Religious Studies **39**, 79–92 © 2003 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0034412502006261 Printed in the United Kingdom

Descartes on the immutability of the divine will

DAVID CUNNING

Department of Philosophy, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115

Abstract: **Descartes holds that God's will is immutable. It cannot be changed by God and, because He is supremely independent, it cannot be changed by anything else. Descartes' God acts by a single immutable will for all eternity, and there is no sense in which it is possible for Him to will or to have willed anything other than what He in fact wills. Passages in which Descartes might appear to be suggesting a different view are simply manifestations of his analytic method.**

Descartes clearly wants to avoid many of the Spinozistic implications of his metaphysics. In the *Principles of Philosophy*, 1.51, he says that a substance is a being that is ontologically independent and thus that God is the only substance. In *Principles*, 1.52 he immediately retreats and says that finite minds and bodies are also substances, but in a very restricted sense. Descartes also holds that God is an infinite being. However, when presented with the objection that an infinite being would take up all ontological space and so leave no room for anything that is distinct from Him, Descartes simply asserts the distinction: 'the term ''infinite'' is not generally taken to mean something which excludes the existence of finite things'.[1] Descartes provides no arguments here, but it is clear what he wants to avoid. If the beings that depend on God are not substances, then they are modes, and modes of God. If God takes up all ontological space, then God is identified with creatures yet again.

Descartes is sometimes seen as parting with Spinoza on issues of modality as well. Descartes holds that God creates freely and presumably that He could have created something other than what He in fact did.[2] Spinoza holds that 'Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced'.[3] Recently it has been argued that Descartes' commitment to the identity of God's will and intellect commits him to a full-blown actualism.[4] Here, I argue that together his doctrines of divine immutability and divine independence also entail that the only possible world is the actual world. Descartes holds that God's will is immutable and that His immutable will could

not have been otherwise. He holds that there is no way that God could have willed what He does not.

The immutability of the divine will

In *Conversation with Burman*, Descartes is reported to have said that all things happen necessarily:

> 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, since he necessarily willed what was best, even though it was of his own will that he did what was best. 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. (AT, 5, 166)

Since God is immutable, His will cannot change 'now', and it could not change 'then'. God is immutable and so cannot change Himself, but since He is supremely independent, nothing else could change Him either. Descartes is reported to have defended this view in his discussion with Burman, and the view also follows from some of the central tenets of his system.

First, Descartes holds that God preordains all events from eternity. He says in *Principles*, 1.40 that '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' (AT, 8A, 20). He says further that this power is one 'by which he not only knew from eternity whatever is or can be, but also willed it and preordained it' (*Principles*, 1.41, AT, 8A, 20). For any event that occurs or will occur, God has already decided that it will happen.

Of course, God's preordination of events is not enough to make them occur necessarily. If God could have preordained events differently, then other events could occur than those that actually do. Or, if God's will can change, He might intervene in some cases to will what He did not preordain. However, Descartes holds that God's will is immutable and that He could not have preordained events differently. He is clear in a number of places that God is immutable: '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'.[5] Since mutability is an imperfection, 'in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible' (*Principles*, 1.56,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

AT, 8A, 26). Furthermore, since God's will is immutable, at any point the structure of a divine volition is identical to its structure at any other point. Descartes says, 'there is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which he simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything'.[6] If an event occurs at a certain time, then God wills that the event occur at that time. Since God's will is immutable and since it would not be immutable if He were not willing that event from eternity, He does will it from eternity. There is for eternity a single identical volition by which He wills. This volition cannot change, for God's will is immutable. Here Descartes is making sure that his conception of God is properly sensitive to God's perfection.

The will of Descartes' God is immutable, but that by itself does not mean that God's will could not have been otherwise. God might be willing the actual universe for eternity, and He might be willing it immutably, but it still might be possible from Him to have immutably willed something else for eternity. If God's will is immutable, then He cannot change His will, and so the only way that He could have immutably willed otherwise if is something other than God could have made Him do this. But Descartes holds that God is wholly independent.[7] His will is immutable and so unchanging for eternity. He cannot change His own will, and His will cannot be changed by anything else, and so His will could not have been immutably otherwise.[8]

Descartes' view that God is immutable is obviously going to touch some of his other views, and if he is careful he will make sure that these views are sensitive to it. For example, he, of course, holds that God is free. Whatever this freedom amounts to, it will have to be something that squares with God's immutability. For Descartes, God's freedom is just his independence from non-divine influences:

> 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.[9]

Here Descartes is pointing to a crucial difference between the infinite will and a finite will. A finite will is compelled to affirm clear and distinct perceptions that are true prior to the affirmations of that will.[10] God has created finite minds so that their wills affirm what is true, and so God and truth both determine the activity of a finite will. A finite will is thus indifferent when nothing is determining it to affirm, and in such cases it does not do any affirming.[11] The infinite will is also indifferent when nothing is determining it to affirm, but that does not mean that it is not affirming. It is indifferent only in the sense that nothing determines it to affirm as it does. As Descartes says in response to an objection,

> 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

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> 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 cause. Thus the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence.[12]

For Descartes, God is indifferent, and His indifference consists in the fact that His activity is not determined by anything.[13] His indifference contributes to His omnipotence because it means that nothing influences His activity. Descartes' view that God is free squares with his view that God is immutable. He immutably wills from eternity all that occurs; He does this freely in the sense that nothing influences His activity.

There of course remains the epistemic problem that it is difficult to understand how the activity of an immutable being manifests freedom and omnipotence, and Descartes realizes this. However, he simply acknowledges that it *is* an epistemic problem. He says to Mersenne,

> It will be said that if God had established [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 judgment about God. 'But his will is free.' – Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. 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.[14]

Descartes holds that God is free *and* that His will is immutable. Any cognitive dissonance that we experience in the face of these two propositions is not evidence that one of them is false but evidence that we do not fully understand how the power of an immutable being amounts to omnipotence. If we do not understand this, we should adhere to Descartes' Fourth Meditation rule for judging and not make affirmations about it.[15]

A common reading of Descartes has him holding that God's omnipotence guarantees that God could have done other than what He has in fact done.[16] Among the passages that are most suggestive of this reading are the ones in which Descartes puts forward his famous doctrine of the creation of the eternal truths: '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.'[17] 'And even if 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.'[18] '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.'[19] And 'God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore … he could have done the opposite'.[20]

When read in the context of Descartes' system, none of these texts suggests that God could have done other than what He has in fact done. God is free not to create the eternal truths in the sense that nothing determines Him to create the eternal

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

truths that He in fact creates.[21] Still, God cannot change His will, and nothing other than God can change His will, and so there is no sense in which it is possible for God to have not created the eternal truths that are with us. In the second text, Descartes says that nothing necessitates God to will as He does, but this just means that God is supremely independent.[22] In the third text, we read that we ought not to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, but this is not a claim about God's power but about us and what we ought not say. We ought not to affirm what we do not clearly and distinctly understand, and we do not understand what would be the case if there were a mountain without a valley or if God's power were constrained.[23] Finally, Descartes does say that God could not have been determined to make opposites not true together and thus that He could have done the opposite, but he immediately retreats after noticing that the prospect of God's making opposites true together is something that we cannot understand either. He says, 'even if this be true [that God could have made contradictories true together], we should not try to comprehend it, since our nature is incapable of doing so'. Here Descartes has checked himself after making an attempt at characterizing God's omnipotence that, given his other systematic commitments, is simply confused.[24]

The analytic method and Descartes' theory of modality

Thus far, we have focused on texts outside of the *Meditations* to generate the view that in Descartes' system things could not have been other than they are. In the *Meditations* itself there are some passages that appear to directly contradict this interpretation. In particular, Descartes argues in the First Meditation that an omnipotent being could have created us such that we 'go wrong every time [we] add two and three or count the sides of a square' (AT, 7, 21) and that, for all we know, He actually did. In the last analysis, however, Descartes does not hold that God could have done this.[25] He points out in Second Replies that 'all the attributes which we include in the concept of the divine nature are so interconnected that it seems to us to be self-contradictory that any one of them should not belong to God' (AT, 7, 151). Non-deception is one of God's attributes, and so the prospect of God engaging in deception is unintelligible. The thought of 'it' is had only by someone who is very confused:

> … as regards God, if I were not overwhelmed by preconceived opinions, and if the images of things perceived by the senses did not besiege my thought on every side, I would certainly acknowledge him sooner and more easily than anything else. For what is more self-evident than the fact that the supreme being exists, or that God, to whose essence alone existence belongs, exists. (AT, 7, 69)

It might seem surprising that Descartes flirts with such confusions at all. When he does so he is simply employing his analytic method – what he calls the 'best and truest method of instruction' (Second Replies, AT, 7, 156). Descartes does not

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hide that he sometimes makes claims early in the *Meditations* that from a later and more sophisticated point of view he will retract. He says,

> The analytic style of writing that I adopted there [in the *Meditations*] allows us from time to time to make certain assumptions that have not yet been thoroughly examined; and this comes out in the First Meditation where I made many assumptions which I proceeded to refute in subsequent Meditations.[26]

Descartes makes a number of false claims in the First Meditation – that God might have created us with defective minds, that perhaps we 'arrived at [our] present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events', and that it is possible that an evil demon is tricking us all the time. However, Descartes makes these false claims very strategically. He holds that 'there is nothing whose true nature we perceive by the senses alone', and that, since most of us do not outgrow the habits of embodiment, 'it turns out that most people have nothing but confused perceptions throughout their entire lives'.[27] He also holds that these confused perceptions are operative in the *Meditations* even if we have pledged to doubt them: they 'eclips[e] our natural light' (AT, 7, 135) and 'capture [our] belief' (AT, 7, 22). Descartes makes a number of false claims in the First Meditation to help us to dissolve such confusions:

> … take the case of someone who imagines a deceiving god – even the true God, but not yet clearly enough known to himself or to the others for whom he frames his hypothesis. Let us suppose that he does not misuse this fiction for the evil purpose of persuading others to believe something false of the Godhead, but uses it only to enlighten the intellect, and bring greater knowledge of God's nature to himself and to others. Such a person is in no way sinning in order that good may come. There is no malice at all in his action; he does something which is good in itself, and no one can rebuke him for it except slanderously.[28]

Many of Descartes' First-Meditation claims are false, but they manoeuvre us into position for thinking non-imagistically about thinking in the Second Meditation and then for thinking non-imagistically about God in the Third.[29] If we object (as does Gassendi) to this kind of (benevolent) dissimulation, Descartes insists that under the circumstances it is only appropriate. He says,

> A philosopher would be no more surprised at such suppositions of falsity than he would be if, in order to straighten out a curved stick, we bent it round in the opposite direction. The philosopher knows that it is often useful to assume falsehoods instead of truths in this way in order to shed light on the truth … .[30]

Descartes cannot bend his reader into shape by describing reality as it is, and so he must lie a little. He holds that when doing metaphysics, we ought to refrain from making judgements about what we do not clearly and distinctly understand. The alleged possibilities that God is a deceiver or that 'everything said about God is a fiction' (AT, 7, 21) are not things that we clearly and distinctly perceive. Along with anything else that we do not clearly and distinctly perceive, they do not belong in Descartes' ontology.

If (pre-*Meditations* or early in the *Meditations*) we think that God's omnipotence entails that God could do something other than what He has done, this is just because we have not meditated to proper conceptions of God's immutability and independence. A meditator who has only advanced so far as the beginning of the First Meditation might think a lot of things – that God could have created us with defective minds, that there are substantial forms, that bodies are perceived by the senses (AT, 7, 26). What this person believes has few implications for metaphysics. Only a person who has meditated sufficiently is in a position to notice that the power of an immutable being amounts to omnipotence.[31]

Interpretive problems arise almost inevitably when we read figures who make the sharp rationalist distinction between a common-sense conception of reality and a deeper conception of reality. If the figure's deeper conception of reality is far enough removed from a common-sense conception of reality, what we take to be an implication of that figure's metaphysics might only be an implication of it, given a premise that makes no sense in the larger system. That is, it might not be an implication of the system at all. Even if the philosopher actually entertains the premise, she is not necessarily committed to it, for she might just be pandering to her reader's common-sense conceptions to avoid coming off as absurd. For example, Malebranche admits that it is often necessary for a philosopher to embellish his view so that his reader does not experience too much cognitive dissonance when that view conflicts with the reader's common-sense commitments.[32] Plato employs this strategy as well.[33] Spinoza is also sensitive to the epistemic position of his reader, and he is clear that we must interpret his system with this in mind. In *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, he argues that words are not the best vehicle for arriving at an accurate picture of reality:

> … since words are part of the imagination, i.e. since we feign many concepts in accordance with the random composition of words in the memory from some disposition of the body, it is not to be doubted that words, as much as the imagination, can be the cause of many and great errors, unless we are very wary of them. Moreover, they are established according to the pleasure and power of understanding of ordinary people, so that they are only signs of things as they are in the imagination, but not as they are in the intellect. … The aim, then, is to have clear and distinct ideas, i.e. such as have been made from the pure mind, and not from fortuitous motions of the body.[34]

Since most of those who would be converted to Spinoza's philosophy have not-yet-emended intellects and conceive of reality in terms of a not-yet-emended language, the ideas that they have of metaphysical objects will not accurately represent those objects until they have done a lot of philosophy. For example, if Spinoza wants to present to his reader an argument concerning omnipotence, his reader will think that Spinoza is talking about omnipotence as according to common sense when Spinoza is talking about something else. This is just what occurs in Proposition 17 of Part 1 of *Ethics*. Immediately after arguing that a proper

conception of God's omnipotence yields that God has actualized all possibilities, Spinoza considers the inevitable objection that such a conception of divine omnipotence entails that God exhausts all of His power and so is absurd. Here Spinoza is considering the perspective of someone who assumes that a being is not really omnipotent unless there always remain some possibilities which it can actualize. Spinoza responds to the objection by arguing that it is generated by an intellect that is not fully emended. God has all the being there is to be had, so if a way of being is a possible way of being, God has it.[35] In Spinoza's terms this means that God has created or actualized all possibilities. For Spinoza, an omnipotent being can bring about all possibilities, and it does bring about all possibilities.[36]

We get the same result in Descartes. An obvious objection to Descartes is that if God was not determined to will as He in fact willed, He could have willed other than He does. But this objection is obvious only from outside Descartes' system. Descartes holds that God is immutable and independent and that His will is the same for eternity. From within his system, the objection has no force.

Philosophy and theology

If Descartes' considered view is that there is no way that God could have willed other than He in fact wills, some interpretive problems remain. One is that it is difficult to see how God's will is always the same if the effects of His will are so diverse. If God *ever* wills the existence of substances, He is willing their existence eternally, and so it might appear that they would exist eternally as well. Another problem is that it is difficult to see how God's activity is simple when He wills *everything*. A final problem is that it is difficult to see how Descartes' view of God squares with the orthodox Christianity that he at least seems to want to espouse. Descartes can dissolve these problems fairly easily.

To the first problem, Descartes can say that God's will is eternally the same but that it eternally wills all events to occur in a certain order. He holds that God wills that the saints obtain eternal life, but he does not hold that they have this life always. He presumably holds that God wills eternally for each and every saint that upon their death they obtain eternal life.[37]

The second problem might seem more pronounced if the sketch of the solution to the first problem is right. If God's will never changes and if He is eternally willing everything that happens, then it would appear that His will is not very simple. Malebranche resolves this problem by arguing that God acts by general volitions. If the structure of God's volitions had to make reference to each and every thing that God's will brings about, God's will would be more composite than is appropriate for a supreme being:

> God being obliged to act always in a manner worthy of Him, by means that are simple, general, constant, and uniform – in a word, means that are in conformity with the idea that we have of a general cause whose wisdom has no limits – He had

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> to establish certain laws in the order of grace, as I have proved that He did in the order of nature. And yet these laws, on account of their simplicity, necessarily have unhappy consequences with respect to us: but these consequences do not warrant that God change these laws into more *composite* ones [composées]. For His laws have a greater proportion of wisdom and fecundity to the work that they produce than all others which He could establish for the same design, since He always acts in the most wise and perfect manner. It is true that God could remedy these unhappy consequences by an infinite number of particular volitions: but His wisdom, which He loves more than His work, and the immutable and necessary order which is the rule of His volitions do not permit this.[38]

The volitions of Malebranche's God bring about all particulars yet are very general. They are similar to (though also *very different from*) the volitions of John Searle's expert skier. For Searle, an amateur skier needs to perform most of the movements involved in skiing by particular volitions, but when she becomes an expert, her body takes over and she can ski just by a general volition to ski.[39] Malebranche's God is similar to Searle's expert skier but much more powerful and advanced.[40] He is an expert at everything without ever having had to practise. Descartes holds that in the material world God acts by willing general laws of nature.[41] It is open to him to hold that God acts by willing so generally for the occurrence of any event.

A final problem for Descartes concerns how well his commitment to divine immutability squares with a more orthodox conception of Christianity. In *Principles*, 1.76 Descartes insists that:

> … whatever God has revealed to us must be accepted as more certain than anything else. And although the light of reason may, with the utmost clarity and evidence, appear to suggest something different, we must still put our entire faith in divine authority rather than in our own judgement. (AT, 8A, 39)

If proper faith requires that we believe that God can perform miracles or that He could have preordained that the ordinary course of events happen differently, then we must believe these. But it is important to note that Descartes does not say here that divine revelation trumps clear and distinct perception; he says that when our clear and distinct perceptions *appear* to conflict with what is divinely revealed, we should accept the latter.[42] Descartes holds that, in fact, divine revelation and clear and distinct perception never conflict. He says, 'As far as theology is concerned, since one truth can never be in conflict with another, it would be impious to fear that any truths discovered in philosophy could be in conflict with the truths of faith'.[43] Since true theology and clear and distinct perception do not conflict, it must be the case that, according to true theology, God's will is immutable. If we think that we have encountered a bit of divine revelation that tells us that God's will is not immutable, Descartes has two responses. One is that the doctrine in question might not be divinely revealed. He warns, 'Even with respect to the truths of faith, we should perceive some reason which convinces us that they have been revealed by God, before deciding to believe them.'[44] If we consider our situation more carefully, we might determine that the reasons we have for thinking that the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412502006261 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doctrine is divinely revealed are not as strong as we thought. Descartes' second response is to leave the reconciliation of philosophy and theology to someone else. When Mersenne worries about how a good God can damn people for eternity, Descartes responds, 'that is a theological question: so if you please you will allow me to say nothing about it'.[45] Sometimes Descartes refuses to enter into theological debates. Sometimes he attempts to show how philosophy is consistent with Christian theology.[46] However, Descartes does not do this to *prove* that theology and philosophy are consistent. He already knows this, and so he is not worried about the implications of any parts of his philosophy for theology. He is working on the philosophical side of enquiry, and he holds that whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive is true.[47]

Conclusion

A common-sense conception of God might entail that God is omnipotent, that He can intervene in the ordinary course of events, and that He could have done other what He has in fact done. Descartes holds that, when we meditate properly, we clearly and distinctly perceive that God is immutable, that God's will is the same for all eternity, and that nothing determines His creative activity. We also notice that He is omnipotent, but our thought of what this amounts to is much different the second time around. God's will is immutable, and so He cannot change it, and since He is supremely independent nothing else can change it either.

Descartes resists some of the Spinozistic implications of his metaphysics. He holds that, strictly speaking, a substance is a thing that is ontologically independent, but he insists that there is a sense in which creatures are substances as well. He holds that God is infinitely real but that He does not take up all ontological space. He also holds that there is no way that things could have been but are not. Descartes does not resist this Spinozistic conclusion. Here the seeds of Spinoza (and Descartes) are allowed to grow.[48]

Notes

1. I use AT to refer to the pagination in Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds) *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols (Paris: Vrin, 1996). Unless otherwise indicated, I use the translations in John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (eds) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); *idem* (eds) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (eds) *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). The objection from Mersenne is that 'the infinite in every category of perfection excludes everything else whatsoever – every kind of being and goodness, as well as every kind of non-being and evil' (Second Objections, AT, 7, 125). Descartes' response is at Second Replies, AT, 7, 141.
2. See for example Harry Frankfurt 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', *The Philosophical Review*, **86** (1977), 36–57; Edwin Curley 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', *The Philosophical Review*, **93** (1984), 569–597; Steven Nadler 'Scientific certainty and the creation of the

eternal truths: a problem in Descartes', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, **25** (1987), 175–192; and James M. Petrik 'Descartes on divine indifference and the transworld validity of the eternal truths', *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, **36** (1998), esp. 418–421. I consider these views below.

3. *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 33. Here and in the following I use the translations in Edwin Curley *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1 (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
4. See Alan Nelson and David Cunning 'Cognition and modality in Descartes', *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, **64** (1999), 137–153; and Alan Nelson 'Cartesian actualism in the Leibniz-Arnauld correspondence', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **23** (1993), 675–694.
5. *Principles*, 2.36; AT, 8A, 61. See also AT, 8A, 26 and AT, 1, 145–146 (To Mersenne, 15 April 1630).
6. *Principles*, 1.23; AT, 8A, 14.
7. See for example AT, 7, 45, and AT, 8A, 24.
8. Spinoza closes the gap between determinism and necessetarianism by the same reasoning. (See *Ethics*, part 1, propositions 17 and 33.) He holds that each and every finite mode is a necessary consequence of the finite mode that causes it. He also holds that God has the modes that He has – that He is as He is – and that He is wholly independent. Nothing could have given Him alternative modes, and so whatever occurs as a necessary consequence of one of His modes is necessary absolutely. Here I am taking issue with Jonathan Bennett's view that Spinoza is entitled at most to determinism and not to necessetarianism. According to Bennett, Spinoza shows at best that every event that occurs is a necessary consequence of its finite cause but not that the causal chain of which it is a part is necessary. See Jonathan Bennett *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1984), 123–124.
9. Sixth Replies, AT, 7, 431–432.
10. See for example AT, 7, 69 (The Fifth Meditation) and AT, 4, 115–116 (To [Mesland], 2 May 1644).
11. See also the Fourth Meditation, AT, 7, 57–58. Tad Schmaltz argues that Descartes' analogy between the infinite will and a finite will is empty. (See Tad Schmaltz 'The disappearance of analogy in Descartes, Spinoza, and Regis', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, **30** (2000), esp. 88–96.) Here I am arguing that the crucial similarity that the analogy retains is that in both divine indifference and human indifference, the will is not determined. Descartes' main reason for employing the analogy is to make the crucial point that the divine will is not determined, so it is not so important that the analogy fails in other respects.
12. Sixth Replies, AT, 7, 432.
13. See also Jonathan Bennett 'Descartes's theory of modality', *The Philosophical Review*, **103** (1994), 641–643; Nelson and Cunning 'Cognition and modality in Descartes', 144–145; and Dan Kaufman 'Descartes's creation doctrine and modality', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, **80** (2002), 37–39.
14. To Mersenne, 15 April 1630, AT, 1, 145–146.
15. See Nelson and Cunning 'Cognition and modality in Descartes', 144–148.
16. See for example Frankfurt 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', 42–43; Curley 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', 581–583; and Nadler 'Scientific certainty and the creation of the eternal truths', 186–187.
17. To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630, AT, 1, 152.
18. AT, 4, 118–119. This is one of Curley's central texts; see Curley 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', 582.
19. For Arnauld, 29 July 1648, AT, 5, 224.
20. To [Mesland], 2 May 1644, AT, 4, 118.
21. Calvin Normore notes that the most that Descartes is committed to in this passage is the view that it is possible for God either to create the eternal truths He in fact created, or to not create them. (See Calvin Normore 'Descartes's possibilities', in Georges J. D. Moyal (ed.) *René Descartes: Critical Assessments*, vol. 3 (London and New York NY: Routledge, 1991), 79–80. Here I am arguing that only one of these is really possible in Descartes' system.
22. See Nelson and Cunning 'Cognition and modality in Descartes', 145, and Kaufman 'Descartes's creation doctrine and modality', 38.
23. See Nelson and Cunning 'Cognition and modality in Descartes', 144–148, and Bennett 'Descartes's theory of modality', 653–656.
24. The same analysis might apply to Descartes' claim in the 27 May 1630 letter to Mersenne that 'it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things' (AT, 1, 152). Here Descartes might just be taking some liberties in an attempt to communicate to a

reluctant Mersenne just how great and independent God is. However, it might also be that Descartes is hinting at his actualism, though very carefully. All that he *says* is that the eternal truths are no more attached to God's essence than are other created things. He does not actually say that creatures are not attached to God's will.

25. Frankfurt interprets Descartes' understanding of divine omnipotence so that it squares with his First-Meditation comments about God's power to have created us with defective minds. (See Frankfurt 'Descartes on the creation of the eternal truths', 51–53; also Nadler 'Scientific certainty and the creation of the eternal truths', 178; and Emile Brehier 'The creation of the eternal truths in Descartes's system', in Willis Doney (ed.) *Descartes: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 199–201.) Here I am arguing that the First-Meditation claims are (by Descartes' own admission) confused and that interpretations of Descartes' views should not be sensitive to them.
26. Fourth Replies, AT, 7, 249. See also Edwin Curley 'Analysis in the *Meditations*: the quest for clear and distinct ideas', in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.) *Essays on Descartes' Meditations* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1986), 153–176; Daniel Garber 'Semel in vita: the scientific background to Descartes' *Meditations*', in Rorty *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, 81–97; and John Cottingham *The Rationalists* (Oxford and New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 43–46.
27. *Principles*, 1.73; AT, 8A, 37.
28. To Buitendijck, 1643; AT, 4, 64.
29. Stephen Menn argues that Descartes' First-Meditation sceptical arguments are intended to help the meditator to ascend from thought about sensible objects to thought about abstract objects. I agree with Menn; I am arguing further that Descartes' First-Meditation possibilities not only do not obtain but that they are not possibilities to begin with. See Stephen Menn *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 245–247, 262–268.
30. Fifth Replies, AT, 7, 349–350. Gassendi's objection is at AT, 7, 258.
31. Descartes' claim to Mersenne that 'It would be rash to think that our imagination reaches as far as his power' might seem to suggest that it is beyond the scope of a finite intellect to understand how the power of an immutable being amounts to omnipotence. Here I am suggesting that Descartes' view is that, though it is beyond the scope of a finite imagination to grasp this, it is not beyond the power of a finite intellect – one that has meditated sufficiently and has adjusted its concept of God to square with the other things that philosophy tells us about God.
32. Nicholas Malebranche *Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, (transl. Thomas M. Lennon) in Lennon and Paul J. Oscamp (eds) *The Search After Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 672–674.
33. Remarking on the prospect of pulling a prisoner from the cave, Plato says, 'what do you suppose would be his answer if someone told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw truly? And also if one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him? … Then there would be need of habituation, to enable him to see things higher up'; (*Republic*, Book 7, H. N. Fowler (transl. and ed.); *Plato*, vol. 7 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1921)). To get a person out of the cave, special tactics are in order. If Plato talks about abstract objects, a prisoner too well-practised at using ideas of sensible objects to conceive of reality will hear something other than what Plato is trying to say. If Plato makes claims that conflict too much with the prisoner's existing commitments, the prisoner will reject these claims as absurd. If he is to teach his metaphysics, Plato cannot present it unembellished. If he is going to say anything, at first he is going to have to lie.
34. Spinoza *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, sections 88–91.
35. Spinoza Proposition 13 of part 1 *Ethics*.
36. R. J. Delahuntey argues that Spinoza commits a 'howler' in defending his account of divine omnipotence, but in fact Spinoza only makes the error if we attribute to him assumptions that make no sense within his system. See R. J. Delahuntey *Spinoza* (Boston MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 140–143. Delahuntey points out that Spinoza defends his conception of divine omnipotence by appealing to the view that divine omnipotence entails that God can bring about all possibilities. Delahuntey says that Spinoza's first statement of this entailment yields that for each possibility God

can bring it about. Delahuntey then argues that Spinoza slips and concludes from this that God can bring about all possibilities together. But to make this inference is to commit a modal fallacy, Delahuntey notes. Although an omnipotent being can bring about all possibilities, that does not mean that He can bring all of them about together. He can bring about the possibility that it is raining at *t*, and He can also bring about the possibility that it is not raining at *t*. However, He cannot bring it about that it is raining and not raining at *t*. Spinoza's view that God can bring about all possibilities is thus wrong-headed. Here Delahuntey is attributing to a figure a view that makes no sense in the figure's system. Delahuntey alleges that Spinoza commits a modal fallacy in moving from (1) for each possibility God can bring it about, to (2) God can bring about all possibilities together. But Spinoza nowhere holds (1) in the way that Delahuntey conceives it. Spinoza holds that God has all possible being. This means that, if it is raining right now, strictly speaking it is not possible that it is not raining right now. This means that Delahuntey's objection to the Spinozistic view that God brings about all possibilities is misguided. *We* might hold that it is possible that it is not raining right now, but Spinoza's system has an account of this as well – we hold something to be possible as a function of our limited epistemic access to reality (scholium 1 to proposition 33 of Part 1 of *Ethics*). Since, strictly speaking, it is not possible that it is not raining right now (if it is not raining right now), an objection that presumes that possibility is without force. This objection does not get off the ground in Spinoza's system, as Spinoza in fact holds that God can bring about all possibilities together. The problem here is that we cannot decide in advance of appreciating Spinoza's metaphysics what are and what are not possibilities. Of course, this does not mean that Spinoza holds that 'it is raining right now' is an actual possibility either, as the idea of its raining right now is very confused and based on the confused perceptions of the imagination. Still, whatever is the case right now is possible, and so actual.

37. Steven Nadler offers this sort of account to explain how Malebranche's God wills atemporally. Malebranche's God does not will each thing as it occurs; rather, He wills eternally that, for example, at t_1 a certain event will occur. His will is like this for all things that occur at their various times. (See Stephen Nadler 'Occasionalism and general will in Malebranche', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, **31** (1993), 41–46.) This view of Descartes handles Descartes' otherwise puzzling claim that 'eternal truths … have no existence outside our thought' (*Principles*, 1.48, AT, 8A, 22). If Descartes holds that 'from all eternity [God] willed and understood them to be' (To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630, AT, 1, 152) and that they have no existence outside of human minds, then it might appear that Descartes holds that human minds are co-eternal with God. (See for example Vere Chappell 'Descartes's ontology', *Topoi*, **16** (1997), 123–127.) But Descartes is not committed to this view. First, he distances himself from the identification of eternal truths as eternal in any robust sense – he speaks to Mersenne of 'The mathematical truths which you call eternal' (To Mersenne, 15 April 1630, AT, 1, 145) and which 'are called eternal' (To Mersenne, 27 May 1638, AT, 2, 138). He then says to Gassendi that eternal truths are eternal in the sense that 'they are always the same' (Fifth Replies, AT, 7, 381). There is thus some equivocation in Descartes' claim that God wills the *eternal* truths from *eternity*. As with any creature, God wills the eternal truths from eternity, yet like anything else He creates they are not co-eternal with God. They are unchanging, and they are co-temporal with the minds that contain them.
38. Nicholas Malebranche *Traité de la Nature et de la Grace*, in Andre Robinet (ed.) *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 5 (Paris: Vrin, 1958–1967), 49–50, emphases added, my translation. See also *Elucidations*, 6, 568–569; *Dialogues*, 12.3, 196–197; *Dialogues*, 12.11, 230; and *TNG*, OC 5, 147. The pagination for *Dialogues* is that in Nicholas Jolley and David Scott (eds) *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
39. John Searle *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 150–151.
40. See David Cunning 'Systematic divergences in Malebranche and Cudworth', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming).
41. See for example *Principles*, 2.36.
42. It is a good thing that Descartes so qualifies his view, for it is difficult to see how we could reject actual clear and distinct perceptions when Descartes holds that they unfailingly compel the will of the mind that has them. See, for example, the Fifth Meditation, AT, 7, 69–70, and Letter to [Mesland], 2 May 1644, AT, 4, 115–116. See also Anthony Kenny 'Descartes on the will', in John Cottingham (ed.) *Descartes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 146–150.
43. Letter To Father Dinet, AT, 7, 581.
44. Appendix to Fifth Replies, AT, 9A, 208.

45. To [Mersenne], 27 May 1630; AT, 1, 153.
46. See for example Descartes' Fourth Replies attempt to show that his mechanism squares with the doctrine of transubstantiation. This is at AT, 7, 248–256.
47. Descartes' view recalls the similar view that Galileo puts forward in his brilliant 'Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina'; (See Galileo Galilei 'Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina', in Stillman Drake (ed.) *Discoveries and Opinions of Galileo* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1957), esp. 183–186.) Galileo argues that 'it being true that two truths cannot contradict one another, it is the function of the wise expositors to seek out the true senses of scriptural texts. These will unquestionably accord with the physical conclusions which manifest sense and necessary demonstrations have previously made certain to us' (186). Galileo holds that we know that the results of science are true because we arrive at them by means of our God-given faculties (our senses in conjunction with reason), and Descartes argues that we know that the results of philosophy are true because we arrive at them by means of our God-given intellects.
48. I am grateful to an anonymous referee of this journal for extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to Alan Nelson and Nicholas Jolley for a number of very fruitful discussions on the issues considered herein.