitata Metaphysica, appendices to his Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae. There Spinoza states that

it is self-evident that component parts are prior at least by nature to the composite whole, then of necessity those substances from whose coalescence and union God is composed will be prior by nature, and each can be conceived through itself without being attributed to God. Again, because they are necessarily distinct from one another in reality, then necessarily each of them can exist through itself without the help of the others...Hence we can clearly conclude that all the distinctions we make between God's attributes are nothing other than distinctions of reason, and that they are not distinct from one another in reality. (CM II 5)

⁵²See Adams (1987) p. 19.

⁵³This is contrary to the interpretations of Cronin (1960) and Alanen (1985) p. 183.

⁵⁴Menn (1998) p. 348.

⁵⁵Menn (1998) p. 348-9.

⁵⁶Except perhaps eternal truths such as 'God exists', etc. I leave the problem of the scope of the Creation Doctrine alone here.

⁵⁷See Adams (1987) p. 19.

⁵⁸That is, in extensional contexts, if x and y are only conceptually distinct₂, then Fx is true iff Fy is true.

CHAPTER 3

DIVINE FREEDOM OF INDIFFERENCE AND THE ETERNAL TRUTHS

Introduction

From even a superficial examination of Descartes' discussion of the eternal truths we can see that Descartes thought that God's freedom and the Creation Doctrine are intimately related. For instance, in 3 June 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes that "[God] was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal - just as free as he was not to create the world." (AT I 152-3; CSMK 26) And in the Sixth Replies, he states:

It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything...because [quia] it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy or belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. (AT VII 431-32; CSM II 291)

Descartes also discusses divine freedom and the eternal truths in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, in which he states:

[T]he power of God cannot have any limits...[this] shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. (AT IV 118; CSMK 235)

Although Descartes does not as say much about divine freedom as one would like, it is quite clear that he believes that God's freedom consists in a liberty of indifference.¹ This account raises problems for any interpreter of Descartes, most obviously because Descartes simply does not provide any

explicit, sustained, or detailed account of divine indifference. Moreover, another problem arises: Descartes' insistence that God's freedom consists in indifference is prima facie peculiar because it seems to be at odds with Descartes' statements about human freedom in the Fourth Meditation:

There is no need for me to be impelled both ways in order to be free...[T]he indifference I feel when there is no reason impelling [impellit] me in one direction rather than another is the lowest grade of freedom [infimas gradus libertatis]; it is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge or a kind of negation. (AT VII 57-8; CSM II 40)

Even leaving aside the oddness of this passage with respect to Descartes' account of divine freedom, this passage is at odds with Descartes' insistence, in places, that indifference belongs to human freedom.² How can Descartes consistently hold F1, F2 and F3?:

F1 Indifference is not required for human freedom, and, in fact, indifference is the lowest grade of human freedom.

F2 Indifference belongs to human freedom.

F3 Indifference is the essence of divine freedom.

How can Descartes hold that something deficient for us both sometimes belongs to our freedom and is the essence of the freedom of the most perfect being?

In this chapter, I will do two things: (i) I will show why Descartes holds F1, F2, and F3, and how he reconciles each with the others. And (ii), I will argue that Descartes believes that a proper understanding of divine freedom entails the Creation Doctrine. In the first part, I

will discuss two different senses of 'indifference' found in Descartes' writings: The Scholastic Sense and another sense introduced by, and peculiar to, Descartes. We shall see that the term 'indifference' in F1 has a different sense from the sense it has in F2. In the second part, I will address the issue of why Descartes thinks that F3 is true despite the fact that human indifference is 'the lowest grade of freedom'. Finally, I will show how the Creation Doctrine is entailed by Descartes' account of divine freedom.

Different Senses of 'Indifference'

The first step in a solution to the problem generated by Descartes' acceptance of F1, F2, and F3, is to notice that there are different senses of indifference in play in Descartes' writings. Because Descartes, as we know, was anxious to find favor with the Jesuits, he sometimes employed the scholastic notion of indifference, accepted by the Jesuits.³ This sense of indifference is particularly prevalent in 16th-century scholastics like Luis de Molina. In his Concordia, Molina defined freedom in terms of indifference. He states:

That agent is said to be free who, all the requisites for acting having been posited, can act or not act, or so perform one action that he is still able to do the contrary. (Concordia, Dis 2)

Let us call this 'scholastic-indifference' ('s-indifference, for short) and define it as follows:

SI: An agent A is s-indifferent with respect to an action α =_{df.} given all the requisites for doing α , A could have done α and A could have refrained from doing α , and A could have done some other action beside α .

And, as I've stated, Molina defined freedom in terms of s-indifference. Thus, on his account

An agent A is free with respect to an action α =_{df.} A is s-indifferent with respect to α .

It is s-indifference, "given currency for the first time by later Scholastics,"⁴ that Leibniz would later oppose in the 'Conversation with Steno' (1677). As Leibniz states:

This notion of freedom - that is, the power of acting or not acting, all the requisites for acting having been posited, and all things being equal both in the object and in the agent, is an impossible chimera, which is contrary to the first principle that I stated. (VE II. p. 302)

Not only does Leibniz think that s-indifference never actually occurs in human free actions, he thinks that it is impossible that any free action feature s-indifference. For an agent to be s-indifferent with respect to an action α , according to Leibniz, would require a violation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The sufficient reason for an action would be contained in 'all the requisites for acting', and given that there is a sufficient reason contained in 'all the requisites for acting' the action follows. Because the Principle of Sufficient Reason is a necessary truth, an action cannot be s-indifferent.⁵

Descartes discusses s-indifference in several texts, most noticeably in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland, in which he states: "Perhaps others mean by 'indifference' a

positive faculty of determining oneself to one or other of two contraries...I do not deny that the will has this positive faculty." (AT IV 173;CSMK 245)⁶ It should come as no surprise that this is stated in a letter to a Jesuit, Mesland. S-indifference, as opposed to the other sense of indifference, to be discussed shortly, is a positive power or ability belonging to the will; it is the ability to determine oneself to an action.

Sometimes, however, Descartes introduces his own sense of indifference.⁷ In the Fourth Meditation, he writes of "the indifference I feel when there is no reason impelling [impellit] me in one direction rather than another," (AT VII 58;CSM II 40, emphasis mine), and states that in some cases "my intellect has not come upon any persuasive reason in favor of one alternative rather than the other. This obviously implies that I am indifferent as to whether I should assent or deny either alternative." (AT VII 59;CSM II 41, emphasis mine) And, in the Sixth Replies, he states: "He is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer." (AT VII 432-3;CSM II 291-92) Finally, in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland, he states: "'indifference'...seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled [impellitur] one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness." (AT IV 173;CSMK 245) I take it that Descartes here means that an agent is indifferent in his peculiar sense when their will is not

impelled by any reason for acting. Let us call this type of indifference 'cartesian-indifference' (or 'c-indifference') and define it as follows:

CI: An agent A is c-indifferent with respect to an action α =_{df.} (i) It is not the case that A has any reason to do α or any alternatives to α , or (ii) the reasons for and against doing α are evenly balanced.⁸

In contrast to s-indifference, which is a power, c-indifference is a state in which an agent is not impelled by any reason to perform an action; it is, as Beyssade states, "the state of hesitation or wavering because of ignorance or insufficient knowledge."⁹ In fact, Descartes explicitly contrasts c-indifference with s-indifference.¹⁰ And it is c-indifference which Descartes characterizes as the lowest grade of freedom.¹¹ As Descartes states in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland:

'[I]ndifference' in this context seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any peception of truth or goodness. This is the sense in which I took it when I said that the lowest grade of freedom is that by which we determine ourselves to things to which we are indifferent. (AT IV 173;CSMK 245)

So, differentiating between s-indifference and c-indifference shows how Descartes can hold that there is a sense in which indifference may be present in human free actions although there is a sense in which it is the lowest grade of human freedom.¹² C-indifference is the lowest grade of human freedom precisely because it is contrary to the highest grade of human freedom, i.e., spontaneous assent to a clear and distinct perception. As Descartes states:

[T]he more I am inclined [propendeo] in one direction...so much more freely do I choose that..For if I always saw clearly what was true and good...in that case, although I would be completely free, yet I could never be indifferent. (AT VII 57-8;CSM II 40)

Although this text seems to decide the matter whether s-indifference is required for human freedom, exactly what Descartes' view of human freedom is depends greatly on the interpretation of a sentence from the Fourth Meditation immediately preceding the quotation above. This is difficult business, to say the least. In particular, the passage, "Neque enim opus est me in utramque partem ferri posse, ut sim liber," (AT VII 57;CSM II 40) does not admit of an easy translation into English. It may be translated as

- (1) There is no need for me to be able to go both ways in order to be free.

In this case, Descartes is denying that s-indifference is essential to human freedom.¹³ On the other hand, Cottingham, et al. translated this sentence as:

- (2) In order to be free, there is no need for me to be inclined both ways.

I believe that another reasonable translation, and one very similar to (2), is:

- (3) There is no need for me to be impelled both ways, in order to be free.¹⁴

We can see that much rests on the translation: If (2) or (3) are accurate translations, then Descartes is denying that c-indifference is essential to human freedom, while remaining silent about whether s-indifference is essential.¹⁵ If (1)

is accurate, then Descartes is denying that s-indifference is essential, while remaining silent about whether c-indifference is essential.

Despite the difficulty in translating this sentence, I believe that (2) and (3) are more plausible translations than (1), which has Descartes denying that s-indifference (a positive power) is essential to human freedom, precisely because (2) and (3) make Descartes' view in the Fourth Meditation consistent with what he states in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland, namely that c-indifference is the lowest grade of freedom. On translations (2) and (3), the reference to indifference (i.e., c-indifference) as the lowest grade of freedom in 1645 simply reiterates what is already Descartes' stated view in the Meditations of 1641.

Translations (2) and (3) also make the 1641 Latin text consistent with the 1647 French text (the latter includes reference to 'indifference' in its 'counterpart' to the sentence from the Latin text, whereas the Latin does not).¹⁶ Contrary to the interpretation of Beyssade,¹⁷ the insertion of 'indifférent' in 1647 does not provide evidence that Descartes' views concerning freedom changed between 1641 and 1647; it is quite reasonable to think that Descartes introduces the term 'indifférent' in the French edition simply to make "his thoughts clearer" (AT IX 3) about the fact that it is indifference (i.e., c-indifference) under discussion, as is stated later in that same passage. Later in the passage, Descartes discusses the "indifference...when

I'm not impelled by any reason is the lowest grade of freedom," and earlier he states that "there is no need for me to be impelled both ways, in order to be free."

I agree with Beyssade that neither s-indifference nor c-indifference is essential to human freedom according to Descartes; but I disagree that in the Latin text it is s-indifference that Descartes is denying is essential to human freedom, whereas in the French it is c-indifference that Descartes is denying is required for human freedom.¹⁸

We should notice at this point what differentiating between s-indifference and c-indifference actually accomplishes: Differentiating between the two is quite helpful in reconciling F1 and F2. That is, there is no inconsistency in Descartes holding F1* and F2*:

F1* C-indifference is not required for human freedom.

F2* S-indifference belongs to human freedom.¹⁹

However, distinguishing s-indifference and c-indifference does nothing to help the situation between F1 and F3, because the sense of indifference involved with both is c-indifference. So, we'll have to look elsewhere to settle this issue.

Why C-indifference is Not Essential to Human Freedom

In the 21 April 1641 letter to Mersenne, Descartes writes, "I wrote that indifference in our case is rather a defect than a perfection of freedom; but it does not follow that the same is the case with God." (AT III 360;CSMK 179,

emphasis mine) Unfortunately, Descartes doesn't explicitly tell us why this is the case. However, there are some implicitly stated reasons, as we'll now see.

The authors of the Sixth Objections objected that it is an article of faith [de fide] that God was from eternity indifferent as to whether he should create one world, or innumerable worlds, or none at all..., and if indifference cannot be a proper part of human freedom, neither will it find a place in divine freedom, since the essences of things are...indivisible and immutable. Therefore indifference is involved in God's freedom of choice no less than it is in the case of human freedom of choice. (AT VII 417;CSM II 281)

Descartes' reply indicates many things about his strategy for reconciliation of F1 and F3. I quote the reply to this particular objection at length, and I number the sections in order to make reference easier.

[1] As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. [2] It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true...prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so...[3] But as for man...it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true all the more willingly, and hence more freely, in proportion as he sees it clearly.[4] He (i.e., man) is never indifferent except when he does not know which of the two alternatives is the better or truer, or at least when he does not see this clearly enough to rule out any possibility of doubt. [5] Hence the indifference which belongs to [convenit] human freedom is very different from that which belongs to divine freedom...[6] Indifference does not belong to the essence of human freedom [indifferentia non pertinet ad essentiam humanae libertatis], since not only are we free when ignorance of what is right makes us indifferent, but we are also free - indeed at our freest - when a clear perception impels us to pursue some object. (AT VII 431-433;CSM II 291-292)

Each of the numbered sections in this passage contains helpful information concerning Descartes' views of freedom, both human and divine. [3] and [6], for instance, constitute strong evidence that Descartes held that indifference (both c-indifference and s-indifference) is not essential to human freedom. That is, there are cases in which a human agent will be free, in fact freer, the less indifferent he or she is. What is required for the freest human actions is spontaneity.

It should be noticed that [5] does state that a type of indifference, s-indifference, 'belongs' to human freedom. This, in conjunction with Descartes' statement in the 9 February 1645 letter to the Jesuit, Mesland, in which he states that humans are s-indifferent, and Principles I §41 in which Descartes seems to identify freedom with s-indifference (AT VIII 20; CSM I 206), would seem to indicate that Descartes, despite [6], held that s-indifference is essential to human free actions. What should be noticed is that, in [5] and [6], Descartes says two very different things: First, s-indifference 'belongs' [convenit] to human freedom; second, s-indifference does not belong [non pertinet] to the essence of human freedom. Why the difference? The answer is that Descartes certainly believes that there are free human actions in which s-indifference is present, and, in this sense, s-indifference may belong to free human actions; however, what Descartes is denying is

that s-indifference is essential to free human actions.²⁰ This should come as no surprise; after all, Descartes, as we have seen, repeatedly states that the freest human actions are those in which indifference (of both varieties) is missing.²¹

More important to the present task of reconciling F1 and F3 are [1], [2], [4], and [5]. [1] and [5] both clearly show that Descartes believes that there cannot be a uniform account of human and divine freedom. There are at least two obvious reasons why Descartes cannot hold a uniform account. First, as Descartes states: "no essence can belong univocally to both God and his creatures." (AT VII 433; CSM II 292) That is, not only does the proposition 'x is free' mean something different depending on whether we substitute the name of a creature or of God for 'x', it cannot fail to mean something different. The predicates of God and creatures are non-univocal.²² So, because of the non-univocity of divine and human predicates, Descartes is committed to the impossibility of a uniform account of divine and human freedom. Thus, something must distinguish human freedom from divine freedom.

Second, even if we denied the non-univocity of divine and human predicates, Descartes' model of the structure of free human actions cannot accommodate divine free acts because of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity (DDS). As Descartes states with respect to human free action: "it is clear by the natural light that the perception of the

intellect must [debere] precede the determination of the will." (AT VII 60;CSM II 41)²³ The priority of the intellect need not be temporal priority, but perhaps only 'priority of nature' or conceptual priority. However, as we've seen, Descartes thinks that "in God, willing [and] understanding...are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually [ne quidem ratione]," (AT I 153;CSMK 25-6); and "there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of ratione ratiocinata as they call it." (AT VII 432;CSM II 291) Thus, because of Descartes' commitment to DDS, in which there is no conceptual priority between God's intellect and will, there simply cannot be a uniform account of freedom, which would accomodate both human and divine free actions.

[2] illustrates that God's freedom requires c-indifference. This is a point to which I will return shortly.

[4] is the key to understanding why Descartes believes F1 and F3 are both true. Just to clarify, F1 and F3 should be rephrased as follows:

F1* c-indifference is not essential to human freedom.

F3* c-indifference is essential to divine freedom.

[4] shows that, in discussing human indifference here, Descartes intends to be discussing c-indifference.²⁴ This will be clear when we discuss the necessary and sufficient conditions for being able to be c-indifferent. In [4], Descartes states that humans can be indifferent if (and only

if) they either lack knowledge or they lack clear perception. This indicates that a state of not-being-impelled is being discussed rather than a power of choosing.²⁵ That is, Descartes is referring to c-indifference and not to s-indifference.

We can begin to see why Descartes held that humans need not be c-indifferent with respect to an action α in order to be free with respect to α by noticing that he held that certain conditions must hold for an agent to be c-indifferent. Descartes held the following:

- ◇CI: It is possible for a finite agent A to be c-indifferent iff
- (i) A lacks relevant information concerning a course of action,
- or
- (ii) A's perception is not sufficiently clear and distinct,
- or
- (iii) A acts without sufficient reason. (i.e., A acts with no reason, or with fewer reasons than ought to suffice for the action.)

Descartes expresses conditions (i) and (ii) in the Fourth Meditation: "[indifference, i.e., C-indifference] is evidence not of any perfection of freedom, but rather of a defect in knowledge...For if I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice." (AT VII 58;CSM II 40) Again in the Fourth Meditation, he states: "this indifference [i.e., c-indifference] does not merely apply to cases where the intellect is wholly ignorant, but extends in general to

every case where the intellect does not have sufficiently clear knowledge." (AT VII 59;CSM II 41, emphasis mine)

Descartes states condition (iii) in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland: "I did not say that a person was indifferent only if he lacked knowledge, but rather, that he is more indifferent the fewer reasons he knows which impel him to choose one side rather than another." (AT IV 115;CSMK 235) This point is slightly altered, but retains the same spirit, in the 9 February 1645 letter to Mesland: "'indifference' in this context seems to me strictly to mean that state of the will when it is not impelled one way rather than another by any perception of truth or goodness." (AT IV 173;CSMK 245,emphasis mine)

Now, for Descartes, (i) - (iii) of \diamond CI are indicative of a privation or deficiency on the part of an agent. Descartes uses the term 'privation' frequently in the Fourth Meditation, and in the 1647 French edition of the Meditations, he insists that he is using the term according to its scholastic usage. (AT IX 48)²⁶ The scholastics distinguished between a negation [negatio] and a privation [privatio]. A negation is simply a lack of something; so, for instance, my lack of wings is a negation. However, privations have normative import. 'Privation', according to Descartes' scholastic usage, may be defined as follows:

F is a privation in some thing S =_{df.} F is a lack of a property P and S is such that it ought to have P.²⁷

So, whereas my lack of wings is a mere negation, if I were to lack feet or reason, I would have a privation.²⁸

That (i) - (iii) of \diamond CI are indicative of a privation, according to Descartes, is clear from Descartes' insistence that the lack of knowledge involved in c-indifference is described in the Fourth Meditation as 'in cognitione defectum'. That this is the case is also clear from Descartes' account of error in terms of privation in the same Meditation: "it is undoubtedly an imperfection in me to misuse [non bene utar] that freedom and make judgements about matters which I do not fully understand." (AT VII 61; CSM II 42)

As I have argued elsewhere,²⁹ Descartes believes that ideas ought to be (in some strong sense) clear and distinct. If this is true, then an idea which is not clear and distinct is a privative idea, one which we ought not to have, or, at the very least, ought not to act upon. As he states: "If, however, I simply refrain from making a judgment in cases where I do not perceive the truth with sufficient clarity and distinctness, then it is clear that I am behaving correctly and avoiding error." (AT VII 59; CSM II 41)³⁰ It is also indicative of a privation in that we misuse our faculties (i.e., use them as we ought not to) when we have an act of will without sufficient reason for the act of will.

Thus, if (i) - (iii) exhaust the ways in which a finite agent can be c-indifferent, then an agent can be c-indifferent only by having a privation. This, I believe, is why Descartes wrote to Mersenne that "indifference in our case is rather a defect [défaut] than a perfection of freedom." (AT III 360) But Descartes thinks that freedom is a perfection: "it is only...freedom of choice, which I experience within me to be so great that the idea of any greater faculty is beyond my grasp; so much so that it is above all in virtue of the will that I understand myself to bear in some way the image and likeness of God." (AT VII 57, emphasis mine)³¹ He reiterates this in the Principles: "it is a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, that is, freely." (AT VIII 18, emphasis mine) And in the Fourth Meditation, it is clear that Descartes thinks that it ought to be the case that humans act freely.

Take the following three propositions:

- (A) Freedom is a perfection.
- (B) A finite agent A can be c-indifferent only if A has a privation.
- (C) C-Indifference is necessary for human freedom.

If Descartes holds (A) - (C), then he is committed to (D):

- (D) A finite agent A can have the perfection of freedom only if A has a privation.

Although Descartes does believe that created agents are essentially limited,³² it does not follow that he believes that we are essentially privative; in fact, he explicitly denies that we are essentially privative.³³ Because

Descartes would not hold (D), he must give up one or more of (A) - (C). But we have already seen that Descartes holds (A) and (B); so, Descartes must reject (C). That is, Descartes cannot hold that c-indifference is necessary for human freedom. But the fact that c-indifference is not necessary for human freedom entails nothing about whether c-indifference is necessary for divine freedom because, as we've seen, Descartes believes that human freedom is quite dissimilar from divine freedom ([1] and [5]). We must now see why Descartes believes that c-indifference is required for divine freedom.

Why C-indifference is Essential to Divine Freedom

At the start of this section, we should notice not why Descartes holds that God's freedom requires c-indifference, but simply that he does. In [2], from the Sixth Replies passage, Descartes states: "It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity...for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true...prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so." And later in the Sixth Replies, Descartes characterizes God indifference in terms of a lack of reasons for willing. (AT VII 435; CSM II 294) Thus, Descartes' God satisfies condition (i) of the criteria for being c-indifferent; hence, he is c-indifferent.

Moreover, Descartes would hold that God is free iff God is c-indifferent. That Descartes believes that c-indifference is a necessary condition for divine freedom is beyond doubt; but it is as clear that he holds that c-indifference is sufficient for divine freedom. This can be shown if we consider that Descartes holds that divine freedom is simply a complete lack of determination with respect to God's will.³⁴ This can happen only if God is c-indifferent. But, moreover, if God is c-indifferent, there is a complete lack of determination of God's will; that is, there will be no reason for God's willing things. Hence, c-indifference is necessary and sufficient for divine freedom.

We may now turn to why Descartes holds that God is c-indifferent. Remember that Descartes thinks that the eternal truths are freely created by God. Descartes believes that God's free creation of the eternal truths requires that God's choice not be determined or impelled in any way by anything independent of God's will. Concerning Mersenne's inquiry, Descartes states: "you ask what necessitated God to create these [eternal] truths; and I reply that he was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal - just as freed as he was not to create the world."

(AT I 152;CSMK 25) Descartes states two important ideas in this passage: First, that God was not necessitated to create the eternal truths, i.e., he was free with respect to their creation. Second, he implicitly explains that this freedom involves the ability to have done otherwise. This is clear

from the fact that Descartes thinks that God could have willed both of the following:

R: That it is false that all the radii of the circle are equal.

W: That it is false that the world exists.

But, as we know, God did not will either of these propositions to be true; in fact, the radii of the circle are equal, and the world does exist. Because Descartes believes that the truth of any proposition depends on God's will, he holds that the truth of the propositions that all the radii of the circle are equal and that the world exists, though differing in modal status, are equally the result of God's will. So, given that this is true, and that Descartes believes that God could have willed R and W, Descartes holds that God's freedom requires the power to have done other than he has in fact done. That is, God's freedom requires something like the positive power of s-indifference. Thus,

GF: God is free with respect to a case of willing only if he could have refrained from willing and he could have willed something else.

In this respect, Descartes is in agreement with the authors of the Sixth Objections (AT III 360)). However, Descartes believes that an omniscient and perfect being could not have the power to do otherwise unless some particular condition is satisfied. I will return to this shortly.

Remember that I previously listed some necessary and sufficient conditions for being c-indifferent. I left out one condition:

- (iv) There is nothing present to A's intellect prior to A's willing.

As we have seen in our discussion of DDS, there is nothing true prior to God's will which could serve as a reason for divine willing. The reason I previously omitted (iv) is that in that context we were concerned only with human freedom, and Descartes holds that humans cannot possibly satisfy condition (iv). As he states: "As for man, since he finds that the nature of all goodness and truth is already determined by God. and his will cannot tend towards anything else, it is evident that he will embrace what is good and true all the more willingly, and hence more freely, in proportion as he sees it more clearly." (AT VII 432)

Clearly, however, Descartes must believe that God satisfies (iv); after all, as we've seen, Descartes holds that God is c-indifferent, but he cannot be c-indifferent in virtue of satisfying (i) or (ii) or (iii) because they are indications not only of human privation but also of divine imperfection. Moreover, Descartes is forced to hold that God satisfies (iv) because Descartes is committed to GF and to the following:

- (v) God can have the power to will otherwise only if God is c-indifferent. (that is, only if nothing impels his will)

Because God could not refrain from willing what is true if truths were present to his intellect prior to his will, he

must be c-indifferent if (GF) is true; and he can only be c-indifferent in virtue of satisfying (iv). But, we know that Descartes believes that

(vi) God has the ability to will otherwise.

Therefore,

(vii) God is c-indifferent.

So, we have seen that humans would require a privation to be c-indifferent. But God would not be free with respect to creation unless he were c-indifferent. Moreover, it isn't clear that S-indifference is required for human freedom, and it certainly isn't the case that human S-indifference requires human C-indifference.

I have shown that Descartes cannot allow c-indifference to be required for human freedom; that Descartes is committed to divine freedom requiring c-indifference; and that there is no inconsistency involved with (a), (b), and (c).

Divine Freedom and the Eternal Truths

Although there is clearly an important relationship between the eternal truths and divine freedom, there are only a few texts in which Descartes discusses this relationship. This, however, should not bother us, given the scarcity of texts in which Descartes discusses either the eternal truths or divine freedom and the scarcity of texts in which Descartes explains why he holds the Creation Doctrine. In every text in which Descartes discusses the

reasons why he holds the Creation Doctrine, he mentions, either implicitly or explicitly, the issue of divine freedom. So, relatively speaking, Descartes discusses the relationship between the eternal truths and divine freedom quite frequently.

The texts in which Descartes presents his most sustained discussion (although not nearly as sustained as one would like) of divine freedom as a reason for the Creation Doctrine are found in the Sixth Replies and the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland. In each of these texts, Descartes presents an argument, albeit an argument grossly lacking sufficient detail, that his account of divine freedom requires that the Creation Doctrine be true. Because I am confining myself to exegetical history of philosophy, I will not be concerned with the soundness of Descartes' arguments, but only in presenting his arguments as accurately as possible. There will, of course, be those who think that Descartes' arguments are unsound. I invite them to take up the matter with Descartes.

I will begin by presenting the relevant texts. I will then extract Descartes' arguments, supplementing them when necessary with premises Descartes provides elsewhere. Finally, I will present Descartes' implicit justification of the more controversial premises.

It is interesting to note that Descartes actually provides two arguments for the Creation Doctrine based on divine freedom. One, found in both the Sixth Replies and the

2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, argues for the Creation Doctrine purely on the basis of divine freedom. Another, which I will now briefly discuss before moving to the other argument, depends also on consideration of DDS. Descartes states:

It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity...because [quia]³⁵ it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true... prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. (AT VII 431-32; CSM II 291)

In this passage, Descartes is arguing that God is indifferent because he is simple. We would not be wrong then in supposing that DDS is the more fundamental explanation of the Creation Doctrine for Descartes. Because, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there can be nothing in the divine intellect which is not also an object of the divine will (in virtue of their identity), there can be nothing in the divine intellect prior to the divine will. But if there can be nothing in the divine intellect prior to the divine will, there can be no reason for God's willing what he wills. Thus, God is c-indifferent with respect to everything in virtue of satisfying condition (i) of CI. And if God is c-indifferent with respect to everything, then he is free with respect to everything. But the eternal truths are something. So, God is free with respect to them. Therefore, if there are eternal truths, they are freely willed by God. Therefore, if God is simple and free, the eternal truths are freely created.

The previous argument rests heavily on DDS as well as divine freedom. Descartes' second, and more interesting argument is based purely on divine freedom. In fact, in this argument Descartes disregards DDS altogether. He seems to be arguing against a hypothetical opponent who objects to Descartes' heavy reliance on DDS. So, Descartes, in order to defeat even this opponent will argue that even if, per impossibile, God were not simple and there were truths in the divine intellect prior to the divine will, God would not be free. Hence the moderate position earlier attributed to Aquinas and Leibniz, cannot achieve a truly worthy conception of God's freedom. Let us now turn to Descartes' words on the subject:

If anyone will attend to the immeasurable greatness of God he will find it manifestly clear that there can be nothing whatsoever which does not depend on him. This applies not just to everything that subsists, but to all order, every law, and every foundation of something's being true and good. If this were not so, then...God would not have been completely indifferent with respect to the creation of what he did in fact create. If some reason for something's being good had existed prior to his preordination, this would have determined God to prefer those things it was best to do. (AT VII 435; CSM II 293-94, emphasis mine)³⁶

In this passage, Descartes begins with a reiteration of the Dependence Thesis: Everything depends on God. Notice that Descartes does not mention DDS in this context even though he could in order to establish once again the dependence of the eternal truths on God's will without reference to divine freedom. Descartes wishes to show that even ignoring DDS, divine freedom entails the Creation Doctrine.

After stating the Dependence Thesis, Descartes presents a reductio ad absurdum in which the contradiction is generated by a hypothetical denial of the Dependence Thesis ("If this (i.e., the Dependence Thesis) were not so..."). Descartes argues that God would not have been indifferent (c-indifferent) if there could be something independent of his will. Moreover, if God were not c-indifferent, then his will would have been determined to will particular things. But if God would have been determined to will particular things, his will would not have been free. "But his will is free," as Descartes states elsewhere. (AT I 146; CSMK 23) Hence, the hypothetical denial of the Dependence Thesis is false. Therefore, the Dependence Thesis is true. But if the Dependence Thesis is true and God's will is free, then the Free Creation Thesis (i.e., the eternal truths are freely created by God) is true.

I realize that a step in this argument requires some justification.³⁷ The controversial premise is the following:

If God were not c-indifferent, then his will would have been determined.

Descartes does not provide any justification for this premise, but we can speculate about why he believed it was true. Why would God be determined to will exactly those things that were true or good prior to his will if there were such things? Presumably, God could not fail to know which things were true or good prior to his will in virtue of his omniscience. Presumably, God could not fail to will those things which are true or good in virtue of his

veracity and goodness.³⁸ Therefore, if there were eternal truths prior to God's will, God would have been determined to will those truths. He would not have had the ability to will otherwise with respect to those truths.

We have seen in this chapter and the previous chapter exactly why Descartes holds the Creation Doctrine and rejects the moderate alternative account. The Creation Doctrine rests on two important and widely-held theological assumptions: God is simple, and God's will is free.

Endnotes

¹See AT III 360; CSMK 179, AT IV 118; CSMK 235, AT VII 431-3; CSM II 291-2.

²See AT VIII 20; CSM I 206, AT IV 173; CSMK 245. Schmalz seems content to say that Descartes held (at least) two different accounts of human freedom. (1996) p. 207 - 209.

³See Dedicatory letter to the Sorbonne (AT VII 1-6; CSM II 3-6) and Chappell (1994) p. 181.

⁴In an earlier version of this, Leibniz writes, "by the Molinists" instead of "by later Scholastics". See Sleigh (1994) p. 560 and Sleigh, Chappell, and Della Rocca (1998) p. 1259.

⁵Notice, however, as Sleigh does, that, although Leibniz claims to be objecting to the Molinist account of indifference (s-indifference), the account of indifference ('of equipoise') he presents as an 'impossible chimera' is the following (call it 'lm-indifference'):

An agent A is lm-indifferent with respect to an action α =_{df.} (i) A is s-indifferent with respect to α , and (ii) all the reasons for and against doing α are equal and (iii) there is no inclination toward α or any alternatives to α .

However, Sleigh thinks that Leibniz's objection to Molinist freedom does not depend on there being a requirement of equipoise. As Sleigh states: "Leibniz characterized a sufficient cause or reason for the obtaining of some state of affairs α as a total set of requisites for the obtaining of α . The principle of sufficient reason requires that, if α obtains, there is a sufficient cause or reason why it obtains. Leibniz also held that if a sufficient reason or cause for some state of affairs α obtained, then α obtains. Put these items together with Molina's characterization of freedom and it is clear why Leibniz regarded it as an impossible chimera. The equipoise feature is irrelevant to this criticism." (Sleigh 1994) p. 560. Cf. Murray (1995) p. 82.

⁶Cf. AT VIII 20, AT IV 116.

⁷See Chappell (1994) p. 181-2, Kenny (1972), Campbell (1999).

⁸See Chappell (1994) Chappell states that, according to the sense of indifference introduced by Descartes, "an action is indifferent only if its agent has no reason to perform it or the reasons for and against it are evenly balanced." (1994) p. 181. Cf. Imlay (1982) p. 87.

⁹Beyssade (1994) p. 193. It must be noted that Beyssade is here limiting her discussion to human freedom and indifference. As we'll see, God is c-indifferent without being ignorant or lacking sufficient knowledge.

¹⁰Cf. AT IV 116 and Kenny (1972) p. 19.

¹¹Cf. Campbell (1999) p. 184.

¹²There is no consensus about the necessary and sufficient condition for human free actions in Descartes. In some texts, Descartes states that α is free iff α is done voluntarily (AT VII 191; CSM II 134, AT VIII 18; CSM I 205, AT IV 116; CSMK 234). In other texts, Descartes states that α is free iff α is done spontaneously. (AT VII 59; CSM II 41, AT IV 175; CSMK 246). And yet in other texts, he states that α is free iff α 's agent is s-indifferent with respect to α . (AT VIII 20; CSM I 206, AT IV 173; CSMK 245). And sometimes he says a combination of these constitutes the essence of human freedom.

¹³See Kenny (1972) p. 18.

¹⁴Geach and Kenny translate the passage as (3) as well.

¹⁵See Kenny (1972) p. 18-19.

¹⁶The French counterpart of the problematic passage reads: "Car, afin que je sois libre, il n'est pas nécessaire, que je sois indifférent à choisir l'un ou l'autre des deux contraires." (AT IX 46, emphasis mine) The French text then mentions indifférence later in the same passage, whereas the Latin text contains only this latter mention.

¹⁷Beyssade (1994).

¹⁸See Beyssade (1994) p. 193-196. Beyssade wishes to show that spontaneity is the essence of human freedom. But, it seems to me, that settling the issue of which translation is correct doesn't affect her point. In any case, there are many passages in which Descartes thinks that both s- and c-indifference are lacking, but the action is nonetheless free because of its spontaneity. (cf. AT IV 116-118, and Chappell (1994)) In addition, Descartes' occasional endorsement of freedom of s-indifference is quite vague: "we have power in

many cases to give or withhold our assent at will." (AT VIII 20; CSM I 205), emphasis mine) Moreover, Descartes believes that we are able to be s-indifferent only if we distract ourselves (AT IV 116), or we think that it is good (or better) to withhold assent from a clear perception to demonstrate our freedom. (AT IV 173; CSMK 245)

¹⁹Although Descartes held that F2* is true, this does not mean that he held that s-indifference is essential to human freedom. I explain this below.

²⁰Cf. AT VII 61; CSM II 42, AT VIII 19; CSM I 205.

²¹An objection: In [5] Descartes states that a type of indifference belongs to human freedom and a type belongs to divine freedom. But you hold that indifference (c-indifference) is essential to divine freedom, but indifference (s-indifference and c-indifference) is not essential to human freedom. This seems ad hoc given that Descartes uses the same term 'convenire' to denote the relation between divine freedom and its type of indifference and between human freedom and its type of indifference. Reply: That indifference belongs essentially to divine freedom but not human freedom follows trivially from the fact that Descartes thinks that anything that belongs to God belongs essentially to God. This, however, is not the case with humans. So, although he uses the same term to denote the relation, this does not indicate that 'to belong to' must either denote a relation that holds essentially or one that holds contingently, but not a relation that can hold essentially in some cases and contingently in others. In fact, we should expect that this relation holds essentially in some case and contingently in others. For instance, being 5' 10'' belongs to me contingently, whereas being powerful belongs to God essentially. No problem here.

²²This does not entail that they are equivocal. It may perhaps be open to Descartes to take a moderate path similar to Aquinas' analogical predication. See ST Ia 13 and SCG I 34.

²³Cf. AT VIII 14; CSM I 201: "And even [God's] understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by mean of operations that are in a certain sense distinct from one another."

²⁴This may not be obvious until we examine the conditions under which an agent would be c-indifferent. [4] is a difficult sentence to interpret, especially in light to [5]. Prima facie Descartes appears hold that the indifference discussed in [4] is the same as the "indifference which belongs to human freedom" in [5]. I believe, however, that the indifference in [4] is c-

indifference and that in [5] Descartes is saying that because of [4], which discusses an indifference which is a deficiency or privation (c-indifference, as will become clear), the indifference that belongs to human freedom is not of this kind.

²⁵Chappell (1994) p. 189, supports this reading.

²⁶Cf. Newman (1999).

²⁷See AT VII 55; CSM II 38: "For error is not a pure negation <in French text: 'i.e., not simply the defect or lack of some perfection to which I have no proper claim (AT IX 43-4; CSM II 38 n. 1)>, but rather a privation or lack of some knowledge which somehow should be in me." (emphasis mine)

²⁸See Aquinas SCG III.6: "Thus, if a man has no wings, that is not an evil for him, because he was born born to have them; even if a man does not have blond hair, that is not an eveil, for, though he may have such hair, it is not something that is necessarily due him. But it is an evil if has has no hands, for these he is born to and should have - if he is to be perfect. Yet this defect is not an evil for a bird. Every privation, if taken properly and strictly, is of that which one is born to have, and should have."

²⁹Kaufman (forthcoming)

³⁰Cf. AT VIII 18, 21; CSM I 204, 207.

³¹This is evidence that Descartes does not think that divine and human predicates are equivocal, but simply non-univocal.

³²See AT VII 60; CSM II 41-42.

³³Cf. AT VII 55-62; CSM II 38-43.

³⁴In every text in which Descartes characterizes divine freedom, he does so in terms of a lack of all impelling or determination of God's will by something independent of God. See, for instance, AT VII 431-32; CSM II 291, AT I 152; CSMK 25, AT IV 118; CSMK 235.

³⁵CSM translates 'quia' as 'for'. I prefer translating it as 'because' for two reasons: First, it is a more literal translation; second, because it makes it clearer that Descartes is providing an explanation of his previous statement.

³⁶Although the last line of this text refers to goodness, the context makes it clear that the same holds for truth.

³⁷Some philosophers (Leibniz, for instance) would find the premise 'if God is determined to will particular things, then God is not free,' controversial. This is a topic which I don't have time to address. It must suffice that for Descartes, this premise is uncontroversial.

³⁸Descartes discusses God's veracity in many texts, but God's goodness does not receive nearly as much attention. Despite this fact, it is clear that Descartes held that God is good. Cf. AT IV 293; CSMK 266, for instance.

CHAPTER 4

THE CREATION DOCTRINE AND MODALITY

Introduction

Because the Creation Doctrine is a thesis concerning the eternal truths, and the eternal truths are so-called 'necessary truths', we would expect the Creation Doctrine to have implications for the modal status of propositions. This aspect of the Creation Doctrine has received much scholarly attention. For instance, some philosophers have taken Creation Doctrine to involve a denial that there are any necessary truths at all.¹ Others have taken a more moderate approach to the implications of the Creation Doctrine for modality: There are necessary truths, but they are only contingently necessary, i.e., they are not necessarily necessary.²

In this chapter, I will make a start toward an adequate and sympathetic understanding of the Creation Doctrine's consequences for modality. In particular, I will show how the following claims, both of which were held by Descartes, are not inconsistent with one another:

- (1) The eternal truths are freely created by God.
- (2) The eternal truths are genuinely necessary.

As we have already seen in earlier chapters, Descartes' acceptance of (1) is uncontroversial; in fact, it is merely a concise statement of essence of the Creation Doctrine. However, his commitment to (2) is more controversial. I

believe the controversy surrounding (2) arises precisely because Descartes' acceptance of (1) is so uncontroversial. That is, some have thought that his acceptance of (1) eliminates any possibility of accepting (2). I will show that this view is mistaken.

First, a comment on (2) is in order. By 'genuinely necessary', I intend to make a stronger claim than some scholars who hold that Descartes' eternal truths are necessary only in the sense that they are merely called 'necessary', are only contingently necessary, or are only necessary in the sense that we cannot conceive otherwise.³ I mean to make the claim that, for Descartes, modality is a mind-independent and objective feature of the world, rather than merely a feature of our minds.

In the first section, I will discuss two prominent interpretations of the Creation Doctrine and its consequences for modality: Universal Possibilism [UP] and Limited Possibilism [LP].⁴ Both UP and LP have the same noble motivation: Both try to understand the modal consequences of a particular statement Descartes makes in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland: "God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite." (AT IV 118; CSMK 235, emphasis mine)⁵ UP and LP are attempts to understand the sense in which God could have willed that an eternal truth be false and the implications this 'could' has for the modal status of propositions. This

is not an easy task; in fact, Janet Broughton has stated that "there is no good sense we can make of this 'could';"⁶ Harry Frankfurt has stated "What is troublesome [is] understanding the 'could';"⁷ and Lilli Alanen has stated "How the 'could' have willed or done otherwise should be accounted for is not very clear."⁸ Although both UP and LP make strong attempts to understand the implications of the 'could', I reject both on the same ground: Other problems aside, both UP and LP presuppose something explicitly disallowed by the Creation Doctrine. Hence they cannot be correct interpretations of Descartes. In the second section, I show this by contrasting the Creation Doctrine with Leibniz's account of the eternal truths. In the third section, I will present an interpretation in which there is a sense in which it is true to say that for any eternal truth P, God could have willed not-P but not to say that not-P is possible. By doing this, we will see that Descartes' acceptance of (1) is not inconsistent with his acceptance of (2). So, my argument in this chapter will have the relatively weak conclusion that (1) and (2) are not inconsistent. In the fourth section, I will show how my interpretation preserves Descartes' idea that conceivability is a reliable guide to modality, at least in the case of clear and distinct perceptions. In the next chapter, I will make the positive case for Descartes acceptance of (1) and (2).

Universal Possibilism

The first interpretation I will examine states that Descartes is committed to UP. (I will refer to those who attribute UP to Descartes as 'UPers'.) UP is the strong and controversial (to say the least) thesis that for any proposition P, it is possible that P. Essentially, UP is a denial that there are any necessary truths at all.

UP is correctly (but with qualifications) called 'the standard interpretation' by Curley.⁹ Although Descartes scholars are apprehensive about attributing UP to Descartes, those with less familiarity with Descartes take UP to be uncontroversially true. That is, it is not uncommon find non-specialists attributing UP to Descartes.¹⁰ Nevertheless, there have been only a few Descartes scholars who have been willing to attribute UP to Descartes.¹¹

The most prominent UPer is Harry Frankfurt. In his seminal article, "Descartes on the Creation of the Eternal Truths," Frankfurt argues that Descartes held that the eternal truths are "inherently as contingent as any other propositions."¹² His reasoning is based on the important and troublesome passage from the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland quoted earlier that "[God] could have done the opposite." Moreover, in the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, Descartes states that God "was free to make it not true that all the radii of the circle are equal." (AT I 152; CSMK 25) From these passages it seems that Descartes thinks that a necessary condition of (1) is (3):

- (3) For any eternal truth P, God could have willed that not-P is true.

And because the "assertion that some state of affairs can be brought about ordinarily entails that that state of affairs is logically possible,"¹³ Frankfurt thinks that (3) (ordinarily) entails (4):

- (4) For any eternal truth P, it is possible that not-P.

But Frankfurt argues that if (4) is true, then an eternal truth, despite all appearances and our inability to conceive of things otherwise, is not a necessary truth. We can generalize this result, and we get the UP thesis: For any proposition P it is possible that P. We may spell out the reasoning as follows. Take P as representative of eternal truths such that P is a necessary truth if anything is.

- U1. God could have willed that not-P is true. (3)
U2. If God could have willed that not-P is true, then it is possible that God wills that not-P is true.¹⁴
U3. It is possible that God wills that not-P is true. (from U1 and U2)
U4. If it is possible that God wills that not-P is true, then it is possible that not-P is true.
U5. Therefore, it is possible that not-P is true. (from U3 and U4)

Curley recaps the reasoning behind UP: "Take any contradiction you like, God could have made it true. Hence it could have been. Hence, it is possible, even if false. Hence, anything is possible, there are no necessary truths."¹⁵ Thus, if Descartes really holds UP, then he cannot consistently hold both (1) and (2).

Epistemic Necessity

Despite this interpretation, which commits Descartes to UP, Frankfurt does recognize that Descartes at least makes a distinction between truths such as (i) it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be at the same time and truths such as (ii) I have a body. However, as we have seen, if Frankfurt is correct and Descartes' Creation Doctrine entails UP, then the distinction between (i) and (ii) cannot be one of genuine modality; that is, if UP is true, then both (i) and (ii) may be true, but neither is really necessarily true. According to Frankfurt, the eternal truths are merely those truths whose negation we cannot conceive.¹⁶ This is what distinguishes what we take to be the modal status of (i) and (ii). The necessity of the eternal truths, for Frankfurt's Descartes, is simply a characteristic of our finite minds and their inability to fully understand God's infinite power. As Frankfurt states:

[T]his inability to conceive the truth of a contradiction is, Descartes suggests, merely a contingent characteristic of our finite minds...That our minds cannot conceive such things signifies nothing beyond itself, however, except that God has freely chosen to create us like that.

The inconceivability of [an eternal truth's] falsity, which we demonstrate by the use of innate principles of reason, is not inherent in them. It is properly to be understood only as relative to the character of our minds...So we cannot presume that what we determine to be logically necessary coincides with the ultimate conditions of reality or of truth.¹⁷

Frankfurt supports this view with alleged textual evidence from Descartes' 29 July 1648 letter to Arnauld, in which Descartes states

But I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of 1 and 2 which is not 3; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. (AT V 224; CSMK 358-9)

Further alleged evidence for an epistemic or conceptualist account of modality is found in the Sixth Replies:

Again, there is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit this is unintelligible to us...I also understand that it would have been easy for God to ordain certain things such that we men cannot understand the possibility of their being otherwise than they are. (AT VII 436; CSM II 294)

And even in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, which contains Descartes' first words on the subject of the Creation Doctrine, he states: "In general we can assert that God can do everything that is within our grasp but not that he cannot do what is beyond our grasp. It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power." (AT I 146; CSMK 23)

All of this, Frankfurt takes it, supports the idea that what we call 'necessary' is simply what we cannot conceive to be otherwise; but this inability to conceive its falsity has no bearing on genuine modality, on what, in fact, is really possible.

Several years after Frankfurt's paper was published, Alvin Plantinga loaned his support to the idea that the Creation Doctrine entails UP. Although he suggests that Descartes wasn't clear about whether the Creation Doctrine entails UP or 'limited possibilism' (which will be examined shortly), Plantinga holds that "there is good reason to think...that [Descartes] was prepared to bite the bullet and accept the consequence that there are no necessary truths."¹⁸ Plantinga also cites the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne, the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, and the Sixth Replies as evidence in favor of UP. Unlike Frankfurt who holds that it is primarily God's omnipotence which requires UP to be true, Plantinga believes that considerations of God's aseity entails UP: "[Descartes] believes that God is the sovereign on whom everything depends, including the eternal truths."¹⁹

Plantinga also supports Frankfurt's view that the reason why we call so-called eternal truths 'necessary truths' is due to a limitation in our powers of conception and not to anything inherent in the proposition.

We are so constructed, by God, that we cannot entertain [the proposition that God has created Descartes, but Descartes has not been created] or hold it before our minds without thinking it quite impossible - not just false but impossible. The fact is, however, that it is not impossible; and if we want to know the truth here, we should not hold it before our minds...To paraphrase Raskolnikov, if God does not exist everything is possible; according to Descartes, the same holds if God does exist.²⁰

This epistemic necessity is required simply to reconcile the Creation Doctrine (when considered as entailing UP) with the

fact that there are propositions which we cannot help but think are necessary or impossible.

What is clear is that UP in conjunction with merely epistemic necessity would entail, as Frankfurt thinks it does, that the genuine range of possibilities is inaccessible to us and that our judgments of necessity and impossibility are, strictly speaking, false. Take, for instance, N1:

N1: It is necessary that $2+2=4$.

N1 is false, if it is understood, as we would normally be inclined to understand it, as N1*:

N1*: It is not possible that $2+2=4$ is false. (where the modality in question is taken to be a mind-independent feature of the world)

However, UPers who employ the notion of epistemic necessity to explain the difference between eternal truths such and 'contingent' truths would hold that N1 is true when properly understood as N1**:

N1**: One cannot conceive that $2+2=4$ is false.

In a recent paper, Johnathan Bennett has gone even farther and argued that for Descartes all there is to modality is conceivability.²¹ That is, he argues that the Creation Doctrine provides the following conceptualist analyses (CAM) of the metaphysical modalities:

CAM1: P is possible =_{df} a human can conceive that P.²²

CAM2: P is necessary =_{df} no human can conceive that not-P.²³

And so on. Bennett's account differs from UPers like Frankfurt and Plantinga in so far as Bennett's Descartes

does not hold that there is an asymmetry between genuine possibility (i.e., what God could do) and conceivability; nor does he hold that the former is somehow inaccessible to our finite minds. Bennett states that "what we can conceive provides all the content we are entitled to give to our modal statements," and "our modal concepts should be understood or analyzed in terms of what does or does not lie within the compass of our ways of thinking;"²⁴ and more bluntly: "He made it necessarily true that $2+2=4$ by making us unable to to conceive otherwise."²⁵ Bennett's primary textual evidence for his conceptualist interpretation of Descartes comes from the Second Replies:

If by 'possible' you mean what everyone commonly means, namely whatever does not conflict with our human concepts, then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense...Alternatively, you may well be imagining [fingitis]²⁶ some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect, and so it...will undermine the whole of human knowledge. (AT VII 150-151; CSM II 107)

So, Bennett's conceptualism differs from Frankfurt and Plantinga's UP-plus- epistemic-necessity-approach in that the former holds that there is some sort of necessity in the eternal truths albeit only a conceptual necessity based on our limitation of conception; the latter holds that there is genuine modality (i.e., everything is possible), but we call certain propositions - eternal truths - 'necessary' because our finite minds cannot conceive the possibility of their being otherwise.

As I will later argue, the textual evidence for Bennett's CAM from the Second Replies is consistent with the falsity of CAM. All Descartes states is that our conceptual capacities had better 'match up' with or be a reliable indicator of 'possibility which relates to the object itself.' This should come as no surprise to anyone with any familiarity with Descartes. God would be a deceiver if he were to create our minds in such a way that our (clear and distinct) perceptions of necessity and possibility did not provide accurate representations of the truth. But this does not entail or even make probable the conceptual analysis. Analogously, we would be reasoning fallaciously if we took the fact that a good workman can make a thermometer accurately represent the temperature to entail that the reading of the thermometer is the temperature. I return to this in section IV.

Problems with Universal Possibilism

There are several problems with UP as an interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine, not the least of which is the fact that Descartes does hold (2). For instance, in the Fifth Meditation discussion of true and immutable essences, Descartes holds that there are propositions about triangles and God which are necessarily true and which are "not invented by me or dependent on my mind." (AT VII 64; CSM II 45; cf. AT VII 65- 69; CSM II 45-48)²⁷ Moreover, in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes writes: "even though

[encore que] God has willed that some truths should be necessary..." (AT IV 118; CSMK 235)²⁸ And in The World, written a decade before the Meditations and roughly around the time of the Creation Doctrine letters to Mersenne, Descartes characterizes the laws of nature as truths such that "if God had created many worlds, they would be as true in each of them as in this one." (AT XI 47; CSM I 97) In the Discourse on Method, he reiterates this: "I tried to demonstrate all those laws about which we could have any doubt, and to show that they are such that, even if God created many worlds, there could not be any in which they failed to be observed." (AT VI 43; CSM I 132)²⁹ Moreover, Curley points out that the necessity of the laws of nature is required by Descartes' a priori physics;³⁰ and Van den Brink is quick to remind us that "the initial reason Descartes gave for [the creation doctrine, in the first letter of 1630 to Mersenne] was precisely that it formed the foundation of his physics."³¹

Furthermore, Curley points out that systematic considerations alone are sufficient to show at least that Descartes ought not to have held UP. By systematic considerations, Curley has in mind constraints on the interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine imposed by virtue of the fact that certain fundamental views are essential to Descartes' philosophical project. Among the systematic reasons against UP, Curley lists the following:

UP Problem 1: Even if he is committed to the view that all of the essences of creatures and the eternal truths concerning such essences are contingent, Descartes never entertains, nor would he entertain the idea that the propositions that God exists and God is powerful are possibly false.³²

UP Problem 2: I have already alluded to the fact that Descartes' version of the ontological argument requires the existence of true and immutable essences that included properties that "I now clearly recognize whether I want to or not." (AT VII 64; CSM II 45) Curley takes this to imply, and I agree, that Descartes thought that the necessity found in the propositions concerning true and immutable essences is something that 'forces' itself upon our minds and not vice versa;³³ and among them is that "it is necessary that [God] has existed from eternity and will abide for eternity. (AT VII 68; CSM II 47)

UP Problem 3: If UP is true, then Descartes' 'truth rule' (i.e., that everything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true) is false. The reason for this is that Descartes believes that not only do we sometimes clearly and distinctly perceive the truth of a certain proposition, but sometimes we clearly and distinctly perceive the necessary or possible truth of a proposition.³⁴ So, Descartes holds the following:

- (A) I clearly and distinctly perceive that it is necessary that a triangle's three angles equal two right angles.

and, by the truth rule, (A) entails

- (B) It is necessary that a triangle's three angles equal two right angles.

But if UP is true, then (C) is true:

- (C) It is possible that a triangle's three angles do not equal two right angles.

If (C) is true, then (B) is false; and granting that (A) is true, the entailment from (A) to (B) is false. But the entailment from (A) to (B) is simply a substitution instance of the truth rule. Thus, the truth rule is false, if UP is true. This should trouble any UPer. After all, the truth rule is the crucial epistemic principle in the Meditations, a work that is primarily epistemological. If the Creation Doctrine jeopardizes Descartes' truth rule, we must either reject the truth rule (at too great a cost to Descartes), reject the Creation Doctrine (which we cannot do because Descartes clearly held it), or reject UP as an interpretation of the Creation Doctrine. I, of course, believe that the last choice is the correct one. UP must be rejected, if not for the systematic reasons Curley states, for the reason that it does not make sense internally.

UP Problem 4:³⁵ The truth rule would be rendered useless. Descartes actively employs our powers of conception and their relation to possibility in his Sixth Meditation argument for the real distinction between mind and body:

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it... [O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of

body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it. (AT VII 78;CSM II 54)³⁶

From a clear and distinct perception of P, we can infer that P is possible; that is, we have a clear and distinct perception of our mind existing apart from body, and so we know that there is a real distinction between them. This argument is merely an application of the important truth rule previously discussed. But, as Bennett correctly points out, Descartes would be seriously understating his position in the real distinction argument if he in fact held UP.³⁷ There would be no need for the truth rule in this argument if UP is true because, if everything is possible, then not only what I clearly and distinctly perceive is possible, but also whatever I perceive confusedly and obscurely is possible. We can formulate this objection as follows:

- (a) If Descartes held UP, then the real distinction argument does not require the truth rule.
- (b) The real distinction argument does require the truth rule.
- (c) Therefore, it is not the case that Descartes held UP.³⁸

We can see that this objection can be formulated using any of Descartes' important arguments that rely on the truth rule.

Thus, there is a reason why Van den Brink calls UP 'the extreme reading' of Descartes' Creation Doctrine. If UP is a correct interpretation of the Creation Doctrine, then it is a disaster for the cogito, the truth rule, a priori

physics, the ontological argument, the argument for the real distinction of mind and body, and even the argument that God is not a deceiver (after all, God would be a deceiver if he has given us minds that are not reliable indicators of modal truth even when we clearly and distinctly understand something to be necessary or impossible.)³⁹ In other words, almost every positive step made in the Meditations is undermined by the Creation Doctrine if it entails UP. For all these reasons, and another to be discussed shortly, we should reject UP unless we are absolutely forced to it.

Limited Possibilism

The second interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine and its implications for modality, which attributes 'limited possibilism' [LP] to Descartes, is primarily an attempt to understand (3) in such a way that Descartes can consistently hold (1) and (2). That is, it acknowledges that Descartes held that the eternal truths are necessary even though they are freely created by God.⁴⁰ The LP thesis is the relatively weaker thesis that for any proposition P, it is possible that P is possible. LPers, such as Peter Geach⁴¹ and Edwin Curley,⁴² attribute LP to Descartes primarily on the basis of the following important passage from the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland:

[T]he power of God cannot have any limits, and...our mind is finite and so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he

nevertheless wished to make impossible...And even though [encore que] God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily; for it is one thing to will that they be necessary, and quite another to will this necessarily, or to be necessitated to will it. (AT IV 118- 119; CSMK 235)

LPers take Descartes to be making an important scope distinction here between LP1 and LP2:

LP1: God wills that necessarily $2+2=4$

LP2: Necessarily, God wills that $2+2=4$

LP1, according to Curley (and presumably, Geach), is true, as is stated in the letter to Mesland quoted above.

However, LP2 is false, as the same passage and our earlier discussion of divine freedom indicates. We have seen that avoidance of any determination of God's will is one of the primary motivations for the Creation Doctrine; so, clearly Descartes cannot hold LP2.

LPers take the passage from the Mesland letter to show that Descartes' eternal truths are necessary, but they are only contingently necessary because it is not necessary that God will them. As Geach states:

[the eternal truths] are necessary in our world, and in giving us our mental endowments God gave us the right sort of clear and distinct ideas to see the necessity. But though they are necessary, they are not necessarily necessary; God could have freely chosen to make a different sort of world, in which other things would have been necessary truths.⁴³

So, LP is not, like UP, a denial that there are any necessary truths; it is a denial that the necessary eternal truths are necessarily necessary. This is the most

significant advantage of LP over UP. LP interprets (3) as entailing the relatively more congenial (4*):

(4*) For any eternal truth P, it is possible that not-P is possible.

So, although LPers hold that the eternal truths are not necessarily necessary, they do hold that they are necessary. Thus, if Descartes' Creation Doctrine entails only LP, then he can consistently hold both (1) and (2). As Curley states, "Descartes wants to allow that there are some propositions which are in fact impossible, but which might have been possible, and that others are in fact necessary, but might, nevertheless, not have been necessary,"⁴⁴ and "[LP] is consistent with holding that there are some necessary truths, whereas [UP] denies this."⁴⁵

Although Geach was the first to suggest that Descartes' Creation Doctrine involves LP, Curley is responsible for the development of the idea and he has formulated an argument to show that Descartes is an LPer. Curley wishes to show how even a contingent act of willing can have a necessary truth as its object. Let 'W' denote the two-place relation '_ wills that _', 'a' and 'p' are variables ranging over agents and propositions respectively, and 'g' is a constant referring to God. Curley's argument is as follows:

- C1. $\forall a \forall p (Wap \rightarrow \Diamond \sim Wap)$
- C2. $\forall p (p \leftrightarrow Wgp)$
- C3. $\Box p$ assumption
- C4. $\Box p \rightarrow Wg\Box p$ from C2

- C5. $Wg\Box p \rightarrow \Diamond \sim Wg\Box p$ from C1
- C6. $\Diamond \sim Wg\Box p$ from C3, C4, C5
- C7. $\Diamond \sim \Box p$ from principle that $(p \rightarrow q) \rightarrow (\Diamond \sim q \rightarrow \Diamond \sim p)$
- C8. $\forall p (\Box p \rightarrow \Diamond \sim \Box p)$ from C3-C7
- C9. $\forall p \sim \Box \Box p$ (or equivalently, $\forall p \Diamond \Diamond p$) from C8.

C1 is the crucial premise in this argument. It simply states a prima facie commonsense view that in any genuinely contingent act of willing it is possible that the agent refrains from willing what they in fact willed. And C2 is simply a statement of God's omnipotence. The rest of the argument basically follows from those two premises. Curley took this to show that even in the realm of contingent acts of will, necessary truths may be the objects of those acts. But their necessity is only contingent precisely because of the contingency of what God in fact wills.

Before I examine the problems that plague LP as an interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine, it is interesting to note, as both Plantinga and Curley do, that LP is independently more plausible than UP as a general thesis about modality regardless of whether it is correct as an interpretation of Descartes. There are some systems of modal logic in which $(\Box P \ \& \ \Diamond \Diamond \sim P)$ can be true. Take the actual world @, and two other possible worlds w1 and w2. In systems in which there is some limitation on the

accessibility relation among worlds, $\Box P$ is true iff P is true at all worlds accessible to @, the actual world. Suppose that $\Box P$ is true at @, but that only w_1 and itself are accessible to @. This means that P is true at @ and w_1 . But suppose that w_2 is accessible to w_1 but not to @. If $\sim P$ is true at w_2 , then $\Diamond \sim P$ is true at w_1 ; and because $\Diamond \Diamond \sim P$ simply means that there is some world accessible to @ in which $\Diamond \sim P$ is true and w_1 is accessible to @, $\Diamond \Diamond \sim P$ is true at @ even though $\Box P$ is also true at @. So, as long as the accessibility relation is intransitive, $(\Box P \ \& \ \Diamond \Diamond \sim P)$ can both be true; that is, in systems like K, D, T, and B it will work.⁴⁶ But as Curley notes, attributing this type of reasoning to Descartes would be ridiculous and anachronistic. Descartes did not have our notion of possible worlds; a fortiori he did not have the notion of accessibility relations. But simply taken on its own LP has the advantage of relative plausibility over UP.

Problems with Limited Possibilism

LP Problem 1: LP seems to place unwarranted and, quite frankly, absurd constraints on God's power. It is reasonable to suppose that Descartes held a Thomistic view of God's omnipotence, at least with respect to mere necessary conditions for omnipotence.

T: God is omnipotent only if God can bring about any broadly logically possible state of affairs.

Evidence that Descartes held T can be found in Notae in Programma quoddam:

We should note that even though the rule 'Whatever we can conceive of can exist', is my own, it is true only so long as we are dealing with a conception which is clear and distinct, a conception which embraces the possibility of the thing in question, since God can bring about whatever we clearly perceive to be possible. (AT VIII 351-352; CSM I 299)

This is reiterated in the 31 December 1640 letter to Mersenne: "[P]ossible existence is contained in everything which we clearly understand, because from the fact that we clearly understand something it follows that it can be created by God." (AT III 274; CSMK 166) If God could not bring about a possible state of affairs, then he would not be omnipotent. This seems to be a very plausible condition on God's omnipotence. But if LP is true, then God would not be omnipotent, that is, if T provides a necessary condition for his omnipotence. Here is the reason: Take any eternal truth P. According to LP, it is not possible that not-P, although it is possible that not-P is possible. Without looking too far beneath the surface, we may see that LP already places restrictions on God's power, i.e., He cannot will that not-P is true. However, prima facie, Descartes does not think that this is an unreasonable constraint, as the quotation from the letter to More above makes clear. The implication of LP that there are some necessary eternal truths makes it the case that God cannot bring about the negation of P, despite his ability to bring about the

possibility of the negation of P. So, an LPer would hold the following proposition:

LP3: For any eternal truth P, God could have made that it is possible that not-P true.

And God is omnipotent, so, let's suppose that He chooses to will that it is possible that not-P is true. So, according to LP, God can perform the incredibly difficult task of willing a necessary truth to be possibly false, but (and here is the rub) he cannot perform the relatively simple task of willing a possibly false proposition to be actually false. This, of course, violates T; and it is agreed on all hands that T is a weak condition for omnipotence.⁴⁷

LP Problem 2: LP also makes the Creation Doctrine something much weaker than the doctrine Descartes actually held. Descartes, as we have seen, held that there are no limitations on which eternal truths God could have created. God is responsible not only for the modal status of a proposition but also for its actual truth value. It is LP's neglect of this consideration that leads to another objection. Recently, James Van Cleve has argued (successfully, according to Curley⁴⁸) that from quite similar reasoning and the idea that not just the modal status but also the truth of any proposition is willed by God, we can show that LP is reducible to UP; hence, LP is not a genuine alternative to the extreme and implausible UP. Van Cleve asks us to consider the following argument, which is quite similar to Curley's LP Argument with the main

difference being that Van Cleve substitutes V2 for Curley's C2:

- V1. $\forall a \forall p (Wap \rightarrow \Diamond \sim Wap)$
- V2. $\forall p (\Box p \supset [p \rightarrow Wgp])$
- V3. $\Box p$ Assumption
- V4. $p \rightarrow Wgp$ from C2 and V3
- V5. $Wgp \rightarrow \Diamond \sim Wgp$ from V1
- V6. $\Diamond \sim Wgp$ from V3-V5
- V7. $\Diamond \sim p$ from V4, V6
- V8. $\forall p (\Box p \supset \Diamond \sim p)$ from V3-V7
- V9. $\forall p \sim \Box p$ (or equivalently, $\forall p \Diamond p$) from V8

Van Cleve strangely provides a passage from the 6 May 1630 letter to Mersenne as textual evidence for V2: "As for the eternal truths, I say once more that they are true or possible only because he knows them as true or possible...In God willing and knowing are a single thing..." (AT I 149; CSMK 24). Although Descartes would certainly accept V2, this passage does not seem to suggest V2 but rather V2* and V2**:

$$V2^*: \quad \forall p (p \rightarrow Wgp)$$

$$V2^{**}: \quad \forall p (\Diamond p \rightarrow Wg\Diamond p)$$

So, the textual evidence for V2 is weak, what's more, V2 is not necessary for Van Cleve's argument. He can use the more textually-supported V2* in conjunction with an

uncontroverial principle stating that $\Box p \rightarrow p$. In any case, Van Cleve's argument makes its point: the Creation Doctrine entails UP if Curley's C1 is true and God is the cause of the truth of any proposition.

The Real Problem with Possibilisms

Unfortunately for LPers, LP (as an interpretation of Descartes's Creation Doctrine), even if it can be defended against the problems raised in the previous section, is still plagued by the same major problem as UP (as an interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine): Both understand (3) to entail the possibility of the eternal truths being otherwise. But the thrust of the Creation Doctrine is that nothing is possible prior to God's willing it to be so.⁴⁹

Although Descartes' Creation Doctrine, as we have seen in Chapter One, may be seen as a reaction to the late medieval and early-modern scholastic debate concerning the eternal truths and whether they are true independently of God,⁵⁰ the real problem with LP and UP can be illustrated most effectively by contrasting Descartes' Creation Doctrine with Leibniz's view of the eternal truths and their relation to God. Leibniz holds, just as strongly as Descartes, that the eternal truths and the essences of creatures depend on God. In fact, in section 44 of the Monadology, Leibniz goes so far as to give an argument for the existence of God based on the fact that the eternal truths depend on Him. However,

an important point on which they disagree is the nature of this dependence. Both believe in the relatively weak thesis that the eternal truths would not be true if, per impossibile, God did not exist. But Leibniz believes that the eternal truths exist in and depend on God's understanding but not God's will.⁵¹

God's understanding is the realm of eternal truths...without him there would be nothing real in possibles, and not only would nothing exist, but also nothing would be possible...However, we should not imagine, as some do, that since the eternal truths depend on God, they are arbitrary and depend on his will, as Descartes appears to have held...[N]ecessary truths depend solely on his understanding, and are its internal object.⁵²

And in the Theodicy, he states

One must not say with some Scotists, that the eternal truths would exist even though there were no understanding, not even that of God. For it is, in my judgment, the divine understanding which gives reality to the eternal truths, albeit God will have no part therein. (§184)

These very truths can have no existence without an understanding to take cognizance of them; for they would not exist if there were no divine understanding wherein they are realized, so to speak. (§ 189)

As we have seen, Descartes, despite holding that the eternal truths depend on God, cannot accept that they depend on his understanding but not his will. The reason, as we have seen, is that Descartes holds a version of the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity; and hence the divine understanding and the divine will are identical though conceptually distinct₂. So, holding that the eternal truths are the object of God's understanding but not his will is not an option open to Descartes.

Furthermore, and more importantly for the present discussion, Descartes, unlike Leibniz, does not allow that anything is true prior to God's decision to make it true.⁵³ Take any eternal truth P willed by God to be (necessarily) true. Descartes thinks that God could have willed not-P to be true; that is, he does hold that (3) is true. However, we cannot infer from (3) that not-P is possible, and here is why: A prominent feature (indeed the characteristic feature) of the Creation Doctrine is that a proposition is true only if God wills it to be true; and Descartes believes that this holds equally for modal propositions (i.e., propositions with a modal operator). As he states in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, we can "conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible," (AT IV 118; CSMK 235); and more explicitly in Principles I §24, he states: "God alone is the true cause of everything which is or can be." (AT VIII 14; CSM I 201, emphasis mine) God is the cause of everything that actually or possibly exists and of everything that is actually or possibly true. But it is not the case that God ever willed that it is possible that not-P or that it is possible that not-P is possible. We know Descartes believes this because he believed that the eternal truths are willed to be (necessarily) true from eternity, i.e., there is no time at which they are not true.⁵⁴ So, because God never willed that it is possible that not-P or that it is possible that not-P is possible, those propositions are not true, nor were they ever true.⁵⁵

Thus, Descartes' Creation Doctrine entails neither UP nor LP because to do so would require that there be true modal propositions prior to God's creative will; and that is clearly not allowed by the Creation Doctrine. Thus, we must look for a way to understand (3) within the confines of the Creation Doctrine, that is, in a way that doesn't presuppose possibilities independent of God's will, as Leibniz does.

We can also now see that C1 in Curley's LP Argument, V1 in Van Cleve's Argument are false. These premises may be true only if the domain of the quantifier is restricted to finite created agents. But Descartes is explicit about one of his personal motivations concerning the Creation Doctrine: "I want people to get used to speaking of God in a manner worthier, I think, than the common and almost universal way of imagining him as a finite being." (AT I 146; CSMK 23)⁵⁶ Although finite agents may require possibilities in order to have freedom of volition, God, being infinite and absolutely independent of all things, does not require this.

Understanding the 'Could' in Terms of Indifference

I understand that there may be some confusion, and it is warranted. After all it is not obvious how we are supposed to understand (3) without presupposing possibilities, and yet we must have an adequate grasp of the sense of the 'could' in (3) in order to make sense of the Creation Doctrine. We usually think that the fact that an

agent could have willed a states of affairs α entails that there are possible alternatives among which is α . I admit that this is ordinarily the case,⁵⁷ but we cannot forget that we are talking about God here; and as we have already seen, divine freedom is different from human freedom for Descartes. Descartes states the difference in a familiar passage from the Sixth Replies:

As for the freedom of the will, the way in which it exists in God is quite different from the way in which it exists in us. It is self-contradictory to suppose that the will of God was not indifferent from eternity with respect to everything which has happened or will ever happen; for it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority: I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of 'rationally determined reason' [ratione ratiocinata] as they call it, such that God's idea of the good impelled him to choose one thing rather than another. For example, God did not will...that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary,...it is because he willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise...Thus, the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence. (AT VII 431-2; CSM II 291, my emphasis)

Absolute indifference (i.e., c-indifference) is a necessary condition of divine freedom. According to Descartes, unless God was c-indifferent in his willing, he would have been impelled or determined (by virtue of his omniscience and simplicity) to will exactly those things that are true (and/or good).⁵⁸ But Descartes thinks that the only way God's will could be c-indifferent is if there can be nothing

true prior to his decision to make it true. Because God, by his very nature, would know what is true if there were anything true independent of his will, his will would not be c-indifferent and hence not (divinely) free.

If we concentrate on the fact that Descartes' Creation Doctrine is not a thesis about modality, as UPers and LPers have thought, but rather a thesis about the dependence of the eternal truths on God's independent and indifferent will, we can finally see how to understand (3) in such a way that Descartes can consistently hold (1) and (2). I propose that the following is the way that Descartes intended (3) to be understood:

(3*) For any eternal truth P, it is not the case that there were any independent factors preventing God from willing not-P or impelling him to will P.

(3*), as we have seen in the previous chapter, will be trivially true in virtue of the fact that there is nothing prior to or independent of God's will; a fortiori, there is nothing independent of God's will which would prevent or impel him.

(3*) has the advantage that it doesn't entail anything about the possibility (or possible possibility) of not-P. Thus, it satisfies the Creation Doctrine constraint that even possibilities require God's willing them to be so. But this advantage is worthless if (3*) is not something that Descartes actually believed. Fortunately, (3*) is supported by strong textual evidence. In the long quotation from the Sixth Replies above, I emphasized Descartes' statement that

God's will cannot be impelled or determined by something independent of his will; and it is in this lack of determination that God's indifferent freedom consists. Evidence for (3*) is also found in the 1630 letters to Mersenne and the 1644 letter to Mesland, where Descartes states that God was not necessitated nor was he determined to will what he in fact willed.⁵⁹ Even the passages (incorrectly) used by Frankfurt to support the UP interpretation of the Creation Doctrine support (3*). For example: "[T]he power of God cannot have any limits...God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together..." (AT IV 118; CSMK 235, my emphasis).

It is also clear that Descartes is concerned with independent limits on God's willing.⁶⁰ In the Fifth Replies, Descartes states that God can have limits self-imposed by his willing certain propositions to be necessarily true: "But just as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God." (AT VII 380; CSM II 261) Prima facie this passage is in stark contrast with what Descartes states in the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne, and as such it may appear to some that Descartes is being inconsistent with his metaphors. The passage is as follows: "Indeed to say that

these [eternal] truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates." (AT I 145; CSMK 23) In this passage, Descartes explicitly contrasts the fact that God is independent of all things with the fact that the gods of the ancients were subject to independent factors. Descartes seems to be stating that God is radically dissimilar from Jupiter and Saturn. But what he is actually doing in these two passages is stating that they are dissimilar in so far as the gods of the ancients are constrained by ('subject to') things external and independent of them; whereas in the Fifth Replies passage quoted above, Descartes is stating that God is similar to Jupiter in that both act in accordance with self-imposed restrictions. This is consistent with God's creation being absolutely indifferent, and with the Creation Doctrine.

In addition to the textual evidence for (3*), the restrictions that the Creation Doctrine imposes on an interpretation of (3) (e.g., that we cannot employ unwilled possibilities in our interpretation) means that there is an extreme scarcity of interpretive options. Because (3*) has so much in its favor (i.e., it allows Descartes to hold both (1) and (2), and it is well-supported by the text), and there is no clear alternative interpretation of (3) to which we can help ourselves, we would be wise to accept (3*) as the correct interpretation of (3).

Brief Remarks on Descartes' Modal Epistemology
and the Conceptual Analysis of Modality

Some people may still be confused. Descartes is saying that there are things that God could have willed even though these things are not possible; and this strikes us as incomprehensible.⁶¹ After all, we may wonder how any agent, human or divine, could have willed something that was not-possible. But Descartes is quick to point out that our inability to conceive the lack of any external limitations on God's will should come as no surprise. In many passages, Descartes emphasizes the incomprehensibility of God's will. For instance, in the Sixth Replies, he states: "There is no need to ask how God could have brought it about from eternity that it was not true that twice four make eight, and so on; for I admit that this is unintelligible to us. (AT VII 436; CSM II 294) And in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, he states: "[E]ven if this be true [i.e., that God could have willed otherwise], we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so." (AT IV 118; CSMK 235) It is precisely the fact that God created everything (except himself, of course) with absolute indifference and without preexisting possibilities that makes him "a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp...whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding." (AT I 150; CSMK 24-5)⁶²

But how then does Descartes account for the fact that we do not have epistemic access to what God could have willed without making God out to be a deceiver? A problem with UP is that it entails an asymmetry between what is conceivable and what is possible; i.e., the range of possibilities is much broader than the range of what is conceivable by our finite minds. As Wilson states "[the Creation Doctrine] seems to lead to the conclusion that God could have made true what we cannot comprehend as possible."⁶³ This poses problems for UP because Descartes does seem to think that (clear and distinct) conceivability is a reliable guide to modality.⁶⁴ This is a problem for UP but not for my interpretation of the Creation Doctrine. On my interpretation, Descartes can certainly hold that whatever is possible is, in principle, conceivable and vice versa despite the truth of each of the following:

- (5) God could have willed that $2+2=5$ is true.⁶⁵
- (6) Humans cannot conceive that $2+2=5$ is true.
- (7) Humans cannot conceive that $2+2=5$ is possibly true.

If UP or LP is true then we encounter the problem that conceivability is not a reliable guide to modality because of (6) and (7) and the fact that Upers take (5) to entail that it is possible that $2+2=5$, and LPers take (5) to entail that it is possible that $2+2=5$ is possible. However, on my interpretation, even though (5) is true, (8) is also true:

- (8) It is not possible that $2+2=5$ is true.

(8) is true for the reason previously stated that (9)

(9) It is possible that $2+2=5$.

was never willed by God to be true; and that is a necessary condition for the truth of any proposition according to the Creation Doctrine. Thus, the truth of (8) accounts for the reason why (6) and (7) are true, despite the truth of (5).

I now return to consideration of Bennett's CAM.

According to this view, conceivability is not merely a reliable guide to modality, as I believe Descartes held, rather conceivability exhausts all there is to modality. Bennett thinks that the following passage clearly shows that Descartes held CAM:

If by 'possible' you mean what everyone commonly means, namely 'whatever does not conflict with our human concepts', then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense...Alternatively, you may well be imagining [fingitis] some other kind of possibility which relates to the object itself; but unless this matches the first sort of possibility it can never be known by the human intellect... (AT VII 150; CSM II 107)

In this passage, Bennett thinks that "Descartes is treating the 'possibility which relates to the object itself as a contrivance, something faked up for the purposes of argument."⁶⁶ In fact Bennett thinks that the use of 'fingitis' ought to be translated, not as 'imagining' but rather as 'inventing'. This translation does not seem warranted without begging the question.

CAM Problem 1: There is a lack of strong textual evidence. Bennett surely has the burden of proof on his shoulders in this case. So, he has to show us that CAM is a correct interpretation of the Creation Doctrine. But does

this text, which Bennett claims to be the best piece of evidence in favor of CAM, show that CAM is a correct interpretation of the Creation Doctrine? The answer is 'no'. Nowhere in this text does Descartes say that all there is to modality is conceivability or that modality simply concerns human concepts. He merely states that this is what 'everyone commonly understands' [ut vulgo omnes... intelligitis] by 'possible'. But there is no reason to think that Descartes has become a champion of the vulgar man's understanding of deep metaphysical theses. Furthermore, as I have already mentioned, Descartes is stating only that this vulgar notion of possibility in terms of conceivability must be a reliable indicator of modal truths or we would constantly be deceived in our perceptions of modal truths. So, Bennett does not establish his position through any strong textual evidence.⁶⁷

CAM Problem 2: If CAM is true, then modality is mind-dependent. But Descartes explicitly denies, in the Fifth Meditation, that it depends on his mind. (AT VII 64; CSM II 45) Bennett could reply that Descartes certainly does not think that the necessary truth of $2+2=4$ depends on his mind; but Descartes does think that it depends on some minds or other. Bennett's response does not help his cause. To see this, imagine the following situation: In 1641 everyone in the universe is annihilated by God except Descartes. (After all, God would only to have willed (from eternity) that in 1641 his conserving power would be removed in order to

annihilate everyone.) That is, we are stipulating that Descartes is the only finite mind in existence. In this case, CAM would be committed to one of the following:

CAMa: The eternal truths depend on Descartes' mind.

CAMb: There are no eternal truths.

Clearly, CAMb is ad hoc; there simply is no reason for a CAM-supporter to assert CAMb simply on the basis that the majority of the population is annihilated. But then we are left with CAMa. Despite its oddness, CAMa does not directly contradict Descartes' statement from the Fifth Meditation (i.e., that the eternal truths do not depend on his mind) because that passage is embedded in a context quite different from the imaginary one we are presently considering. However, notice the absurd consequences of CAMa: If Descartes is annihilated, then there will be no eternal truths. That the eternal truths would be true at one moment and not only not true at another but also non-existent in any way simply because Descartes is annihilated, strikes me as too great an absurdity to attribute to Descartes. But I believe that CAM is committed to this absurdity. Therefore, CAM, as an interpretation of Descartes, is absurd, especially given my alternative interpretation which makes sense of the CAM-texts without these absurd consequences.

CAM Problem 3: Descartes believes that the eternal truths are eternally true, but our minds are not eternal. Excluding his use of 'eternal' in 'eternal truths', Descartes has two different senses of 'eternal'.⁶⁸

x is eternal₁ =df x is outside of time or timeless.⁶⁹

x is eternal₂ =df x exists at all times.⁷⁰

Although Descartes is vague about whether the eternal truths are eternal₁, he certainly believes that they are eternal₂.⁷¹ (refs?) On the other hand, the human mind is clearly not eternal₁. Nor is the human mind eternal₂. Even supposing, as Descartes seems to have, that a mind, once created, exists at every time afterward, a mind has not existed since the beginning of time. Thus, if CAM is a correct interpretation of Descartes, he is committed to the following: Something eternal₂ depends on something non-eternal₂. But, when we consider what 'dependence' is, the previous statement is contradictory. Remember that Descartes' concept of dependence is the following:

x depends on y =df. it is not possible for x to exist without y and it is possible for y to exist without x.

But if the eternal truths are eternal₂, then there is no time at which they are not true. But the human mind is not eternal₂; hence, there is a time at which it did not exist. So, there is a time at which the eternal truths are true and there is no human mind. But, if the eternal truths depend on a human mind, then there cannot be a time at which the eternal truths are true but no human mind exists.

Contradiction. I don't see a way out of this problem for CAM.⁷²

We have seen that the fact that Descartes' God could have willed otherwise with respect to the eternal truths does not entail that the eternal truths are possibly false or that there are other possible eternal truths. This eliminates UP and LP from consideration as correct interpretations of Descartes' Creation Doctrine and its implications for modality. My interpretation of the 'could' allows Descartes to hold two important theses, which he in fact held; and my interpretation pays close attention to the consideration of divine freedom as a reason for the Creation Doctrine. Moreover, my interpretation allows Descartes to maintain that conceivability is a reliable guide to modality, and that God is not a deceiver, despite the fact that we cannot conceive some of the things God could have done. We cannot conceive them precisely because they are not possible.

Endnotes

¹Frankfurt (1977), Plantinga (1980).

²Geach (1973), Curley (1984), (1998)

³Bennett (1994), Frankfurt (1977), Ishiguro (1986), Wilson (1978)

⁴These are Plantinga's (1980) terms.

⁵Cf. AT I 152;CSMK 25.

⁶Broughton (1987) p. 208.

⁷Frankfurt (1977) p. 43.

⁸Alanen (1985) p. 168.

⁹Curley (1984).

¹⁰Almost without fail, the non-specialists with whom I have discussed these issues take UP to be uncontroversially true for Descartes.

¹¹For instance, Cronin (1966) p. 37: "In the cartesian system there is nothing which is simply and universally good, for nothing is good save that which God, whose nature is wholly one and incomprehensible, wills to be good. There is no truth which is absolutely necessary, even the truth that the whole is greater than any of its parts...". Van den Brink goes so far as to call UP 'the extreme reading'. (1993) p. 3.

¹²Frankfurt (1977).

¹³Frankfurt (1977) p. 43.

¹⁴By a principle stating that if x could will that P, then it is possible that x wills P. (We will see that this principle is false).

¹⁵Curley (1984) p. 571.

¹⁶Wilson also thinks that this is the case: "Descartes did regard the 'necessity' we perceive in mathematical propositions as in some sense and degree a function of the constitution of our minds." (1978) p. 125.

¹⁷Frankfurt (1977) p. 44-5.

¹⁸Plantinga (1980) p. 95.

¹⁹Unlike Frankfurt who holds that it is primarily God's omnipotence which requires UP to be true, Plantinga believes that considerations of God's aseity entails UP: "[Descartes] believes that God is the sovereign on whom everything depends, including the eternal truths." (1980) p. 110.

²⁰Plantinga (1980) p. 114.

²¹Bennett (1993). Ishiguro (1986) also seems to hold this view. Cf. Chappell (1997) p. 125.

²²Cf. Rescher (1973)

²³Bennett (1993) p. 647. Bennett is quick to point out that the 'can' in CAM1 and CAM2 "must be understood in causal, psychological terms, and not as involving the absolute or logical modalities that are being analyzed." This is a curious remark because a causal or psychological 'can' seems to have as a necessary condition a metaphysical or logical 'can', in which case, CAM1 and CAM2 are circular.

²⁴Bennett (1993) p. 647.

²⁵Bennett (1993) p. 649.

²⁶Bennett translates the verb 'fingere' as 'to invent'. This surely is more agreeable to his interpretation; however, he states that it doesn't matter much how it is translated because the thrust of the passage is that "Descartes is treating the 'possibility which relates to the object itself' as a contrivance, something faked up for purposes of argument rather than part of our natural conceptual repertoire." (1993) p. 648.

²⁷A UPer may suggest that the 'or' here should be read as 'that is' or 'in other words'. So, the statement would read in such a way as to make being invented by me equivalent to being dependent on my mind; it would read: "not invented by me, that is (or, in other words), dependent on my mind." The latin is helpful here: "quae a me non efficta est, nec a mente mea dependet." Translated literally, this reads: "which is not invented by me nor does it depend on my mind." So, it seems that Descartes is not treating 'invented by me' and 'dependent on my mind' as equivalent in this passage. On a different note, this constitutes fairly strong textual evidence against a conceptualist interpretation of Creation Doctrine like Bennett's. If eternal truths do not depend on my mind (and eternal truths are truths concerning essences), then it follows that their modal status cannot depend on my mind.

²⁸CSM translates 'encore que' as 'even if'. I chosen to translate it more literally and non-question-beggingly as 'even though'.

²⁹Even some scholars who hold that Descartes' natural laws are not eternal truths nevertheless hold that they are necessary truths. In fact, Blake Dutton has argued that they are in fact 'necessary to a greater degree' than the eternal truths. While Dutton's arguments are admirable, I simply find it hard to believe that Descartes thought that natural laws have a greater degree of necessity than, say, the law of non-contradiction. See Dutton (1996).

I have reservations about interpreting Descartes' talk about 'worlds' in terms of our contemporary notion of 'possible worlds'. On our notion of possible worlds, they are maximal and compossible states of affairs (or propositions) or something alongs these lines; and, because of issues of compossibility, no more than one world can be actual (where this is understood de dicto and not de re). However, Descartes writes of God creating 'many worlds'. On the contemporary possible worlds account, many worlds cannot exist. So, Descartes must mean something else by 'world' than what we mean. However, this does not affect the point that the laws of nature are necessary truths. Rather, they are necessary, but not because they would be true in any world God could create.

³⁰Curley (1984).

³¹Van den Brink (1993) p. 4.

³²See Wells (1982).

³³Curley (1984) p. 572: "my thought does not impose any necessity of things, rather the necessity of the things themselves determines me to think of them in the way that I do."

³⁴See AT VII 78; CSM II 54, and AT VII 116-119; CSM II 83-85, for instance.

³⁵This 'systematic reason' is not from Curley. It resembles a reason presented by Bennett (1994) p. 644.

³⁶See also Principles I §60 (AT VIII 28-29; CSM I 213).

³⁷Bennett (1994) p. 644.

³⁸Some might be tempted to argue Descartes did not foresee this consequence of the Creation Doctrine (and UP) for his real distinction argument. But I propose that the principle of charity be applied generously.

³⁹It should be noted that CAM is not susceptible to this criticism precisely because it does not think that there is a realm of modal truths which are inaccessible to us. So, CAM has at least this advantage.

⁴⁰See Van den Brink (1993), p. 6: "[LP] has one important advantage in comparison to [UP]. For it does not only take seriously the fact that eternal truths are created by God, but also the fact that they are created as eternal, i.e., necessary truths."

⁴¹Geach (1973)

⁴²Curley (1984), (1998).

⁴³Geach (1973) p. 10.

⁴⁴Curley (1984) p. 582-3.

⁴⁵Curley (1998) p. 14.

⁴⁶See Hughes and Cresswell (1996).

⁴⁷Plantinga (1980) and Bennett (1994) both notice this bizarre consequence.

⁴⁸Curley (1998)

⁴⁹Alanen (1988) and LaCroix (1984) make similar points.

⁵⁰See, for example, Wells (1960), (1961), (1981); Doyle (1967); Dear (1988); Osler (1994); Cronin (1966).

⁵¹As Woolhouse states: "though it is clear that immutable essences and natures would have no existence were it not for God, and though it is clear that their existence is independent of the rest of creation, Descartes does not say where they exist. For Leibniz, on the other hand, it is clear that they exist in the divine mind." (1990) p. 37. Although Woolhouse's statement concerning Leibniz is uncontroversial, his comment about Descartes has been called into question by at least three papers in recent years: Schmaltz (1991), Chappell (1997), Nolan (1997).

⁵²Monadology §43, in Leibniz (1989)

⁵³Obviously, I am not speaking of temporal priority here because Descartes holds that the eternal truths are eternal and immutable. So, there was no time at which they were not true. See AT IV 314; CSMK 272.

⁵⁴See AT I 152; CSMK 25.

⁵⁵We can know this simply through the truth rule applied to modal propositions. Cf. Mattern (1986).

⁵⁶Cf. AT V 158, 165; CSMK 341,347, and AT VIII 14; CSM I 201.

⁵⁷We might remember that even Frankfurt states that it is only ordinarily the case that a 'could' entails possibility. Earl Conee also states that there is an epistemic sense of 'could' which doesn't entail possibilities. Conee (1991)

⁵⁸See AT VII 435-6; CSM II 293-4.

⁵⁹AT I 152; CSMK 25, AT IV 118; CSMK 235.

⁶⁰See LaCroix (1984) and Van den Brink (1993) p. 9: "Rather than being determined by external substances, God determines himself to what he creates."

⁶¹Although Descartes thinks that God could have done the not-possible, he does not think that God can do the impossible. In a June 1642 letter to Regius, Descartes states: "...the only things that are said to be impossible for God to do are those which involve a conceptual contradiction, that is, which are not intelligible." (AT III 567; CSMK 214)

⁶²See also AT I 146; CSMK 23.

⁶³Wilson (1978) p. 122.

⁶⁴This is most noticeable in Descartes' Fifth Meditation 'ontological argument', in which we have a clear and distinct perception that God necessarily exists, and in the Sixth Meditation 'real distinction' argument, in which we have a clear and distinct perception that it is possible for the mind and body to be separated.

⁶⁵Where this claim is understood as an instance of (3*), namely as 'it is not the case that there were any independent factors preventing God from willing that $2+2=5$ or impelling him to will that $2+2=4$ '.

⁶⁶Bennett (1994) p. 648.

⁶⁷There is some troubling textual evidence for CAM in the Principles, in which Descartes discusses "the eternal truths which have no existence [existentiam] outside our thought." (AT VIII 22; CSM I 208) This constitutes the strongest evidence for CAM. However, this evidence is not as strong as it initially seems. Because this passage occurs in a context in which Descartes is contrasting the eternal truths with 'things' and their 'affections', both of which

enjoy, what Descartes calls, 'formal being', perhaps Descartes simply means that the eternal truths do not enjoy formal being. According to Larry Nolan (1997) and Vere Chappell (1997), this constitutes evidence that the eternal truths are ideas in the objective sense, thus supporting CAM. However, if Descartes was here endorsing the idea that the eternal truths are ideas in the objective sense, his use of the term 'existentia' would be peculiar because, without fail, he use the term 'esse' whenever he discusses objective being [esse objectivum]. (Cf. AT VII 47; CSM II 32, AT VII 102; CSM II 74, AT VII 161; CSM II 113-114) And, for the closely related though distinct notion of objective reality he use the term 'realitas' (Cf. AT VII 14; CSM II 10, AT VII 41; CSM II 28, AT VII 135; CSM II 97, AT VII 165; CSM II 116)

Rather than an endorsement of CAM in this passage, Descartes is merely denying that eternal truths have formal being; that is, the eternal truths do not exist in the way that real tables, chairs and God exist. Even if we think that objective being and formal being exhaust the types of being something can have, we still can deny that CAM is true by holding that the eternal truths exist objectively in God. Someone may object (i) that Descartes holds that whatever is in God is identical with God, (ii) that God's ideas in the objective sense, are 'in' God, (iii) but Descartes explicitly denies that the eternal truths are 'attached to God's essence', (iv) so, the eternal truths cannot be ideas in the divine mind. Fine, but we get the same problem with other things then. For instance, God wills tables and chair, and by the identity of his will and intellect, God understands tables and chair. But this does not mean that tables and chairs are 'attached to God's essence'. So, the divine-objective-being take is open to Descartes.

⁶⁸Cf. Chappell (1997) p. 113, 126-27.

⁶⁹See AT VII 432; CSM II 291, AT V 193; CSMK 355, AT V 193; CSMK 355.

⁷⁰See AT VII 381; CSM II 262.

⁷¹AT VII 381; CSM II 262.

⁷²Chappell (1997) recognizes this worry. His solution is to deny that the eternal truths are eternal₂. Although I disagree with Chappell on this issue, arguing against him satisfactorily would require a detailed excursion into Descartes' ontology, something which I don't have time to pursue here.

CHAPTER 5
THE NECESSITY OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that Descartes is not inconsistent in holding that the eternal truths are both freely created and genuinely necessary; hence Descartes' Creation Doctrine does not entail bizarre modal theses. Because Descartes did hold that the eternal truths are necessarily true, what is now needed is an account of the necessity of the eternal truths; that is, Descartes needs to provide an explanation of how an eternal truth P could be both freely created (so, in some sense, P could have been false) and necessarily true (so, not-possibly-false). Does Descartes provide such an account? I believe that he does, although he doesn't spend a significant amount of time explaining the necessity of the eternal truths. As a result, Descartes' account, as it is explicitly stated in his writings, is grossly underdeveloped and requires some piecing together.¹ To make matters worse, scholars have likewise been vague and brief in their treatment of the problem.²

Despite the absence of a satisfactory treatment, two interpretations of Descartes' justification or explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths have been prominent in the secondary literature:

- (a) The potentia dei absoluta et ordinata Interpretation³ (henceforth, 'the Potentia Interpretation')
- (b) The Immutability Interpretation⁴

Although I find both of these interpretations to be admirable attempts to deal with a particularly sticky issue, I will argue that neither is correct as an interpretation of Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths.

In the first section of this chapter, I will discuss the Potentia Interpretation. I begin with a short history of the distinction between potentia dei absoluta et ordinata (henceforth 'the distinction'). I then look at a seventeenth-century account of the distinction found in Spinoza's "Cogitata Metaphysica" (appendices to his Renati Des Cartes Principiorum Philosophiae), and the manner in which his account differs from the medieval accounts. The reason I look at Spinoza's writings on the distinction is that a recent commentator⁵ has claimed that Spinoza is giving a correct account of Descartes' usage of the distinction to explain the necessity of the eternal truths. I then discuss Descartes' alleged understanding of the distinction and its alleged use in his explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. I will argue that the Potentia Interpretation is incorrect as an interpretation of Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths for two reasons: First, there is simply no evidence that Descartes was employing the distinction. Second, the

Potentia Interpretation is not interestingly different from the better-supported Immutability Interpretation; as such, it will be susceptible to the same objection I will consider with respect to the latter. I then examine the Immutability Interpretation, and I argue that it is not sufficient to explain the necessity of the eternal truths; it merely explains their immutability, and immutability is neither identical with, nor does it entail, necessity. Furthermore, if we supplement the Immutability Interpretation in such a way that would enable it to account for the necessity of the eternal truths, we commit Descartes to necessitarianism. Because Descartes is not a necessitarian, the supplemented version cannot be correct. Thus, the Immutability Interpretation is either too weak to sufficiently and satisfactorily account for the necessity of the eternal truths or it is too strong insofar as it commits Descartes to conclusions he did not hold and should not hold.

Potentia dei absoluta et ordinata

In recent years, there have been several attempts to explain the necessity of the eternal truths in Descartes by consideration of the well-known medieval distinction between two ways of understanding and speaking of God's power (henceforth, 'the distinction').⁶ The first, potentia dei absoluta, is God's power considered as absolute; and the second, potentia dei ordinata, is God's power considered with respect to the order he has established by his decree.⁷

This is the most general way of understanding the distinction and one on which all parties will agree. However, as we'll see, there are more specific ways of understanding the content of the distinction, ways on which there is some disagreement.

Those who appeal to this distinction in their interpretation of Descartes argue that in the texts in which Descartes states that God could have created other eternal truths than he actual did or made the eternal truths false, Descartes is referring to potentia dei absoluta. However, in the texts in which Descartes states that the created eternal truths are nonetheless necessary in such a way that even God cannot falsify them, Descartes is referring to potentia dei ordinata.

In this section, I will examine this interpretation in detail. I will first give a brief history of the distinction and its development and applications in the 11th through 14th-centuries. I will attempt to clarify the content of the distinction and the relevant issues to which it was applied. I will then examine Descartes' alleged use of the distinction as an explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths.

A Short History of the Distinction

The history I present is short, and there are many philosophers and theologians excluded from discussion. There are two reasons for this: First, a detailed history of

the distinction would constitute a book by itself.⁸ I simply do not have the time or the required expertise to write such a history. Secondly, and more importantly, I am interested almost exclusively in the philosophical and theological content of the distinction; that is, what the distinction amounts to and which types of issues it is intended to address. Thus, I will concentrate on some of the most important philosophical and theological figures of the eleventh century through the fourteenth century: Peter Damian, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus. Each of these philosophers played a pivotal role in the development or refinement of the distinction.

An Eleventh-Century Antecedent: Peter Damian

Although the terminology of 'potentia absoluta et ordinata' was not in use until the early thirteenth century,⁹ the groundwork for the distinction was established in the eleventh century. In 1067, Peter Damian wrote a letter to Abbot Desiderius concerning their discussion at the Abbey of Monte Cassino. The topic of their discussion was St. Jerome's statement that although God is omnipotent, there are certain things that he cannot do, for instance, restore a virgin after her fall [cum omnia Deus possit, suscitare virginem non potest post ruinam].¹⁰ Damian states:

This view...has never been able to satisfy me. For I pay attention to what is said not to by whom it is said. It seems too much a dishonor that an inability should be ascribed to him who can do all things.¹¹

Desiderius shared Damian's concern about attributing an inability to God, and thus attempted to understand the fact that there are things God cannot do without attributing an inability to God. Desiderius thus held that we should understand God's power only as the ability to do what he wills. That is:

P1: God is able to F =_{df} God wills to F.

and

P2: God is unable to F =_{df} God does not will to F

In this way, Desiderius can say that there are things that God cannot do but not because of an inability in God. So, any statement, in which an apparent inability is predicated of God, should be understood as predicating a lack of volition on God's part, not an inability.

Damian's response to Desiderius is the foundation of the distinction which would later be more fully developed concerning potentia absoluta et ordinata. He agrees with Desiderius that an attribution of any inability to God is false. However, he objects to Desiderius' characterization of God's power as co-extensive with his volition. Surely, Damian points out, God's volition does not exhaust his capacity, ability, or power; there are many things which though, God does not will them, God could have willed them.¹² As Damian states:

To this [i.e., P2] I say, if God can do nothing he does not want to, but he does nothing except what he wants, therefore he can do nothing at all that he does not do...It follows therefore, that whatever God does not do, he is altogether incapable of doing. [Sequitur ergo ut quicquid Deus non facit, facere omnino non possit]¹³

According to Damian, if Desiderius' position, as expressed by P1 and P2 is true, then it follows that P3 is true:

P3: God cannot do anything except what he wills to do. Damian found P3 to be absurd and blasphemous. Surely, there are alternatives possible to God, even if they are not actualized.¹⁴ As Courtenay states: "God can do more than he actually wills to do; divine capacity exceeds divine volition."¹⁵ So, the lesson to be learned from Damian's discussion of divine power is that there are possibilities open to God's power despite the fact that God chooses not to will them. God can do more than he does, and he can do other than he does.

In Damian's letter, we see an early sketch of one of the fundamental features of the distinction as it is developed and used in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: We can consider God's power in abstraction from his will (or his actual willing), in itself, and considered this way, there are things which God could do though he does not will to do them. That is, there are other ways God could have created the world and the truths concerning it. The distinction will later be employed to explain the contingency of the created order; and we get more than a hint of this in Damian: God's creative will is not

determined to will what it does will. Thus, as early as the eleventh century, philosophers were laying the foundation for the yet unnamed distinction in order to address the issue utrum Deus possit facere quae non facit.¹⁶

The Distinction in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Aquinas and Scotus

The thirteenth century saw the increasing development and refinement of the distinction.¹⁷ In the latter half of the century, the distinction found a fully developed formulation in St. Thomas Aquinas. In an article in the Summa Theologiae, not suprisingly titled, "Utrum deus possit facere quae non facit,"¹⁸ Aquinas addresses the same issue that concerned Damian and Desiderius two centuries earlier: Can God do what he does not actually do? And, if there is a sense in which he cannot, what is this sense? Aquinas states

What is attributed to his power considered in itself [secundum consideratae se], God is said to be able to do with his potentia absoluta. And this covers...everything in which an aspect of being can be salvaged [omne illud in quo potest salvari ratio entis]. As for what lies within his power as carrying out the command of his just will, he is said to be able to do it by his potentia ordinata. (ST Ia 25.5, res)

From this passage, we can see that there are several factors involved in Aquinas' account of the distinction. The first concerns the manner in which potentia absoluta is to be understood, namely as God's power considered in itself, in abstraction from other 'features' of his nature and his

actual decrees. Thus, we can attribute the following to Aquinas:

A1: *Potentia dei absoluta* =_{df} God's power considered in itself.

However, we may also understand the distinction in terms of the scope of *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*.

Potentia dei absoluta, according to Aquinas, extends to 'everything in which an aspect of being can be salvaged', i.e., it extends to everything possible, where "something is judged to be possible...from the implication of the terms [habitudine terminorum]: possible when the predicate is compatible with the subject." (ST Ia 25.3)¹⁹ Thus,

A2: God can do x de potentia absoluta iff x is possible.

Thus, Aquinas' use of the distinction also emphasizes non-necessity of the created order: it was initially open to God to will any possible order.

Aquinas' understanding of potentia ordinata, on the other hand, emphasizes both God's actual decrees and his nature. The feature of God's nature that is most relevant, though it goes unmentioned in the passage from ST 25.5, is God's immutability. As Aquinas states elsewhere: "[O]n the supposition that he does will a thing it cannot be unwilled, since his will cannot be changed." (ST Ia 19.3.res)²⁰ If God were not immutable, then there would be nothing preventing him from acting contrary to his decrees; and hence the scope of his potentia ordinata would be the same as the scope of his potentia absoluta. But I take it that

the point of the distinction, as it is employed by Aquinas in ST 25.5, is to allow a sense in which there are some things that God could do de potentia absoluta but not de potentia ordinata. That is, the scope of the former is greater than the scope of the latter. Thus,

A3: God does x de potentia ordinata iff (i) x is consistent with God's actual decrees and (ii) x is consistent with God's nature.²¹

For instance, initially it was open to God to will any possible state of affairs de potentia absoluta. And he still could will any possible state of affairs de potentia absoluta. However, suppose that God has willed that state of affairs S obtains (and thus that a proposition P is true). On the supposition that God wills S (and that P), and that God is immutable, he cannot de potentia ordinata will that S does not obtain (and that P is false). As Aquinas states:

[W]hatever God could [do] he can [do], for his power is not decreased, as neither is his essence. But he cannot now not will what he is posited as having willed, because his will cannot be changed. (SCG I 83)

Thus, we can see that Aquinas' use of the distinction emphasizes two important things: First, there is almost a total lack of determination of God's potentia absoluta; God could have willed anything possible, and as such, there is a sense in which God could have willed other than he in fact has. Second, there is a sense in which God cannot will anything other than he in fact has, when we consider his potentia ordinata, which takes into consideration his immutability.

Although Scotus uses the distinction to address some of the same issues as Aquinas, his understanding of the distinction differs from Aquinas' in at least four ways. The first is that Scotus explicitly applies the distinction to any moral agent - divine or human.²² The second difference is that Scotus employs analogies from the law and the legal terms 'de facto' and 'de jure' to describe potentia absoluta and potentia ordinata, respectively. He states:

In every agent that acts by intellect and will and is able to act in conformity with the right law and nevertheless does not necessarily act in conformity with the right law, potentia ordinata must be distinguished from potentia absoluta. The reason is that it can act in conformity with the right law, and then it acts according to its potentia ordinata (for it is ordered insofar as it is a principle of carrying out some things in conformity with the right law) and it can act outside that law or contrary to it, and in this there is potentia absoluta that exceeds potentia ordinata. Therefore, not only in God but in every free agent which can act according to the dictates of the right law and outside such a law or contrary to it - potentia ordinata et absoluta must be distinguished. Therefore, the jurists say that someone can do this de facto - i.e., with respect to potentia absoluta - or de jure - i.e., with respect to power ordered according to the law.²³

Like Aquinas, he holds that God's potentia absoluta is simply his ability to will anything short of a contradiction. As Scotus states: "For God can do anything that does not include a contradiction or act in any way that does not include a contradiction...; and then he is said to be acting according to his potentia absoluta."²⁴ Thus, Scotus also holds A2. That is, potentia absoluta extends to everything in which there is non repugnantia terminorum.

The third difference is that, unlike Aquinas, who holds

that God, by his potentia absoluta, can will any possible state of affairs or set of states of affairs, Scotus states that God's potentia ordinata is his power to do whatever is consistent with the general laws instituted by divine decree. As such, this power extends to acts directly prescribed by the laws and also to acts not contrary to the laws.²⁵

The fourth and most glaring difference between Aquinas and Scotus on the distinction is the role played by God's immutability. Aquinas thinks that God's immutability guarantees that God's actual decrees will never be violated, not even by God; thus, immutability restricts the scope of God's potentia ordinata. However, Scotus does not seem to consider God's immutability to be important with respect to his laws/decrees. In fact, for Scotus there is a sense in which God's potentia absoluta is the same as his potentia ordinata.²⁶ The potentia absoluta of a finite agent, who is not a lawgiver, is her ability to act contrary to the law; as such there are inordinate acts available to such an agent de potentia absoluta but not de potentia ordinata. However, Scotus believes that in the case of a lawgiver, especially the divine lawgiver, the scope of his potentia absoluta is the same as his potentia ordinata at a time. He believes this because it is impossible for a lawgiver to act contrary to the laws. As Marilyn Adams states, "Scotus has in mind the principle of Roman law according to which illegal action is impossible for the absolute ruler."²⁷ By 'acting

contrary to the law', the lawgiver would thereby establish a new law. That is, the lawgiver can change the laws so that any action they perform is in accordance with the law.

This might seem strange to someone like Aquinas for whom the scope of God's potentia absoluta is not the same as the scope of his potentia ordinata because God is immutable and cannot change his decrees ex post facto. But, for Scotus, God never acts de potentia absoluta but not de potentia ordinata because he can change the laws so that his actions are in accordance with them.²⁸ So, for any possible action α , if God were to do α , α would be done de potentia ordinata. The following texts from Scotus illustrate this line of thought:

For example, [God] established that no one should be glorified unless he first receives grace. When [God's] action is ordered according to this law, he acts according to his potentia ordinata. And he cannot act otherwise except by ordaining and establishing another law - which he can do, since he contingently willed that every sinner should be damned. Thus by doing the contrary, he establishes another law, according to which he acts in an orderly fashion.²⁹

[W]hen the law and the rightness of the law are within the power of the agent in such a way that it is right only because it is established; then the agent can, by its liberty, ordain otherwise than the right law says. Nevertheless it is consistent with this that it acts in an orderly fashion, since it can establish another right law according to which it acts in an orderly fashion.³⁰

And in that case its potentia absoluta does not absolutely exceed its potentia ordinata, since it would be ordered according to another law, just as according to the earlier law. Nevertheless, it exceeds the potentia ordinata precisely according to the earlier law, against which or outside which it produces.³¹

Thus, according to Scotus,

The scope of God's potentia absoluta would exceed the scope of his potentia ordinata iff (i) there is a time t at which there is a right law L and an action α which is not in accordance with L , (ii) there is another time t^* at which there is a right law L^* (where $L \neq L^*$) and an action α which is in accordance with L^* , (iii) God does α at t^* , and (iv) God's doing α is considered relative to L and t .

Only with respect to a different law would God's potentia absoluta exceed his potentia ordinata. What is clear is that immutability does not play a role in differentiating between potentia dei absoluta et ordinata.³²

We must be careful to remember, as Ockham has warned, that the distinction is not between two distinct powers in God (that would be to deny his simplicity), but rather between two different ways of considering God's power. As Ockham states:

This distinction should not be understood to mean that in God there are really two powers, one of which is ordained and the other of which is absolute. For with respect to things outside himself there is in God a single power, which in every way is God himself.³³

So, when we say that the scope of God's potentia absoluta is greater than that of his potentia ordinata we are saying something like the following: if there were a being as powerful as God but who lacked the other 'features' of God's nature (for instance, his immutability), the scope of his potentia absoluta could be the same as the scope of his potentia ordinata. However, when we consider God's nature and not merely his power in abstraction, we see that even though God has the power or capacity to change a truth, he

cannot because of his immutability. God cannot do these things because they are incompatible with his essential perfection.

The Distinction in the Seventeenth Century: Spinoza

Four centuries later, Spinoza discussed the distinction in his Cogitata Metaphysica.³⁴ He states:

We thus divide God's power into ordinata and absoluta. We speak of absoluta potentia dei when we consider his omnipotence without attending to his decree; his [potentia] ordinata, when we regard his decrees. (CM II 9)³⁵

At first glance, Spinoza's understanding of the distinction is not interestingly different from Aquinas' and Scotus' understanding. However, Spinoza is quick to point out in another passage that his take on the distinction is different from the philosophers of the middle ages, and that "although we want to retain the same distinction in God's power as is commonly adopted by philosophers, we are nevertheless constrained to expound it in a different way." (CM II 9) Where Aquinas and Scotus restrict potentia dei absoluta to what is absolutely possible, Spinoza claims that this account is false and impious:

[F]or many speak of [God's power] without proper piety and not according to truth. They say that...some things are possible, some things impossible, and some things necessary, and that God's omnipotence [i.e., his potentia absoluta] is concerned only with the possible [Deique omnipotentiam tantum circa possibilitia locum habere]. We, however, who have already shown that all things depend absolutely on God's decree, say that God is omnipotent. (CM II 9)

On the version of the distinction presented by Spinoza, potentia dei absoluta is not restricted to the realm of the absolute possibles; but rather, because even the essences of things (and hence, the necessary truths concerning them) depend on his decree, there is nothing God cannot do de potentia absoluta.³⁶

Despite this difference between Spinoza and the medievals, Spinoza's presentation of the distinction shares several features with some medieval accounts. First, Spinoza joins Aquinas in holding that potentia dei absoluta is God's power considered in abstraction from his decrees and other features of his nature, in particular, his immutability. This is clear in the following passage:

But having understood that he has decreed some things from the mere freedom of his will [i.e., de potentia absoluta], and then that he is immutable, we say now that he cannot act against his own decrees, and that this is impossible simply because it is opposed to the perfection of God. (CM II 9, my gloss)

That is, potentia dei absoluta is God's power considered apart from his immutability, and in this sense, there is nothing that God cannot will. However, on the supposition,³⁷ that God wills certain things to obtain, he cannot de potentia ordinata act contrary to his will or change his will; hence there are things that God can do de potentia absoluta which he cannot do de potentia ordinata. However, as I have already mentioned, it is not that this is true because there are two distinct powers in God; nor is it true because God's potentia ordinata is a diminished version of his potentia absoluta. Rather, it is because of our

consideration of his power with respect to other essential features of his nature, such as his immutability.

Once again, we see that the same issues are addressed in Spinoza's presentation of the distinction: (i) There is a lack of any determination of God's potentia absoluta; God could have willed anything, so, a fortiori, God could have willed other than he in fact has. (ii) But there is a sense in which God cannot will anything other than he in fact has, when we consider his potentia ordinata.³⁸

Descartes' Alleged Use of the Distinction

Descartes' Creation Doctrine may be seen as a response to two different, though closely related, questions inherited from his medieval predecessors: 'What is the relationship between God and the eternal truths?' and 'Could God have willed things other than those he actually willed?'. We have already seen Descartes' answer to the first inherited question: The relationship is one of causal dependence of the eternal truths on God's indifferent will. The answer to the second question, according to those who hold the Potentia Interpretation, is 'yes and no': 'Yes,' if we consider potentia dei absoluta; 'no', if we consider potentia dei ordinata. What is of particular interest to Descartes is the question whether God could have willed that the eternal truths are false, even though they are necessarily true.

Although an important issue to be addressed is whether Descartes in fact employs the distinction at all in his explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths, it is quite likely that he would have been familiar with the distinction. The author(s) of the Second Objections and the authors of the Sixth Objections brought the distinction to Descartes' attention.³⁹ The Jesuit Coimbrans wrote of the distinction in a traditional manner, and Descartes was familiar with their commentaries.⁴⁰ Moreover, Suarez, with whom we know Descartes was familiar,⁴¹ wrote of the distinction in Disputation XXX and in Tractatus de Legibus ac deo legislatore (1612).⁴² Moreover, in one text, Descartes makes reference to potentia absoluta. (AT VII 154; CSM II 109) So, there is reason to think that Descartes was familiar with the distinction.

In a recent article, James Petrik has given the most fully developed interpretation of Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths in terms of the distinction.⁴³ Petrik understandably notices that the tension in Descartes' Creation Doctrine concerns whether God could have created a world in which the eternal truths that actually obtain do not obtain. More precisely, he attempts to understand how Descartes reconciles the following two theses:

Thesis of the Transworld Validity of the Eternal Truths [TTV]: The eternal truths would obtain in any world that God created.

Thesis of Divine Indifference [TDI]: God could have created different eternal truths than the ones he in fact created.

In effect, he has the same concern that I do; that is, how can Descartes hold both that the eternal truths are freely created and yet genuinely necessary; and what is Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths given that they are freely created. Petrik claims that TTV and TDI "can be reconciled with one another if one approaches them with Descartes' version of the Medieval distinction between potentia ordinata and potentia absoluta."⁴⁴

Petrik's interpretation, he claims, has its source in Spinoza's Cogitata Metaphysica, texts we've already discussed. The issue of whether Spinoza is actually interpreting Descartes, stating his own theses, or doing something else in the texts on which Petrik's interpretation relies will be discussed shortly.

One thing is clear, however. If Descartes is employing the distinction, he does so with a different understanding of what the distinction amounts to from Aquinas and Scotus. These philosophers, as we have seen, held A2:

A2: God can do x by his potentia absoluta iff x is possible.

However, as we've seen in earlier chapters, Descartes holds that even something's modal status depends on God's will.

Thus, there are no possibles independent of God's will.⁴⁵

So, Descartes would have to understand the scope of potentia dei absoluta as Spinoza has stated:

DP: There is nothing that God cannot do de potentia absoluta.

Despite the differences between DP and A1, Descartes' DP follows the scholastic tradition insofar as it emphasizes the lack of determination in God's will. This is crucial to the Creation Doctrine, as we've seen previous chapters. It goes even further, however, in not restricting potentia dei absoluta to what is possible.⁴⁶

However, there is every reason to think that if Descartes is implicitly using the distinction, he does so with a partly-thomistic understanding of potentia dei ordinata, emphasizing God's actual decrees and immutability, as given by A3; and with a partly-scotistic understanding, emphasizing God's role as lawgiver/king. As Descartes states:

It will be said that if God had established these truths he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them [i.e., the eternal truths] to be eternal and immutable.' - I make the same judgement about God. (AT I 145-146; CSMK 23)

And in the Conversation with Burman, he states:

Concerning the decrees of God which have already been enacted, it is clear that God is immutable with regard to these, and, from the metaphysical point of view, it is impossible to conceive of the matter otherwise. (AT V 166; CSMK 348)

So, although initially there is nothing God cannot do de potentia absoluta, given that he makes certain decrees and that he is immutable, he cannot change his decrees de potentia ordinata.

So, how is the distinction put to use by Descartes in order to reconcile TTV and TDI? Petrik believes that the way to reconcile TTV and TDI is by noticing that in the passages in which Descartes is presenting TTV and emphasizing the necessity of the eternal truths, Descartes is considering potentia dei ordinata. And in the passages in which he is presenting TDI and emphasizing the lack of determination in God's indifferent will, Descartes is considering potentia dei absoluta. Thus, our (1) and (2) would be understood as follows:

- (1*) The eternal truths are freely created by God de potentia absoluta.
- (2*) The eternal truths are necessary via God's potentia ordinata.

As Petrik states:

When we attend to the fact that the eternal truths are dependent upon God's indifferent will, and we set aside the actual decrees that God has enacted, we are considering God's power absolutely. From this standpoint we can say that God was not necessitated to create our eternal truths and that he could have done otherwise. When we attend, on the other hand, to the order that God has in fact decreed, and we attend to the that God is immutable, then we are considering God's power as ordained. From this standpoint we can say that the eternal truths will never be violated, even by God.⁴⁷

Margaret Osler reiterates this line of thought:

Descartes' argument reflects the traditional discourse about the absolute and ordained power of God. By his absolute power, God freely created the eternal truths, just as he freely created the other creatures... [but] his own nature prevents him from changing what he once created freely.⁴⁸

Blake Dutton also argues along these lines:

[A]lthough God's will is free and indifferent, it is also immutable and cannot change with respect to that

which it has ordained...And so, even though it was not within God's power when considered in relation to his ordination to have created world in which the truths which hold in this world do not hold, it was perfectly well within that power to have done so when considered in itself.⁴⁹

Thus, if Petrik's Potentia Interpretation is correct, Descartes can have his freely-created necessary truths.

Problems with the Potentia Interpretation

In order to see what is wrong with the Potentia Interpretation, let us review what it has in its favor. First, it is reasonable to think that Descartes was familiar with the distinction. Second, There are texts (AT I 145-146; CSMK 23, AT V 166; CSMK 348) in which Descartes seems to discuss something like the distinction, despite not mentioning the distinction explicitly. Third, a very smart person, Spinoza, presents the Potentia Interpretation as the correct way to understand Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths.

Now that we have the 'evidence' in favor of the Potentia Interpretation laid out in front of us, we can see just how weak the case for this interpretation really is. Against the first consideration, we must notice that the fact that Descartes was familiar with the distinction does not entail anything about whether he employed the distinction. After all, there are many things with which Descartes was familiar, which he did not employ in any capacity (final causes in physics, for instance).

The second consideration is rather weak as well. If Descartes were employing the distinction, why doesn't he state that he is? In fact, the only text in which Descartes mentions potentia absoluta is not a text concerning the eternal truths (AT VII 154; CSM II 109). So, there is no direct textual evidence for the Potentia Interpretation. Petrik anticipates this objection, and answers that the reason Descartes does not explicitly mention the distinction in his explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths is that he understood the distinction in a different manner from his scholastic predecessors; hence, any mention of the terminology of distinction would be liable to mislead his contemporary readers. Petrik's reply would perhaps be convincing if we did not know that Descartes was not bashful about borrowing other scholastic terminology and putting his own spin on them. Moreover, given that Descartes actively sought the approval of the seventeenth-century Schoolmen, it is particularly strange that he did not employ their language, especially when such an opportunity presented itself. The bottom line is that Petrik's reply is not convincing.

The third consideration, is perhaps the weakest of the three. If the reason to attribute the distinction to Descartes is that Spinoza discusses the distinction in the Cogitata Metaphysica, then we should not feel confident about attributing it to Descartes. It simply is not clear that Spinoza is stating or interpreting Descartes' positions

in the Cogitata Metaphysica. Although there are places in this work in which Spinoza presents ideas which are clearly not his own and which may properly be attributed to Descartes, there are just as many passages in which Spinoza presents clearly Spinozistic and decidedly un-cartesian ideas. In fact, in the paragraph preceeding Spinoza's discussion of potentia dei absoluta et ordinata, Spinoza states a paradigmatically Spinozistic thesis about modality:

For if men clearly understood the whole order of nature [totem ordinem naturae], they would find all things to be equally necessary as are the things treated in mathematics. But because this is beyond the reach of human knowledge, certain things are judged by us as possible and not as necessary. (CM II 9)⁵⁰

So, we should not put much weight in the idea that Spinoza's Cogitata Metaphysica are interpretations of Descartes.⁵¹

Even granting that Spinoza is interpreting Descartes does not guarantee that his interpretation is correct. Yes, Spinoza is smart, but he is not infallible.

Now that we have seen the lack of evidence in favor of the Potentia Interpretation, we can consider the uselessness of this interpretation. The Potentia Interpretation 'reduces' to, what I call, 'the Immutability Interpretation'. To see this, we simply need to ask whether there is anything in the Potentia Interpretation with explanatory value concerning the necessity of the eternal truths, besides consideration of God's immutability. The answer is 'no'. The reason why God cannot change the truths he has established is not something 'in' the truths. It is only God's immutability that prevents any change in his

decrees; and it is the fact that God's decrees cannot be changed (even by God), that gives support to the Potentia Interpretation as an interpretation of Descartes on the necessity of the eternal truths.⁵² Moreover, as I have just mentioned the texts that allegedly support the Potentia Interpretation never mention the distinction; they appeal exclusively to God's immutability.

Therefore, because of the lack of any compelling evidence in favor of the Potentia Interpretation, and the fact that it is God's immutability that does all the work in the Potentia Interpretation and the fact that the Immutability Interpretation is much simpler than the Potentia Interpretation (as we'll see), we should see what can be said in favor of the Immutability Interpretation.

The Immutability Interpretation

According to the Immutability Interpretation, the eternal truths are necessarily true because they are willed by God's immutable will. Before we examine the role, if any, that God's immutability actually plays in Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths, it will be helpful to have a working account of what God's immutability is. To be immutable is not merely to be unchanging, but rather to be unable to change. That is:

I1: x is immutable iff x is essentially unchanging⁵³

We must, however, recognize that there are irrelevant extrinsic and relational properties that a thing may acquire

or lose without any real change in the thing; that is, there are so-called 'Cambridge changes' that something may undergo without thereby being mutable. For example if x is five feet tall at t and x is five foot five at some later time t', then x has really changed; but if x is not an uncle at t and x is an uncle at some later time t', then x has not really changed in virtue of acquiring this property. The idea is that there are some properties which are, to use Edward Wierenga's and Nicholas Wolterstorff's term, 'change-relevant', and others which are not.⁵⁴ According to Wierenga, this distinction has roots in Anselm, and there is an intuitive sense of which properties are change-relevant and which are not. As Anselm states:

Suppose that there are some accidents which, when taken on by a substance, do not entail any change in that substance. Being subject to such accidents would not negate the immutability of a nature. We may indeed divide all accidents into two kinds. There are those whose presence or absence implies some change in the subject: e.g. all colors. Others cause no change in that of which they are predicated: e.g. some relations. Take someone who is going to be born next year. At the moment I am not taller than him, or smaller than him; nor the same height as, or lose, all these relations, without my changing at all, insofar as he grows and changes through different qualities. Some accidents, then, bring mutability with them in some respect. And other accidents do not take away immutability in any respect whatsoever.⁵⁵

Despite the difficulty in providing a precise, non-question-begging definition of a change-relevant property, we have a good enough intuitive sense of what it is. For example, intrinsic properties such as being red and being six feet tall are change-relevant; and relational properties such as being an uncle and being worshipped by Saint Paul are

change-irrelevant.⁵⁶ With an intuitive sense of the distinction between change-relevant and change-irrelevant properties, Wierenga proposes the following analysis of being unchanging:

I2: x is unchanging iff there are no times t_1 and t_2 and change-relevant property P such that x has P at t_1 and x lacks P at t_2 .⁵⁷

And immutability, according to I1, is the property of being essentially unchanging.

Although Descartes does not give an account of immutability, there is no reason to think that he held a different account of immutability from that given by I1. In fact, Descartes' God would trivially satisfy I2 in virtue of being either simple or eternal (in Boethius' and Aquinas' sense of 'eternal'). Descartes' God is eternal in the relevant sense, and he is simple. Hence he would satisfy I2.⁵⁸

Those who hold the Immutability Interpretation do so primarily on the basis of one passage from Descartes' correspondence, and to a lesser degree, passages from the Conversation with Burman, the same texts used to support the Potentia Interpretation. I quote them again to refresh our memories:

It will be said that if God had established these truths [i.e., the eternal truths] he could change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes, he can, if his will can change. 'But I understand them to be eternal and immutable.' - I make the same judgement about God. 'But his will is free.' Yes, but his power is incomprehensible. (AT I 145-146; CSMK 23)

Concerning the decrees of God which have already been enacted, it is clear that God is immutable with respect

to these, and from the metaphysical point of view it is impossible to conceive the matter otherwise. (AT V 166; CSMK 348)

On the basis of these passages, Edwin Curley has stated that "[God's] creation of them [i.e., the eternal truths] is a genuine act of will (not necessitated), and yet it does provide a foundation of their necessity, because his will is immutable."⁵⁹ That is, God is free with respect to the creation of the eternal truths, but, given that he creates them, the immutability of his will explains why they are necessary. This line of thought has been reiterated by Stephen Menn,⁶⁰ Steven Nadler,⁶¹ and Margaret Osler.⁶²

Additional evidence for the Immutability Interpretation is given by those scholars who understand Descartes' laws of nature, discussed in the Principles and The World, to be eternal truths. After all, Descartes' foundation for these laws is God's immutability;⁶³ as he states: "it is that these two rules [i.e., laws of nature] follow manifestly from the mere fact that God is immutable and that, acting always in the same way, he always produces the same effect." (AT XI 43; CSM I 96) So, if the laws of nature are eternal truths, and laws of nature are explained by God's immutability, then it is prima facie reasonable to think that God's immutability is sufficient to explain the necessity of the eternal truths.

Although few scholars attempt to offer a real argument for the Immutability Interpretation based on the passages from the 15 April 1630 letter to Mersenne and the

Coversation with Burman,⁶⁴ we can attempt one here. I offer Argument 1 as a first-shot.

Argument 1

1. God wills the eternal truths.
2. God's will is immutable.
3. Therefore, the eternal truths are immutable.

As it stands, it isn't clear that the conclusion of Argument 1 follows from the premises. What is needed is a principle, not explicitly stated by Descartes, establishing that there is a transfer of immutability from God's will to its effect.

Transfer of Immutability Principle: For any x, if x is willed by an omnipotent and immutable will, then x is immutable.⁶⁵

Descartes seems to advocate the Transfer of Immutability Principle in The World: "God is immutable and always acting in the same way, he always produces the same effect." (AT XI 43; CSM I 96)⁶⁶ And in the Principles, he states: "For we understand that God's perfection involves not only his being immutable in himself, but also his operating in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable." (AT VIII 61) I grant that this textual evidence is not particularly compelling. However, because the Immutability Interpretation requires the Transfer of Immutability Principle to get off the ground, we should grant it simply to see how far it can take the interpretation.

Inserting the Transfer of Immutability Principle into Argument 1, we get Argument 1*:

Argument 1*

1. God wills the eternal truths.
2. God's will is immutable.
3. For any x, if x is willed by an omnipotent and immutable will, then x is immutable.
4. Therefore, the eternal truths are immutable.

Descartes, as the passages quoted above make clear, held premise 2. Likewise, Premise 1 is something that Descartes held; in fact it is merely a concise statement of the Creation Doctrine.⁶⁷ So far, we have a very cartesian argument grounded firmly in Descartes' texts. However, we should notice that Argument 1* doesn't establish the necessity of the eternal truths; it only establishes their immutability.⁶⁸ And, by Descartes' time, several philosophers, including Robert Grosseteste, Ockham, and Duns Scotus, had established that something can be immutable without also being necessary (although whatever is necessary is also immutable). So, if supporters of the Immutability Interpretation wish to establish their conclusion (i.e., that God's immutability explains the necessity of the eternal truths), Argument 1* needs to be supplemented by another principle.

Immutability-Necessity Principle: For any x, if x is immutable, then x is necessary.

Adding the Immutability-Necessity Principle to Argument 1*, we get the desired conclusion that the eternal truths are

necessary. However, we should be apprehensive about attributing the Immutability-Necessity Principle to Descartes.

Providence and Contingency: A Problem for the Immutability Interpretation

If Descartes did hold the Immutability-Necessity Principle and the Transfer of Immutability Principle, he would be committed to disastrous consequences. One of the things that a theory of modality should provide is an account of the difference between necessary truths and contingent truths. Despite the fact that Descartes rarely uses the term 'contingent',⁶⁹ it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so, i.e., they are contingent. For example, the propositions that Descartes had a body, that the wax smells like flowers, etc., are contingent for Descartes. But Descartes holds that not only eternal truths, but all things, including contingent truths, are the effect of God's immutable will. As Descartes states: "if God exists, it is a contradiction that anything else should exist which was not created by him." (AT VII 188; CSM II 132)⁷⁰ And in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, he states:

[A]ll the reasons that prove that God exists and is the first and immutable cause of all effects that do not depend on human free will prove similarly, I think, that he is also the cause of all the effects that do so depend...and he would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him. (AT IV 314)⁷¹

Thus, from a premise stating that God wills contingent truths, we get, via the Transfer of Immutability Principle, the conclusion that contingent truths are immutable. And via the Immutability-Necessity Principle, we get the further conclusion that contingent truths are necessary. This should strike us as problematic because Descartes clearly wishes to distinguish eternal truths from contingent truths.

Descartes' discussion of providence and petitionary prayer is relevant here. In the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, Descartes states

When your highness speaks of the particular providence of God as being the foundation of theology, I do not think that you have in mind some change in God's decrees occasioned by actions that depend on our free will. No such change is theologically tenable; and when we are told to pray to God, that is not so that we should inform him of our needs, or that we should try to get him to change anything in the order established from all eternity by his providence...but simply to obtain whatever he has, from all eternity, willed to be obtained by our prayers. (AT IV 315-16, my emphasis)

In the Conversation with Burman, he reiterates this line of thought:

[W]e have to say that God is indeed quite immutable, and that he has decreed from eternity either to grant me a particular request or not to grant it. Coupled with this decree, however, he has made a simultaneous decree that the granting of my request shall be in virtue of my prayers [per meas preces], and at a time when, in addition, I am leading an upright life. (AT V 166, my emphasis)

As these passages show, Descartes held that even contingent propositions made true by virtue of 'prayer-response' are willed from eternity by God's immutable will. For instance, let's say that I am starving to death, I am leading an

upright life, and I pray for a sandwich which I then receive from God. Thus, (a) is true.

(a) Dan receives a sandwich.

But it is absurd to think that Descartes held that (a) is immutably true, despite the fact that it is willed from all eternity by an immutable will. After all, before my prayer, (a) was false and after my prayer, (a) was true. So, Descartes does think that there are genuine changes in the world; as Descartes states, "there are some changes whose occurrence is guaranteed either by our own plain experience or by divine revelation, and either our perception or our faith shows us that these take place without any change in the creator." (AT VIII 61) How can he hold this, if he holds the Transfer of Immutability Principle? Notice in the Burman passage quoted above, there is reference made to a time at which my prayer is answered; and in the letter to Elizabeth, there is an implicit assumption that we receive an answer to our prayers at a certain time.⁷² We can reasonably assume that God immutably wills from eternity that, at a certain time, (a) is true. Thus, what is immutably true is (a*):

(a*) Dan receives a sandwich at t.

So, the Transfer of Immutability Principle will be true only if we either restrict the scope of the quantifier to certain types of willed-things, or we restrict God's willing to temporally-indexed propositions. The former alternative will have undesirable consequences; if we restrict the scope of

the quantifier, then we need some reasonable way of specifying which objects of the divine immutable will are immutable. Descartes does not provide any indication of how to do this. The latter alternative seems reasonable. The Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation. But clearly propositions like (a) can change with respect to their truth value. It seems that propositions like (a*) are the most plausible candidates for the objects of God's will, if the Immutability Interpretation is true.

This account so far allows that there can be genuine changes in the world without any alteration in God's will. This allowance is quite important because Descartes' foundation for the laws governing natural change is God's immutability.⁷³

But does this help Descartes explain the difference between eternal truths and contingent truths? Even though (a) is not immutable, it seems that Descartes is committed to the immutability of (a*); and if he held the Immutability-Necessity Principle, (a*) and other so-called 'contingent truths', when indexed to a time, turn out to be necessary. So, we have not greatly improved the situation concerning the difference between necessary and contingent propositions for Descartes.⁷⁴

To sum up the problem thus far: An unsupplemented Immutability Interpretation (Argument 1) is not sufficient to explain the necessity of the eternal truths. On the

other hand, a supplemented version (Argument 1*) is too strong, insofar as it would commit Descartes to necessitarianism. Furthermore, if God's providence consists of a set of non-temporally-indexed propositions like (a), then the Transfer of Immutability Principle is false; because the Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation, the interpretation would be false if the Transfer of Immutability Principle were false. On the other hand, if God's providence consists of temporally-indexed propositions like (a*), then, if the Immutability-Necessity Principle is true, then Descartes is committed to the necessity of all temporally-indexed propositions. That is:

- (1) The Transfer of Immutability Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation.
- (2) The Immutability-Necessity Principle is required for the Immutability Interpretation.
- (3) The view of providence consisting of a series of temporally-indexed propositions is required for the Transfer of Immutability Principle.

So, in order for the Immutability Interpretation to have a chance of being correct, the Transfer of Immutability Principle, the Immutability-Necessity Principle, and the temporally-indexed view of providence must be attributable to Descartes. However, we have seen that Descartes is committed to disastrous consequences if these are attributed to him.

Clearly, Descartes cannot accept both principles and the temporally-indexed view of providence. However, as we have seen, there is textual evidence supporting an

attribution of the Transfer of Immutability Principle and the temporally-indexed view of providence to Descartes. The textual evidence for the Transfer of Immutability Principle is stronger than the evidence for the temporally-indexed view of providence. However, because the Transfer of Immutability Principle requires the temporally-indexed view of providence, the latter, we might say, 'inherits' the evidence for the former. So, the trouble-maker seems to be the Immutability-Necessity Principle. As the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth and the Burman passages show, Descartes is willing to live with the immutability of things. What he cannot systematically live with is the necessity of all things. Moreover, unlike the Transfer of Immutability Principle and the temporally-indexed view of providence, there is a total lack of textual evidence to support the Immutability-Necessity Principle.⁷⁵ So, the way to go about interpreting Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths is to start by rejecting the Immutability-Necessity Principle.

Before we reject the Immutability Interpretation in its supplemented form, we should look at some suggestions on how to salvage the Immutability Interpretation.

Suggestion 1: It has been suggested by Edwin Curley, that although immutability is not identical with nor sufficient for necessity for the most part, immutability plus eternality is sufficient for necessity.⁷⁶ To bring out this point, let us consider Thomas Morris' suggestion that

immutability doesn't entail necessity.⁷⁷ The reason why this is true is that it is conceivable that some thing x may never be able to change (and hence is immutable), but x could have failed to exist altogether. The view we have here is that x comes into existence at t and at no time t', after t, can x change. Curley agrees that, in cases like this, immutability doesn't entail necessity. But the case of the eternal truths is different. Descartes not only thinks that God is immutable and eternal, but also that he has willed the eternal truths from eternity. Now, as we have seen, Descartes uses the term 'eternal' in two different ways:

x is eternal₁ =_{df.} x is outside of time or is timeless.

x is eternal₂ =_{df.} x exists at all times.

The eternal truths are, at least, eternal₂. Given that the eternal truths are true at all times and they are willed by God's immutable will, then by the Transfer of Immutability Principle, there is no time at which they can fail to be true. So, unlike the case in which something comes to exist immutably but not necessarily, in the case of the eternal truths, they cannot change and there was no time at which they were not true. Hence, according to Curley, they are true at all times and cannot be false at any time; that is, they are necessarily true

There is also some apparent textual evidence for Curley's reading, although he doesn't sufficiently exploit it. Descartes states that the eternal truths and the

essences they concern "are immutable and eternal." (AT VII 380) I will consider this textual evidence in the next section.

I have some sympathy for such an interpretation. However, this solution merely leads directly back to the problem of contingency already discussed. For certainly, temporally-indexed contingent propositions are willed from all eternity by God's immutable will. In fact, Descartes states the "there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he [i.e., God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything." (AT VIII 14; CSM I 201, emphasis mine). Do we then want to say that they are necessary because they are true at all times and cannot be false at any time? We would be forced to this if there were not another way in which Descartes explains the necessity of the eternal truths. Fortunately for Descartes and the sympathetic commentator, Descartes does provide another explanation.

In fact, there is an important but overlooked point: We should not think of the immutability as explaining the necessity of the eternal truths for Descartes. A careful look at the texts used to support the Immutability Interpretation⁷⁸ reveals that Descartes appeals to immutability not to explain the necessity of the eternal truths, but to answer the different, though related, issue of whether God can change the eternal truths he has in fact willed. The answer that consideration of God's immutability

provides is that he can change them only if his will can change. And because his will is immutable, he cannot change the eternal truths. Thus, although immutability explains this issue, it does not (and should not, for reasons already mentioned) explain the issue at hand, namely why the eternal truths are necessary.

Suggestion 2: Because Descartes' account of prayer is nearly identical to the account given by Aquinas, perhaps Aquinas' solution to the problem is open to Descartes. In ST IIa IIae 83.2, Aquinas addresses the same kind of problem concerning prayer, contingency, and the immutability of providence that has been bothering us. In particular, Aquinas is concerned with whether prayer is useful [conueniens], i.e., whether it makes a difference given that God's providential plan is willed immutably from eternity. He reviews three common mistakes concerning this issue and rejects them.⁷⁹ Aquinas sees that the real problem for an account of providence and prayer is to reconcile the immutability of divine providence with prayer and the contingency of some things governed by providence. He then gives an account nearly identical to Descartes' account:

[W]e do not pray in order to change the decree of divine providence, rather we pray in order to impetrate [impetremus] those things which God has determined would be obtained only through our prayers. (ST IIa IIae 83.2)

Thomas' solution for reconciling this view of prayer with the the contingency of 'prayer-responses' is as follows:

When considering the usefulness of prayer, one must remember that divine providence not only disposes

which effects will take place, but also the manner in which they will take place, and which actions will cause them. Human acts are true causes, and therefore men must perform certain actions, not in order to change the divine providence, but in order to obtain certain effects in the manner determined by God. (ST IIa IIae 83.2)

Thus, Aquinas believes that the immutability of providence takes nothing away from the contingency of 'prayer-responses' in virtue of the fact that God will that certain things come about contingently and some necessarily; and the way God does this is by arranging certain types of causes (necessary or contingent) which will either bring about an event necessarily or bring it about contingently. Thus, something is contingent (or necessary) depending on the nature of a secondary cause.

It would be nice if Descartes could help himself to this kind of explanation. However, this explanation is not available to Descartes. Descartes is much less willing than Aquinas to allow causes other than God. As he states: "God alone is the true cause of everything which is or can be" (AT VIII 14; CSM I 201); and in the 27 May 1630, Descartes states that, with respect to all of creation, including eternal truths, God is their "efficient and total cause." (AT I 152; CSMK 25). And in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth, he states: "God is the universal cause of everything in such a way as to be also the total cause of everything." (AT IV 314; CSMK 272) Because the truth and modal status of a proposition is something that depends

completely on God, as does everything, Descartes cannot help himself to Aquinas solution.⁸⁰

We have so far seen that the Immutability Interpretation cannot be a correct interpretation of Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. This would be disheartening if it were not for the fact that Descartes actually presents a better explanation, one which does not employ the notion of immutability and which avoids the problem of contingency. We now turn to this explanation.

An Alternative Explanation

As Edwin Curley has noticed, in several texts, Descartes appears to be giving a different explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths, one that doesn't make reference to immutability.⁸¹ For instance, in the Fifth Replies, Descartes states:

I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths [i.e., eternal truths] which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that they should be so. (AT VII 380; CSM II 261, my emphasis)⁸²

And in the Sixth Replies, he states:

God did not will the creation of the world in time because he saw that it would be better this way than if he had created it from eternity; nor did he will that the three angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognized that it could not be otherwise, and so on. On the contrary, it is because he willed to create the world in time that it is better this way than if he had created it from eternity; and it is because he willed that the three angles of a

triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise. (AT VII 432; CSM II 291, my emphasis)

And in the 2 May 1644 letter to Mesland, Descartes states that "even though [encore que] God has willed that some truths should be necessary, this does not mean that he willed them necessarily." (AT IV 118; CSMK 235) In these passages, Descartes is presenting his real explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths: the eternal truths are necessary precisely because God willed that they are necessary.

This is exactly what Descartes needs to say to avoid the problem of contingency that plagues the Immutability Interpretation. That is, even though God immutably wills both necessary eternal truths and merely contingent truths, the fact that he wills the former to be necessary accounts for the distinction between eternal truths and contingent truths. And any account of necessity should be able to account for the difference between necessary and contingent truths. On Descartes' account, this desideratum is satisfied. The eternal truths are necessary because God wills that they be so; and temporally-indexed contingent truths are contingent, though immutable, because God wills them to be contingent.

This account is exactly the type of explanation we should expect from Descartes. After all, it is a central feature of the Creation Doctrine that a proposition is true

iff God will it to be true; and the same is true for modal propositions.

Some readers may be unsatisfied with Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal truths. A reader may object that Descartes presents his account too quickly and without any explanation of its details. I am very sympathetic to this criticism. However, I am willing to allow Descartes some leniency here because, despite the frustrating lack of detail, he has given an account that distinguishes between necessary and contingent truths; thus, it avoids the pitfalls of the Immutability Interpretation. Also, this account provides a firm foundation for modal truths. To see this, let us go back in time to Augustine. In his De libero arbitrio, Augustine addresses the problem of whether God's foreknowledge is compatible with human free actions. Part of his solution consists in holding that God doesn't merely know that an agent A will do an action α , God knows that, in many cases, A will do α freely. Because God is omniscient and infallible, the fact that he know that A will do α freely absolutely guarantees that A will do α freely. The same type of divine guarantee is provided by Descartes, but in this case it is truths and modalities that are guaranteed by God's will. After all, nothing could guarantee that $\Box P$ more effectively than the fact that God wills that $\Box P$. So, in spite of its lack of detail, Descartes' explanation of the necessity of the eternal

truths both distinguishes necessary from contingent truths and guarantees the modal status of a proposition.

In this dissertation, I have tried to make some sense and to give a sympathetic interpretation of Descartes' Creation Doctrine. The interpretation I have given accomplishes several goals: (i) It shows that the Creation Doctrine rests on quite traditional theological assumptions concerning God's simplicity and his freedom. (ii) It shows that the Creation Doctrine does not commit Descartes to bizarre modal theses. (iii) It shows that Descartes has a sufficiently robust, though underdeveloped, account of the necessity of the eternal truths. Of course, there is much more to be said about the Creation Doctrine. However, this must wait for another occasion.

Endnotes

¹Although medieval philosophers (especially Scotus) had rigorous and well-developed accounts of modality in the thirteenth century, in the seventeenth century we don't find issues of modality given the attention they deserve until Leibniz.

²Curley (1984), (1988), (1998), Geach (1973), Petrik (1998), LaCroix (1984).

³Held by Petrik (1998). Dutton (1996) says merely that there is "something akin" to the distinction at work in Descartes. Dutton has admitted to me in conversation that he does not think that the distinction explains the necessity of the eternal truths. Richard LaCroix holds something similar to this interpretation: God binds himself to whatever he wills. See LaCroix (1984) p. 467. Textual evidence for LaCroix's view can be found at AT VII 380. Osler (1994) and (1995) seems to inadvertently waiver between the Immutability Interpretation and the Potentia Interpretation. Perhaps this is because, as we'll see, the latter is not interestingly different from the former.

⁴Held, in varying degrees, by Curley (1984), LaCroix (1984), Menn (1998), Osler (1995), Van den Brink (1993).

⁵Petrik (1998)

⁶Osler (1994), (1995), Dutton (1996), Petrik (1998).

⁷As Oakley states, concerns about omnipotence "led theologians [in the twelfth century] to distinguish increasingly between capacity and volition; to tease apart, that is, the consideration of what God could do hypothetically and in abstracto, given the very absoluteness of his power, and the consideration of what he had chosen and willed to do in actuality. During the first three quarters of the thirteenth century, the period that proved to be formative for the distinction, the familiar terms potentia dei absoluta came to be used of the former and potentia dei ordinata of the latter." (1998) p. 441.

⁸In fact, there are at least two book-length treatments of the history of the distinction: William Courtenay's Capacity and Volition (1990) and Lawrence Moonan's Divine Power (1994).

⁹According to Moonan, "one of the earliest undeniably recognisable uses of the power distinction" is found in Geoffrey of Poitiers' (fl. 1215) Summa theologiae. (1994) p. 57-61. According to Courtenay, however, an earlier use of the distinction is found in an anonymous commentary on

the Pauline epistles circa 1200. Courtenay (1985) p. 247. See Oakley (1998) p. 441.

¹⁰See Oakley (1984) ch. 2 and Courtenay (1985) and (1990) ch. 1. The same example is used by others, even extending to the sixteenth-century Lutheran, John Eck (d. 1543) in a series of letters on the first book of Lombard's Sentences. See Oakley (1998) p. 452.

¹¹Peter Damian (1972) section II.

¹²As Courtenay states: "God can do more than he actually wills to do; divine capacity exceeds divine volition." (1985) p. 244.

¹³Peter Damian (1972) section II.

¹⁴In fact, Damian believes that unactualized alternatives are a necessary condition for both divine and creaturely freedom and power: "[Desiderius' position] seems so absurd and so ridiculous that not only is the assertion incompatible with the omnipotent God, it cannot even be applied to fragile mankind. There are many things, after all, that we do not do and yet are able to do." (1972) section II.

¹⁵Courtenay (1985) p. 244

¹⁶Cf. Anselm Cur deus homo II.5, 10, 17 in Anselm (1998) and Courtenay (1990) p. 34-5.

¹⁷William Courtenay states that the distinction had become established "by the early 13th-century and had become commonplace scholastic terminology by mid-century." (1985) p. 243. According to Moonan (1994), among those developing and employing the distinction in the thirteenth century besides Aquinas were Roland of Cremona (d. 1259), Hugh of St. Cher (d. 1263), Alexander of Hales (d. 1245), and Aquinas' teacher, Albertus Magnus (d. 1280).

¹⁸ST Ia 25.5.

¹⁹See ST Ia 19.3, res.

²⁰See ST Ia 19.7, res; 19.8.ad 4.

²¹It is interesting to note that even some 17th-century Calvinist theologians understood the distinction in this Thomistic fashion. For instance, Samuel Willard (d. 1707), in his work, A Compleat Body of Divinity, states: "Divines do from Scripture observe a two-fold Power ascribed to God, viz. 1. An unlimited and absolute power, by vertue of which he can do all possible things, even such things as he never actually doth...2. An ordinate power, which is not a Power

different from the former, but the former considered as God has pleased to set limits or bounds to it by the Decree with respect to his exerting of it is his works of Efficiency...Not that his Arm was shortened in these respects, but because his purpose, and sometimes his promise has tied his hands; his Will was otherwise and he pursues that in all he doth." p. 70 Quoted in Oakley (1998) p. 460.

²²Aquinas is silent on whether we can apply the distinction to agents other than God. It would seem to be permissible to do so.

²³Ordinatio I.44, in Woler (1986) p. 255.

²⁴Ordinatio I.44, in Wolter (1986) p. 257.

²⁵Cf. Ordinatio I.44, in Wolter (1986) p. 257-259, and Adams (1987) p. 1190.

²⁶Of course there is a trivial sense in which they are identical in God: God is simple, and as such, his power is not composed of two different powers. Rather, as Ockham states, the distinction is one concerning ways of understanding and speaking of God's power.

²⁷Adams (1987) p. 1192.

²⁸See Korolec (1982) p. 639-640, and Cross (1999) p. 58-60.

²⁹Ordinatio I.44. Quoted in Adams (1987) p. 1195.

³⁰Ordinatio I.44, in Wolter (1986) p. 257.

³¹Ibid.

³²In contemporary discussions of God's omnipotence, many scholars have gone to great lengths to give an account of the omnipotence of God in light of the fact that God seems to be unable to do many things. For instance, God is not able to make a four-sided triangle; he cannot make it true that (x exists at t and x does not exist at t). Furthermore, Anselm and others argue that God cannot make himself impotent, to sin, to change, to be evil, to lack some relevant propositional knowledge, etc.¹ They attempt to give an account of God's power such that it is consistent with God's seeming inability to do the impossible and his inability to do a variety of other things that are possible. Some find it strange to say that there are things that finite creatures are able to do but that God cannot do (i.e., sin or make something too heavy to lift). But, as Anselm rightly argues, it is not because of some lack of power that God cannot sin or change; rather it is precisely

because God's nature is essentially perfect, and sinning and changing are imperfection. As Anselm states: "Again, how are you omnipotent if you cannot do all things? But, how can you do all things if you cannot be corrupted, or tell lies, or make the true into the false (such as to undo what has been done), and many similar things? Or is the ability to do these things not power but impotence? (Proslogion VII, in Anselm (1998))

³³William of Ockham (1991) p. 491 (Question I, article 1).

³⁴In Spinoza (1925) pp. 233-281 and Spinoza (1985) pp. 299-346.

³⁵I have taken liberty with the translation of this passage. Because all of the occurrences of 'potentia', 'ordinata', and 'absoluta' are in the accusative, the Latin actually says 'potentiam', 'ordinatam' and 'absolutam'. But, for the sake of consistency, I have left them in Latin but left out the accusative endings.

³⁶It is interesting to note that in CM II 9, Spinoza states that, were God to create creatures with essences other than the ones they in fact have, God would have to give us different powers of conceivability so that we would have epistemic access to certain truths. As Spinoza states: "it would follow that if God had created things in a different way, he would likewise have also constituted our nature that we could understand things as they had been created by God." (CM II 9) That Spinoza even discusses the 'possibility' of God creating an order different from the actual order seems to be in direct opposition to his claims made in Proposition 33 of the Ethics. I'm not sure how to reconcile these views.

³⁷All of the temporal language employed by philosophers concerning the distinction cannot be taken literally. When they write of 'what God has already done' and 'what God cannot now do', we should understand this to mean that on the supposition that God does p, God cannot do not-p.

³⁸In fact, Spinoza states that from his discussion of potentia dei absoluta et ordinata, questions such as "whether [God] can do better than he does, whether he can do more than he has done" can be "very easily answered." (CM II 9)

³⁹ See AT VII 125; CSM II 90, AT VII 415; CSM II 280.

⁴⁰The commentators at Coimbra, however, distinguished potentia absoluta from potentia ordinaria. The former is God's power do anything that does not involve a contradiction; the latter extends only to what is consistent

with "the common and habitual course or order put into things." Commentari Collegio Conimbricensis Societatis Jesu: In octo libros Physicorum Aristotelis Stagiritae (1592), II, 7, 16, 1. Quoted in Oakley (1998) p. 454.

⁴¹See AT VII 235; CSM II 164.

⁴²Tad Schmaltz points out, however, that there is no compelling evidence that Descartes was familiar with this latter work. (1991) p. 138. Cf. Cronin (1966) p. 32-33.

⁴³Petrik (1998)

⁴⁴Petrik (1998)p. 418.

⁴⁵Descartes would, however, hold that God can do x de potentia absoluta if (but not only if) x is possible.

⁴⁶Cf. Dutton (1996) p. 205 n.22.

⁴⁷Petrik (1998) p. 423.

⁴⁸Osler (1994) p. 130-131.

⁴⁹Dutton (1996) p. 205.

⁵⁰Cf. Ethics I, Proposition 29; Proposition 33, Scholium 1.

⁵¹In conversation and correspondence, Michael Della Rocca has told me that CM is a hodge-podge of cartesian and spinozistic ideas, and it is very difficult to tell when Spinoza is interpreting Descartes and when he is presenting his own ideas.

⁵²Cf. Lennon (1998) p. 338-9.

⁵³Wierenga (1989) p. 170.

⁵⁴Wierenga (1989), Wolterstorff (1975)

⁵⁵Monologion XXV, in Anselm (1998). Quoted in Wierenga (1989) p. 171.

⁵⁶Examples are from Wierenga (1989) p. 172.

⁵⁷Wierenga (1989) p. 172.

⁵⁸Aquinas thinks this is case as well. For instance, in ST Ia 9.1, Aquinas argues that God is immutable in virtue of his simplicity. In ST Ia 10.3, he argues that God is eternal because he is immutable. So, in the latter case, God's immutability is conceptually prior to his eternality.

This, however, does not affect the point that if God is eternal, then he is immutable.

⁵⁹Curley (1984) p. 588. Cf. Curley (1988), p. 41-2: "[Descartes] professes to deduce them from God's immutability, which would confirm their necessity."

60. Menn, "Because these truths proceed from God, they are eternal and immutable...because God's will is such as to produce an immutable effect." p. 351.

⁶¹Nadler (1987) p. 176.

⁶²Osler (1995): "divine immutability provides Descartes justification for the necessity of the eternal truths that God created freely." p. 152. Cf. Osler (1994) p. 131.

⁶³See Curley (1984, Van den Brink (1993), Nadler (1987). Even some who hold that the laws of nature are not eternal truths hold that they are necessary truths. For instance, in a recent and interesting paper, Blake Dutton (1996) argues that Descartes' laws of nature are not eternal truths because eternal truths are such that God was free to create them or not to create them and he could have created them any way he wished; but the laws of nature are such that God was free to create them or not to create them, but given that God chooses to create them, his immutability restricts his choice to only those laws compatible with his immutability.

⁶⁴Margaret Osler has provided an actual argument for the Immutability Interpretation. Her argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. God's will is identical with God's understanding.
 2. If 1, then a change in God's will entails a change in God's understanding.
 3. A change in God's will entails a change in God's understanding.
 4. There cannot be a change in God's understanding (because this would indicate some imperfection in God's understanding).
 5. Therefore, there cannot be a change in God's will.
- Osler (1994) p. 131.

⁶⁵Cf. Dutton (1996) p. 206. Robert Sleigh has pointed out to me that there must be some mention of omnipotence (or of 'sufficient power') in the Transfer of Immutability Principle because it is possible that there be a being with an immutable but insufficiently powerful will. In that case, although the will is immutable, it is not sufficiently powerful to secure the obtaining of its object, let alone the immutability of its object.

⁶⁶Cf. AT XI 38; CSM I 93, and Menn (1998) p. 351.

⁶⁷See AT I 149-50; CSMK 24, AT I 151-3; CSMK 25-26, AT IV 118-19; CSMK 235, AT V 166-7; CSMK 348, AT V 223-24; CSMK 358-59, AT VII 435-36; CSM II 293-94, AT VII 380; CSM II 261.

⁶⁸Curley blurs the distinction between necessity and immutability: "More problematic is the reason he here assigns for the immutability of the eternal truths. In the letter to Mersenne, it was the immutability of God's will. Here it is the fact that God wills them to be immutable. If Descartes is not now inclined to explain the necessity of necessary truths by the immutability of God's will, if he's prepared to concede that God's will might change, then the fact that God has once willed the eternal truths to be immutable does not seem to provide much security for the future." (1998) p. 10, my emphasis.

⁶⁹Descartes uses the term 'contingent' in the Regulae (AT X 422; CSM I 46), and in the Principles he states: "In this one idea [of God] the mind recognizes existence - not merely the possible and contingent [existence which belongs to the ideas of all the other things which it distinctly perceives, but utterly necessary and eternal existence." (AT VIII 10; CSM I 197)

⁷⁰It is important to notice that Descartes thinks that God wills all things that exist or are real; God does not will the privations involved in sinful actions and erroneous judgments. Privations, strictly speaking, are nothing. They don't require God's causal input. See the Fourth Meditation (AT VII 54-61; CSM II 37-42)

⁷¹Cf. AT VII 191, 436; CSM II 134, 294, AT VIII 14-15; CSM I 201-2, AT V 166-7; CSMK 348, AT IV 332, 354; CSMK 277, 282, AT XI 438; CSM I 380.

⁷²While we receive answer at a certain time, God doesn't answer our prayers at a certain time but from all eternity.

⁷³See Garber (1992) p. 282

⁷⁴This problem is not peculiar to Descartes. For instance, any philosopher who held, what Knuuttila and Hintikka (following Lovejoy) call, the 'principle of plenitude', will face the problem of contingent temporally-indexed truths. According to this principle, which Knuuttila and Hintikka argue was held by Aristotle, Boethius, and Maimonides among others, no genuine possibility will remain forever unactualized. Knuuttila (1982), Hintikka (1973). So, on this view, to say that P is possible is to say that, at some time, P is actual; to say that P is necessary is to

say that P is true at all times; and to say that P is impossible is to say that there is no time at which P is actual. Thus, if a truth is immutable, it is necessary. As Terence Irwin has stated, Aristotle "treats 'always' as interchangeable with 'necessary'." Irwin, (1988) p. 523. And Hintikka (1973) argues that Aristotles' real 'Sea-Battle Problem' concerns 'omnitemporal truth' and not 'past truth'.

⁷⁵There is a prima facie strange passage in the Passions in which Descartes states: "we should reflect upon the fact that nothing can possibly happen other than as Providence has determined from all eternity. Providence is, so to speak, a fate or immutable necessity [une Necessité immuable]..." (AT XI 438; CSM I 380, emphasis mine) On one reading of this, Descartes seems to be advocating the Immutability-Necessity Principle. However, because much of the material in the Passions was first developed in letters to Elizabeth, starting in 1643, we should read this letter as being consistent with the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth; that is, as saying simply that providence is immutable (adding 'necessity' for emphasis). Cf. Gaukroger (1995) ch. 10.

⁷⁶This suggestion was made by Curley when he served as commentator on my paper, "Immutability and Necessity in Descartes," at the Central Division APA, April 2000.

⁷⁷Morris (1984)

⁷⁸AT I 145-6; CSMK 23, AT V 166; CSMK 348.

⁷⁹See ST Ia 22.2&4; 23.8; 115.6; 116.3

⁸⁰I do think that this means that Descartes is really an occasionalist, but I realize that this is an incredibly controversial topic. I do not have the time to argue for this here.

⁸¹Curley (1998).

⁸²In the previous section, I stated that this passage could be used by Curley to support his suggestion that immutability plus eternality entails necessity. In don't think that his constitutes very strong evidence in favor of Curley's suggestion to help the Immutability Interpretation, because, if the Immutability Interpretation is correct, Descartes cannot mean that the eternal truths are immutable and eternal because God willed them to be so. After all, on the Immutability Interpretation, God does not need to will that the eternal truths are immutable and eternal in order for them to be immutable and eternal. On the Immutability Interpretation, God merely needs to will them (from eternity), and by the Transfer of Immutability Principle, they will be immutable (and eternal). I think that, in this

passage, Descartes is using 'immutable and eternal' to stand for 'necessary', although he does not believe that immutability plus eternality entail necessity. This reading is supported by the passage from the Sixth Replies (AT VII 432; CSM II 291), in which Descartes states that the eternal truths are necessary because God wills them to be so.

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