

Descartes on God and the Products of His Will

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Descartes begins his *Meditations on First Philosophy* with a number of remarkable claims about what is possible. He argues that it is possible that God is a deceiver (AT 7:21), that it is possible that God does not exist and that we arrived at our “present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events” (Ibid.), and that it is possible that there is an evil demon who is constantly manipulating our minds to regard what is false as utterly evident and true (AT 7:22).¹ As commentators noted almost immediately, Descartes’ epistemological project is in serious trouble if he establishes in the First Meditation that it is possible that we are mistaken about what is most evident to us.² In subsequent Meditations, Descartes will use his mind to try to demonstrate results, but if it is possible that his mind is defective, he cannot be sure that those results are to be accepted. Perhaps most worrisome, in the Third Meditation he proceeds to argue that a benevolent God exists and that this being would not have created our minds to be certain about things that are nonetheless false (AT 7:40–52). It is remarkable to think that Descartes could have failed to see the problem here.

There are passages elsewhere in Descartes’ corpus that appear to entail the existence of the possibilities that are advanced in the First Meditation and also other possibilities as well. Descartes appears to go so far as to argue that there are no limits on God’s power and thus that *anything* is possible. Some of the relevant (and extremely striking) passages are these:

You ask me by what kind of causality God 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

¹ Here and in the following I use ‘AT’ to refer to the pagination in Adam and Tannery 1996. For all translations I am using Cottingham et al. (1984, 1985, 1991).

² See for example Antoine Arnauld, *Fourth Objections* (AT 7:214) and Marin Mersenne, *Second Objections* (AT 7:124–25). For more contemporary statements of the worry, see Loeb 1992 and Nelson and Newman 1999.

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cause. ... 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.³

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 3.⁴

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.⁵

God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore... he could have done otherwise.⁶

Commentators have appealed to these passages to argue that Descartes is committed to the view that anything is possible for God and thus that he is committed to the view that anything is possible simpliciter.⁷ It is possible that two and three could have added to something other than five; it is possible that the radii of a circle could have been unequal; it is possible that an evil demon has been allowed to deceive us; it is possible that God does not exist at all.

There is no question that the above passages paint a certain picture of the contents of Descartes' system. Descartes not only holds that there are minds and bodies, but he also appears to hold that there is such a thing as possible reality and that there exist possibilities that are not actualized. If there are such entities in Descartes' system, they do not exist automatically but depend on God for their creation. Descartes holds very generally that

If anyone attends 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, law, and every reason for anything'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.⁸

Descartes makes similar claims in the Third Meditation (AT 7:45) and "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630" (AT 1:152), and he says very specifically about possible reality that

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 impossible, but not to be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible.⁹

³ "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:151–52.

⁴ "For [Arnauld], 29 July 1648," AT 5:224.

⁵ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:432.

⁶ "To [Mesland], 2 May 1644," AT 4:118.

⁷ See for example Frankfurt 1977, 44–46 and 50–53, and Wilson 1978, 125.

⁸ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:435.

⁹ "To [Mesland], 2 May 1644," AT 4:118. See also *Fourth Replies*, AT 7:219.

Here Descartes is not yet conceding that God has created any possible reality, but he is insisting that any such reality does not exist independently of God's creative activity. When God is deciding on the details of the universe that He is going to create, He is not confronted with a set of possibilities that already exist on their own. Possibilities do not exist alongside Him, as things to which He needs to be responsive. The issue that I want to discuss in this paper is whether or not Descartes' God creates any possible reality: possible eternal truths that would make trouble for Descartes' view that the actual eternal truths are necessary,¹⁰ and any other possible reality that could be actualized but is not.

We might start by considering those things that are uncontroversially to be included in the Cartesian system. Descartes of course holds that there exist mental and physical substances and also modifications of those substances. He demonstrates the existence of mind-independent physical reality in the Sixth Meditation, and he demonstrates the existence of (at least one) mind in the Second.¹¹ In addition to minds and bodies, and as we have already seen, Descartes' ontology contains eternal truths:

All the objects of our perception we regard either as things, or affections of things, or else as eternal truths which have no existence outside of our thought. ...I recognize only two ultimate classes of things: first, intellectual or thinking things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or thinking substance; and secondly, material things, i.e. those which pertain to extended substance or body. Perception, volition and all the modes both of perceiving and of willing are referred to thinking substance; while to extended substance belong size (that is, extension in length, breadth and depth), shape, motion, position, divisibility of component parts and the like.¹²

Here we have a statement of the substance dualism for which Descartes is so famous, and Descartes also reveals (perhaps surprisingly) that eternal truths are not anything above and beyond mental and physical substances (and their modifications). They do not exist outside of our thought, and more specifically they are modifications of mental substances. For Descartes, truths are ideas that conform to reality,¹³ and so *a fortiori* eternal truths are ideas. Insofar as they exist as discrete, where for example the eternal truth that one and two are three is not identical to the eternal truth that the radii of a circle are equal, eternal truths are ideas in finite minds and not ideas in a divine mind (or a mind that is perfectly simple and all of whose "parts" are identical¹⁴). Like any other true ideas in finite minds, eternal truths are

¹⁰ And that is Descartes' view. See for example "To [Mersenne], 6 May 1630," AT 1:150; *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:432; and "To Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:308. Commentators like Frankfurt (1977) have argued that if Descartes holds that God is the free author of the eternal truths then Descartes is committed to the view that eternal truths are not necessary.

¹¹ See AT 7:78–80 and AT 7:23–27. For parallel demonstrations, see *Principles of Philosophy* II:1, AT 8A:40–41, and also *Principles* I:7, AT 8A:7.

¹² *Principles* I:48, AT 8A:22–23.

¹³ "To Mersenne, 16 October 1639," AT 2:597.

¹⁴ See for example *Principles* I:23, AT 8A:14, and "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:153, but there is a further discussion of divine simplicity below.

creatures of God,¹⁵ which is just what Descartes says in the passages about the dependence of eternal truths on God's freedom and power. Eternal truths are also eternal, of course, but Descartes unpacks their eternity in terms of their unchangingness.¹⁶

Descartes' system clearly contains minds and bodies and eternal truths, but it also appears to contain a number of additional creatures: alternative eternal truths that God could have created; the series of possibilities that is posited in the First Meditation; and indeed the vast (and presumably unlimited) number of possibilities that God considers in selecting the much smaller subset that constitutes the world that He makes actual. There is no question that if we import a common-sense libertarian conception of freedom into our interpretation of Descartes' claims about God's power, possibilities abound. On such an interpretation, if God is free in His creation of the essence of a circle, and if He is free to make it not the case that the radii of a circle are equal, then there exists the possibility that the radii of a circle are equal, and there exists the possibility that the radii of a circle are not equal. If God could have made two and three add to six or anything else, then there exists the possibility that two and three add to six, and there exists a possibility for every other imaginable sum. The same would then apply in the case of God's creation of this world over any possible other.

Descartes' claims about God's freedom in creation might seem straightforwardly libertarian to some readers, but Descartes goes out of his way to offer his own Cartesian definition of divine freedom, and we would be remiss if we did not keep it in mind. He writes,

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.¹⁷

Here Descartes is stating quite explicitly that what it is to say that God is free is to say that God is indifferent and that there is nothing that is independent of God that puts any pressures or limits or constraints on His creative activity.¹⁸ God is free, but not in the sense that He confronts possibilities from which He must select. Descartes is not automatically working with a libertarian conception of divine freedom, and so we must look to the texts to locate the conception that he in fact assumes. When we do we find that Descartes looks a lot like his contemporary Spinoza:

¹⁵ The Fourth Meditation, AT 7:62. See also "To Princess Elizabeth, 21 May 1643," where Descartes speaks of primitive notions which are implanted in us by God (AT 3:666) and which are "the patterns on the basis of which we form all our other conceptions" (AT 3:665). See also Nolan 1997, 171 and 188.

¹⁶ *Fifth Replies*, AT 7:381, and also Chappell 1997, 123–27.

¹⁷ *Sixth Replies*, AT 7:431–2. See also *Principles* I:51, AT 8A:24.

¹⁸ See also Bennett 1994, 641–43; Nelson and Cunning 1999, 144–5; Cunning 2002; Cunning 2003, 81–2; and Cunning 2010, Chap. 8.

There is no problem in the fact that the merit of the saints may be said to be the cause of their obtaining eternal life; for it is not the cause of this reward in the sense that it determines God to will anything, but is merely the cause of an effect of which God willed from eternity that it should be the case. Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of His omnipotence.¹⁹

If Descartes understands divine freedom in terms of indifference, there is a straightforward and easy way to understand the passages in which he speaks of God's freedom in creating the eternal truths. Descartes says that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, but in Cartesian terms that is just an application of the view that God is indifferent with respect to His creation. Descartes says that God is free to make it not true that the radii of a circle are equal, but that is just to say that God was indifferent in His creation of the eternal truth relating circles and their radii. Descartes says that eternal truths about triangles are necessary and that their necessity is not antecedent to God's creative activity. That is exactly what we should expect to Descartes to say if he holds that God is the wholly indifferent cause of all reality including eternal truths. Descartes says that we ought not say that God cannot make one and two add to something other than three. Indeed we ought not say this, because it is imperative when we do philosophy that we refrain from affirming confusion, and it is confusion to affirm that there are things that exist independent of God's creative activity and that might circumscribe or limit it.

Descartes also says in one of the passages that because nothing determines God to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, that therefore He could have done the opposite. This claim also makes perfect sense in terms of Descartes' understanding of divine freedom. The first thing to note is that, strictly speaking, Descartes holds that divine freedom is to be understood in terms of indifference, and so the claim that God could have done the opposite is again just the claim that nothing determines God to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together. The second thing to note is that in the comments that Descartes makes immediately afterward, we find a reminder that we are mistaken if we understand God's freedom in terms of alternate possibilities from which He selects. Indeed, Descartes writes that

if we would know the immensity of his power we should not put these thoughts before our minds, nor should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and will; the idea which we have of God teaches us that in him there is only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. (AT 4:119)

This is a remarkable passage. Descartes is saying that God's activity is perfectly simple and singular and thus that God's activity does not consist in considering ideas (in His intellect) and then subsequently actualizing them with His will. If God wills that contradictories cannot be made true together, that does not mean that God considers and then rejects the possibility that contradictories can be made true

¹⁹ Sixth *Replies*, AT 7:432. See also Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being* I.iii, in Morgan and Shirley 2002, 50–53.

together. The possibility does not automatically exist, and if it is a necessary truth that contradictories cannot be made true together, we have evidence that the possibility was never in fact created. Hence we should not put before our minds the idea that there really exists the possibility that contradictories can be true together. We should not put it before our minds because it is fictional and confused. We can imagine it, but we can imagine a lot of things, and imagination is not the mark of the true.²⁰

Commentators have already defended the more encompassing thesis that there is no room for possible reality in Descartes' philosophical system. One route to this thesis is to focus on Descartes' commitment to the doctrine of divine simplicity and argue that, unlike Leibniz, Descartes does not think that God has distinct faculties of intellect and will. We have already seen a passage in which Descartes speaks to the simplicity of God's activity, and there are other passages that entail that, for Descartes, whatever is the object of God's intellect is also the object of His will and creative power.²¹ Descartes writes,

there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills, and accomplishes everything.²²

In God, willing, understanding and creating are all the same thing without one being prior to the other even conceptually.²³

If God's intellect has ideas of A, B, C, and D, He creates A, B, C and D if understanding and willing and creating are all the same thing in God. We might assume that God has ideas of things that do not exist, perhaps because we assume that we have such ideas. There seem to be things that could exist instead of A, B, C and D, and indeed things that are not compossible with A, B, C and D. But again, we can imagine a lot of things that are fictional, and possibilities are no exception. For Descartes, everything of which God has an idea is actualized, and anything of which God does not have an idea is nothing at all.

Another route to the thesis that there is no possible reality in Descartes' system starts from the doctrine that God is wholly immutable. Descartes derives the doctrine from God's essential perfection:

It will be said that if God had established these [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 unchangeable.' – I make the same judgement about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp.²⁴

We understand that God's perfection involves his not only being immutable in himself, but also his operating in a manner that is always utterly constant and immutable.²⁵

²⁰ See for example *Second Replies*, AT 7:145 and 130–31; *Principles*, "Preface to the French Edition," AT 9B:7; and Cuning 2010, chapters one and three.

²¹ Nelson and Cuning 1999, 138–9.

²² *Principles* I:23, AT 8A:14.

²³ "To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630," AT 1:153.

²⁴ "To Mersenne, 15 April 1630," AT 1:145–46.

²⁵ *Principles* II:36, AT 8A:61.

If God is immutable, then all that exists aside from God is the actual series of creatures that God creates, and the series does not include possible reality. The reasoning for this Cartesian conclusion is straightforward. Alternative possible realities do not automatically exist alongside the series, for they only exist if God actually creates them, and if God does not create them then they are not part of the fabric of the universe. But God wills the single series of creatures for eternity:

Now that we have come to know God, we perceive in him a power so immeasurable that we regard it as impious to suppose that we could ever do anything which was not already preordained by him. ...[H]e not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it.²⁶

If God is eternal and His will is eternal and wholly immutable there at no point exists the possibility that His will change course and produce an alternate series, and so there do not exist any alternative possible series.²⁷ God is of course the author of all reality and thus the author of any actual and possible reality that there might be, but it turns out that the latter sort of reality is non-existent.²⁸

Another way to reach the thesis that there is no possible reality in Descartes' system is to emphasize that a God that is perfectly simple has no parts and that what seem to be its parts are really identical and so equally essential to it.²⁹ We might assume that Descartes is working with a common-sense conception of freedom and omnipotence and therefore holds that if God is free, there are decrees that God makes that are not tied to His essence and that He does not have to make. But the Cartesian God is different:

Concerning ethics and religion, ... the opinion has prevailed that God can be altered, because of the prayers of mankind; for no one would have prayed to God if he knew, or had convinced himself, that God was unalterable.... From the metaphysical point of view, however, it is quite unintelligible that God should be anything but completely unalterable. It is irrelevant that the decrees could have been separated from God; indeed, this should not really be asserted. For although God is completely indifferent with respect to all things, he necessarily made the decrees he did.... We should not make a separation here between the necessity and the indifference that apply to God's decrees; although his actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary. Then again, although we may conceive that the decrees could have been separated from God, this is merely a token procedure of our own reasoning: the distinction thus introduced between God himself and his decrees is a mental, 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.³⁰

²⁶ *Principles* I:40–41, AT 8A:20.

²⁷ See Cuning 2003, 79–92, and Cuning 2010, 193–94.

²⁸ Note that Alanen (2008, 367–70) concedes that it is incomprehensible how God could create possible reality if God is simple, immutable, and eternal, but she argues that for Descartes God is incomprehensible. I certainly appreciate Alanen's concern here, but insofar as Descartes is making God the subject of philosophical investigation – where we arrive at views about whether or not He is a deceiver, or is omnipotent, or is the author of all reality – Descartes does not think that God is incomprehensible. Commentators actually presuppose that for Descartes God is comprehensible, when they conclude (for example) that he thinks that God is omnipotent in that He is the author of all reality and can make eternal truths false.

²⁹ See Walski 2003, 39–42.

³⁰ *Conversation with Burman*, AT 5:166.

This passage is taken from Franz Burman's notes from an interview that he had with Descartes in 1649. Burman could have made up the quote, perhaps, but the reasoning that he attributes to Descartes is strikingly Cartesian. Descartes does not ever come out in his published writings and say that he is a full-blown necessitarian, though he says things that entail it, and it is clear why he would avoid such topics. He famously withheld publication of *Le Monde* when he learned of the condemnation of Galileo.³¹ Descartes would have violated his own stoicism, and his efforts at achieving equanimity,³² if he had advertised all of his scientific commitments. The same sensibility would apply in the case of a commitment to necessitarianism, if not more strongly.

One thing that we still need to do is address the evidence in the First Meditation that there are unactualized possibilities like that God does not exist or that there is an evil demon. The first thing to say here is that Descartes' meditator advances a lot of claims in the *Meditations* – for example, that what we know best we know either from or through the senses (AT 7:18); that we should use imagination to get to know our minds better (AT 7:27); that general perceptions are apt to be more confused than particular ones (AT 7:30); and that bodies really have qualities like color and taste and sound (AT 7:30) and heat (7:41, 43–44). None of these claims is advanced by Descartes, but instead they are the deliverances of a meditator who is reporting what he sees to be true from his first-person point-of-view, but whose intellect has not yet been emended. Thinkers like Glaucon, Hylas, and Simplicio might proceed along the same lines, but they do not thereby reveal to us the views of Plato, Berkeley or Galileo. When we do philosophy, we often have thoughts at the start of inquiry that are unconsidered and confused, and later we come to recognize a priori truths that are unimpeachable and that inform us that the thoughts that we had before we were careful were not particularly telling. Descartes' meditator makes epistemic progress and recognizes the obvious truth of various primary notions of metaphysics,³³ and concludes from them that God exists necessarily, that God cannot deceive, that God would not allow a demon to manipulate our minds, that everything depends on God for its existence, and that truths like two and three add to five are necessary. Because God is a necessary existent who is the author of all reality, we can thereby conclude that there does not exist the possibility of divine deception or of God's nonexistence, or the possibility of alternative eternal truths, and hence that God did not author these. Any such possibilities do not exist automatically alongside God, and because He does not create them they do not in fact exist. Like Spinoza, Leibniz or any other figure who is properly identified as a rationalist, Descartes does not construct his philosophical arguments from claims that are grounded in the senses or imagination, and claims that are known by "purely mental scrutiny" (AT 7:31) start to emerge in the Second Meditation and beyond. The First Meditation is not evidence of anything but the commitments of a person who is

³¹ See Gaukroger 1995, 290–92.

³² See Rutherford 2008.

³³ *Second Replies*, AT 7:156–7.

moving slowly and awkwardly away from a non-Cartesian paradigm.³⁴ Descartes writes the *Meditations* from the first-person point-of-view because it is imperative that we come to see the truth for ourselves,³⁵ but at the start of inquiry we are not in the best position to see (and report) how things really are.

I want to conclude with an extended discussion of a recent attempt in the literature to argue that a necessitarian reading of Descartes is a nonstarter.

In a recent paper, Dan Kaufman argues that in Descartes' system there are necessary truths and contingent truths and that there is no further explanation of the necessity of the former than that God freely created some truths as necessary and others as contingent.³⁶ Kaufman argues that for Descartes

the eternal truths are necessary precisely because God wills that they are necessary. ...[T]o expect more of an explanation from Descartes is to expect something to which we are not entitled. The explanation that we receive from Descartes is *all the explanation we can get* from him.³⁷

Kaufman admits that the view might seem puzzling, and indeed he compares it to another view that has elicited a similar response – the Augustinian doctrine that divine foreknowledge does not preclude the possibility of libertarian freedom because, even though we cannot avoid doing what God knows we will do, what God knows we will do is act freely.³⁸ But Kaufman argues that the Cartesian view should not be met with “incredulous stares.”³⁹ Descartes of course holds that every creature is completely dependent on God for its existence, and so if there are necessary truths in Descartes' system, then God must be the author of their necessity.⁴⁰

But another reason that Kaufman gives up on offering a further explanation of the necessity of Cartesian eternal truths is that he considers various attempts to make sense of their necessity and concludes that they all fall short. First, Kaufman considers the view that the reason why they are necessary is that (1) God wills them and (2) God's will is immutable. Kaufman is of course right to argue that, even on the most charitable interpretation, an argument along these lines “does not establish the *necessity* of the eternal truths; it merely establishes their *immutability*.”⁴¹ Just because two and two are immutably four, they are not necessarily four. If two and two are immutably four, they are not necessarily four if it is possible that they could have been immutably otherwise.

Kaufman also dismisses a second interpretation that would purport to explain the necessity of eternal truths in Descartes' system. This interpretation helps itself to what Kaufman calls the “Immutability-Necessity” Principle: for any x, if x is

³⁴ See also Cuning 2010, chapter one.

³⁵ See *Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies*, AT 9A:208.

³⁶ Kaufman 2005, 1–19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 17–8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

immutable, then x is necessary. One of the problems with this interpretation, of course, is that it is not clear why anybody in their right mind would subscribe to the principle. If the immutability of the eternal truths only establishes their immutability and not their necessity, then it is not the case that for any x , if x is immutable, then x is necessary. But the real problem that Kaufman sees with the second interpretation is that it “is had at too high a cost.”⁴² The cost is that it does not leave room for Descartes to make a distinction between truths that are necessary and truths that are contingent, and in particular it does not allow Descartes to hold that the free actions of creatures are contingent. Kaufman sets up his worry as follows. First, he allows that Descartes holds that in God there is a single and perfectly simple act by which He wills the series of creatures for eternity.⁴³ Eternal truths are creatures and are true at every moment, but non-eternal truths are true only at particular times. Kaufman then highlights that if God wills a single series for all eternity and if His will is immutable, then it is an immutable truth that two and two are true for all eternity, and it is an immutable truth that (to use Kaufman’s example) Deaton receives a sandwich at t .⁴⁴ It is also an immutable truth that Deaton engages in the mental act of deciding to eat a sandwich at t_2 (if it is in fact a truth that he decides to do so). On the interpretation that employs the Immutability-Necessity Principle, then, “Descartes is committed to the necessity of all temporally-indexed propositions.”⁴⁵ But “it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so, i.e., they are contingent,” and “Descartes certainly wants to hold that the free actions of creatures are contingent.”⁴⁶ Below I consider the evidence that Kaufman offers here. For now I am just recording the view.

If eternal truths are going to be necessary truths in Descartes’ system, they will have to be truths that are authored by God, and it will have to be the case that in Descartes’ system there do not exist possible alternative eternal truths. I argued earlier that Descartes’ God does not create any possible reality and thus that possibilities are not among the creatures in the Cartesian system. But nor is there any room for possibility as a constituent of God:

I have many potentialities which are not yet actual, [but] this is all quite irrelevant to the idea of God, which contains absolutely nothing that is potential.⁴⁷

[P]otential being... strictly speaking is nothing.⁴⁸

If Descartes’ God is simple and wholly active, of course He contains nothing at all that is potential. As we have seen, He does not author any possible reality either. For Descartes, possibility reality does not get authored, and it does not reside in God, so it is a fiction. Thus we secure the fruits of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 9–10.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ The Third Meditation, AT 7:47.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

frequent reflection upon Divine Providence: 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, which we must set against Fortune in order to expose the latter as a chimera which arises solely from an error of our intellect.⁴⁹

There is no potential being in God, and possibilities do not automatically exist side-by-side the series that God in fact produces, for something exists only if He produces it. God wills a series of creatures for eternity, and there does not exist the possibility that His will could have been otherwise for eternity.

It is somewhat surprising actually that Kaufman does not accept the view that in Descartes' system there does not exist the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity. In his 2002 paper he states the view that all that Descartes means in saying that God could have created alternative eternal truths is that there exist no non-divine influences that constrain God in His act of creating the eternal truths that He in fact made.⁵⁰ But this is not to say that in Descartes' system there thereby exists the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity. It just means that God wills what He wills and that there is nothing independent of God that has any bearing on that. It is just to make a point about God's independence, and not about any real possibilities that exist or that God wills and creates. It is not to add the existence of a possibility to Descartes' system. The view that God is supremely independent in creating the eternal truths does not by itself entail the existence of unactualized possibilities. Why is Kaufman so confident that in Descartes' system there exists the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity?

The reason why Kaufman places this possibility into Descartes' system is that if the possibility does not exist in Descartes' system, then Descartes is a necessitarian. But as Kaufman insists,

Descartes may be willing to live with the *immutability* of things. What he cannot systematically live with is the *necessity* of all things.⁵¹

Surprisingly, though, Kaufman offers almost no evidence for this view. First, he says that Descartes holds that some truths are contingent in the sense of being not necessary:

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', 'the wax smells like flowers', 'anything other than God exists', etc., are contingently true according to Descartes.⁵²

Noteworthy is that Kaufman is not quoting Descartes here, but just supposing that it is obvious that Descartes would identify these as non-necessary truths. He says that if Descartes does not do so then "he would commit himself to unwanted consequences."⁵³ The idea is presumably that it *is* obvious that these

⁴⁹ *Passions of the Soul* II:146, AT 11:438.

⁵⁰ Kaufman 2002, 36–7.

⁵¹ Kaufman 2005, 11.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

are not necessary truths, and that as a reasonable person, Descartes would agree. But that is not evidence, and it is certainly not systematic evidence.⁵⁴ Indeed, systematically speaking Descartes would refrain from advancing the first two claims as philosophical truths, as they violate the Fourth Meditation rule that we should refrain from affirming what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive. Descartes holds that, strictly speaking, things like wax and flowers do not have a smell, and that what we clearly and distinctly perceive to pertain to particular bodies are general features like extension and flexibility – features that are known through the intellect alone and not through the senses.⁵⁵ Kaufman insists, though, that “Despite the fact that Descartes rarely uses the term ‘contingent’, it is clear that he believed that there are some propositions that, while true, are not necessarily so.”⁵⁶ Descartes does rarely use the term ‘contingent’, and when he does he is not committing himself to the view that there are truths that are not necessary. He speaks of things as having possible and contingent existence, and identifies possible and contingent existence with the dependent existence had by creatures in contrast to the independent existence had by God.⁵⁷ Spinoza speaks of possible and contingent existence in similar terms, but that is not evidence that Spinoza is not a necessitarian.⁵⁸ There is indeed just a small number of texts in which Descartes speaks of contingency, but even these do not entail that his system contains unactualized reality.⁵⁹

Kaufman also offers the datum that Descartes “certainly” holds that the free actions of creatures are contingent. Here he does not offer much evidence either. Instead of locating passages in which Descartes makes clear that human behavior is not necessitated, Kaufman points to passages in which Descartes appears to leave little room for contingency, and says that “despite” these passages Descartes holds that the free actions of creatures are contingent.⁶⁰ For example, there is the famous passage in the 6 October 1645 letter to Elizabeth:

[God] would not be supremely perfect if anything could happen in the world without coming entirely from him... [P]hilosophy by itself is able to discover that the slightest thought

⁵⁴ This would be similar to arguing that a reasonable person would hold that finite creatures are efficacious and therefore that Malebranche cannot really hold that God is the only cause, and so we must go back and interpret the relevant parts of his system accordingly.

⁵⁵ See also Simmons 2003, 575–79, and Cunning 2010, 181–86.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *First Replies*, AT 116–7; *Second Replies*, AT 7:166; *Comments on a Certain Broadsheet*, AT 8B:361; *Principles* I:51–52, AT 8A:24–25. See also Nelson and Cunning 1999, 141–43.

⁵⁸ *Ethics*, Part IV, definitions three and four. See also Koistinen (2003).

⁵⁹ Note also that Kaufman (2005, p. 11, note 32) cites the *Passions of the Soul* II:146 passage in which Descartes says that providence is a ‘fate or immutable necessity,’ but he argues that because *Passions of the Soul* emerged out of Descartes’ correspondence with Elizabeth, and because Descartes speaks of providence as immutable to Elizabeth, he should not be read as speaking of providence as immutable necessity in *Passions of the Soul*, even though he refers to it as such.

⁶⁰ Kaufman (2005), 8.

could not enter into a person's mind without God's willing, and having willed from all eternity, that it should so enter.⁶¹

Commentators have cited this passage (along with others⁶²) as evidence for the view that Descartes has a compatibilist view of freedom.⁶³ Taken in isolation the passages do leave room for the Leibnizian (and quite non-libertarian) view that human actions are contingent in that they do not *have* to occur, even though once God puts us into existence we cannot do anything other than what He preordains that we will do. But that is not a kind of freedom that would allow us to avoid error at the moment that it is about to occur. If the passages are taken in the context of the larger systematic evidence that Descartes holds that will and intellect are identical in God and that there does not exist the possibility that God's will could have been otherwise for eternity, they entail that finite volitions are necessitated.⁶⁴ What we need is some evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the reason why Kaufman is supposing that it is so obvious that Descartes takes the free actions of creatures to be contingent is that the Fourth Meditation reflects the view that God is not perfect if it is not possible for His creatures to avoid error.⁶⁵ Descartes' meditator certainly accepts a version of this view, and it is a view that will have to be addressed, but as we have seen Descartes' meditator expresses a lot of views in the *Meditations*, and in many cases these are not views that we

⁶¹ "To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:314.

⁶² For example, in "To Princess Elizabeth, 3 November 1645" Descartes says that "[The] independence which we experience and feel in ourselves... is not incompatible with a dependence of quite another kind, whereby all things are subject to God" (AT 4:333). See also *Principles* I:40–41, AT 8A:20.

⁶³ Sleight et al. (1998), 1208–12; Loeb (1981), 144–6.

⁶⁴ C. P. Ragland (2006) has argued that there are a number of texts in Descartes' corpus that cannot be read except as evidence that Descartes holds that human actions are contingent. As Ragland expresses the view, the passages entail that Descartes is committed to the principle that at the time of action human agents have a two-way power to do or not do. For example, Ragland cites Descartes' claim in *Principles* 1:37 that "when embracing the truth, our doing so voluntarily is much more to our credit than would be the case if we could not do otherwise" (AT 8A:19; Ragland 2006, 389). But by itself such a text is evidence of hardly anything. A compatibilist will certainly allow that it is true it is possible for a person to "do otherwise," but what it is for that to be possible will be analyzed in compatibilist terms. For example, it is possible in the sense that if the person had different beliefs and desires the person would have chosen otherwise. To understand what a philosopher means in making the claim that it is possible for X to do otherwise, we need to read the figure systematically, but Ragland is assuming that in the *Principles* I:37 passage Descartes is not only saying that it is possible for us to do otherwise but that what it is for it to be possible for X to do otherwise is to have a two-way power. Another passage that Ragland (387) offers as evidence for the view that Descartes holds that human agents have a two-way power is from *Principles* I:40–1. There Descartes speaks to the difficulty of reconciling human freedom and divine preordination, and indeed Descartes would best be understood as a libertarian if he thought that the relevant tension was between God's preordination of all events and our two-way power to do or not do, but noteworthy is that what Descartes actually says (AT 8A:20–21) is that it is our *experience* of freedom and independence that is difficult to reconcile with divine preordination. See also Cunning 2010, chapter five.

⁶⁵ AT 7:54–55. See also Walski 2003, 43.

should attribute to Descartes himself. Like all of the views of the *Meditations*, they are the views of Descartes' meditator as he engages in philosophical reflection from the first-person point-of-view on the way to becoming a full-blown Cartesian.⁶⁶ If the meditator engages in yet further reflection, some of which might take place after working through the *Meditations*, he will appreciate that God is a necessary existent who is simple and immutable and utterly independent, and the cause of all reality. The meditator will notice things that he was not in a position to recognize in the Fourth Meditation, even though the conceptual entailments were all sitting there and waiting to be seen:

Joining himself willingly entirely to God, he [a person who "meditates on these things and understands them properly"] loves him so perfectly that he desires nothing at all except that his will should be done. Henceforth, because he knows that nothing can befall him which God has not decreed, he no longer fears death, pain or disgrace. He so loves this divine decree, deems it so just and so necessary, and knows that he must be so completely subject to it that even when he expects it to bring death or some other evil, he would not will to change it even if, *per impossible*, he could do so. He does not eschew the permissible goods or pleasures he may enjoy in this life, since they too come from God. He accepts them with joy, without any fear of evils, and his love makes him perfectly happy.⁶⁷

[t]he first and chief of [the truths most useful to us] is that there is a God on whom all things depend, whose perfections are infinite, whose power is immense and whose decrees are infallible. This teaches us to accept calmly all the things which happen to us as expressly sent by God. Moreover, since the true object of love is perfection, when we lift up our minds to consider him as he is, we find ourselves naturally so inclined to love him that we even rejoice in our afflictions at the thought that they are an expression of his will.⁶⁸

there is nothing to show that the present life is bad... [and that] True philosophy, on the contrary, teaches that even amid the saddest disasters and most bitter pains we can always be content, provided that we know how to use our reason.⁶⁹

Descartes is clear that death and afflictions are part of the immutable order, and error is not the end of the world either.⁷⁰ Certainly we have to engage in a lot of reflection to reach the point where we recognize all of this, clarifying and then refining our results each in terms of the other: "to reach such a point we have to be very philosophical indeed."⁷¹ Thus we have Descartes' final reconciliation of the problem of error – a reconciliation that would have made little sense to the Fourth Meditation meditator, and which Descartes very appropriately presents later on.⁷² The Fourth Meditation lays out the will-compelling reasons that help us to recognize that we will avoid error so long as we refrain from affirming what we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, but we do not need to have libertarian freedom to recognize the force of these reasons, and we certainly do not need to demonstrate

⁶⁶ See *Appendix to Fifth Replies*, AT 9A:208–9, and Cuning 2010, chapter one.

⁶⁷ "To Chanut, 1 February 1647," AT 4:609.

⁶⁸ "To Princess Elizabeth, 15 September 1645," AT 4:291–92.

⁶⁹ "To Princess Elizabeth, 6 October 1645," AT 4:315.

⁷⁰ See also Cuning 2010, chapter five.

⁷¹ "To Clerselier, 2 March 1646," AT 4:355.

⁷² Here I am borrowing from the language of Arnauld in *Fourth Objections*, AT 7:215–16.

(what is false) that it is inconsistent with the perfection of a divine being that all of our volitions are wholly dependent on His will. There is no worry that Descartes is ambivalent in his adherence to the new mechanistic science when we read his Second Meditation claims about colors and sounds and his Third Meditation claims about heat. We could attribute to him the concerns that launch the Fourth Meditation, even though the entirety of his metaphysical system insists that we should not; or else we could attribute those concerns to his fumbling meditator.

Given that Kaufman offers almost no evidence for the view that Descartes is not a necessitarian, one final speculation is that he is assuming that Descartes rejects necessitarianism as a matter of theological doctrine. However, Descartes actually says almost nothing about what he accepts as a matter of theological doctrine. When pressed, he makes every effort to avoid theological issues altogether. For example, the question of how an omni-benevolent God can damn people for eternity

is a theological question: so if you please you will allow me to say nothing about it.⁷³

What you say about the production of the *Word* does not conflict, I think, with what I say; but I do not want to involve myself in theology....⁷⁴

Descartes does say that if the deliverances of reason conflict with the deliverances of divine revelation, “we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgement.”⁷⁵ However, he also holds that divine revelation and clear and distinct perception in fact never conflict and that, because clear and distinct perceptions are true, the claims of theology must be made to square with them.⁷⁶ If a given clear and distinct perception conflicts with a tenet of theology, we should take a second look at the tenet and attempt to reinterpret it:

The six days of the creation are indeed described in Genesis in such a way as to make man appear its principal object; but it could be said that the story in Genesis was written for man, and so it is chiefly the things which concern him that the Holy Spirit wished particularly to narrate, and that indeed he did not speak of anything except in its relationship to man.⁷⁷

If the reconciliation of philosophy and theology turns out to be too difficult, Descartes will affirm clear and distinct perceptions and leave the theology to someone else. But clear and distinct perceptions entail that God wills a single series for eternity and that there does not exist the possibility that God’s will could have been otherwise. Descartes may not go to great lengths to advertise this view, given his interest in avoiding theological controversy. But it his view, nonetheless.⁷⁸

⁷³“To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630,” AT 1:153.

⁷⁴“To Mersenne, 6 May 1630,” AT 1:150.

⁷⁵*Principles* I:76, AT 8A:39.

⁷⁶“Letter To Father Dinet,” AT 7:581, 598. See also *Appendix to Fifth Objections and Replies*, AT 9A:208.

⁷⁷“To Chanut, 6 June 1647,” AT 5:54. See also Cuning 2010, chapter eight.

⁷⁸Descartes might be even more a Spinozist than this. Annette Baier has pointed out (in conversation) that in the Sixth Meditation Descartes identifies God and nature, and that in the Fourth Meditation he speaks of God as having an imagination (which would require that He is extended). In the Sixth Meditation Descartes writes, “For if nature is considered in its general aspect, then

There are a number of different interpretive options for making sense of Descartes' view that God has created necessary truths. One is to argue that because truths that could have been otherwise are not really necessary, Descartes does not think that the eternal truths are necessary. With Frankfurt, we might argue that all that Descartes means to say in claiming that eternal truths are necessary is that finite minds are constructed to regard them as necessary even though they are not.⁷⁹ Finite minds are wrong in their assessment that the eternal truths are necessary, but, as Frankfurt develops the view, a finite mind's certainty about something is just that – the certainty of a finite mind. It is not an indication of how things actually are from an objective point-of-view, and indeed for all we know there is a radical gap between what we are able to find completely certain and what is really true.⁸⁰ Frankfurt's view can handle all of the texts in which Descartes says that eternal truths are necessary, but it faces a host of problems. One is that the view is self-contradictory in that it supposes that there is one claim whose absolute truth we do recognize – namely that God is omnipotent in such a way that He can do anything, even the logically impossible. This claim generates Frankfurt's entire reading. Another (related) problem is that the view has to allow that it is false that human beings are compelled to see the eternal truths as necessary, because if the view is right our rational faculties in fact enable us to arrive at the result that they are not necessary at all. A third problem is that the view does not allow Descartes to be a systematic philosopher. It allows Descartes to hold that God is omnipotent, but it does not allow Descartes to make his understanding of omnipotence be systematically sensitive to his other systematic understandings of things like simplicity, immutability, and independence.⁸¹

A second way of attempting to make sense of Descartes' creation doctrine is to argue that God created the eternal truths as necessary, even though in His system there exists the possibility that He could have done otherwise.⁸² God freely created the eternal truths as necessary, end of story. A third way is to explain the necessity of Cartesian eternal truths in terms of divine immutability and the fact that Descartes' God is the author of all reality. In Descartes' system, God does not create the possibility that His will could have been otherwise, and so it is not possible that His will could have been otherwise. His will can only be as it in fact is. We thereby understand the necessity of the eternal truths, God's omnipotence and independence, and God's creation of all reality by a single immutable and eternal act. A distinction

I understand by the term nothing other than God himself, or the ordered system of created things established by God" (AT 7:80). In the Fourth Meditation he writes, "if I examine the faculties of memory or imagination, or any others, I discover that in my case each one of these faculties is weak and limited, while in the case of God it is immeasurable" (AT 7:56). There is also of course the famous passage in *Principles* I:51–52 where Descartes says that strictly speaking God is the only substance and that finite minds depend on Him for their existence (AT 8A:24–25). Baier will point out that that makes Cartesian creatures sound a lot like modifications.

⁷⁹ Frankfurt 1977, 44–46.

⁸⁰ Frankfurt 1997, 50–53.

⁸¹ See also Cunning 2010, chapter eight.

⁸² This is Kaufman's view, and also the view in Curley 1984, 569–597.

between God's actual will and alternative ways that His will could have been is "merely a token procedure of our own reasoning." But Kaufman says that "it is clear that," and that "certainly," Descartes holds that there are truths that are merely contingent and not necessary. He says that "what [Descartes] cannot systematically live with is the *necessity* of all things." Kaufman provides almost no evidence for this view. Indeed the only view that Descartes' actual system can absorb is that there does not exist the possibility that things could be other than they are. That does not mean that God's power is limited or that there are things that God cannot do. His power would be limited if there existed possibilities that He cannot actualize, but He does not create any possible reality.

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