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DESCARTES ON THE CREATION OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS

HARRY FRANKFURT

In a letter to Mersenne dated 15 April 1630, Descartes remarks that if it had not been for his metaphysical investigations—that is, his endeavors to know God and himself—he would never have discovered the foundations of physics. Without elaborating on this provocative statement concerning the connection between his philosophical and his scientific ideas, he goes on to say that he intends to defer publishing his metaphysics until he has completed a treatise on physics which he is currently writing, and has had an opportunity to observe how it is received. ¹ Descartes tells Mersenne, however, that this treatise itself will include a certain amount of metaphysics:

In my treatise on physics I shall discuss a number of metaphysical topics and especially the following. The mathematical truths which you call eternal have been laid down by God and depend on Him entirely no less than the rest of His creatures. Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of Him as if He were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject Him to the Styx and the Fates. Please do not hesitate to assert and proclaim everywhere that it is God who has laid down these laws in nature just as a king lays down laws in his kingdom. There is no single one that we cannot understand if our mind turns to consider it. They are all inborn in our minds, just as a king would imprint his laws on the hearts of all his subjects if he had enough power to do so. The greatness of God, on the other hand, is something which we cannot comprehend even though we know it. But the very fact that we judge it incomprehensible makes us esteem it the more greatly; just as a king has more majesty when he is less familiarly known by his subjects, provided of course that they do not get the idea that they have no king—they must know him enough to be in no doubt about that. (K 11)

This is the earliest account we have of Descartes's remarkable doc-

¹ It is uncertain what treatise this is, but perhaps Descartes is referring to the Dioptrique. Cf. his letter to Mersenne dated 25 November 1630, in Anthony Kenny, Descartes: Philosophical Letters (Oxford, 1970), pp. 18-19. Hereafter I shall refer to this book as "K".
trine that the eternal truths are created by God.

Despite his eagerness in 1630 to have Mersenne broadcast the doctrine freely, Descartes never included it in any of his scientific works; nor did he present it recognisably as an explicit part of the argument of any of his philosophical books. He wrote about it only in various letters, and in his Replies to the Fifth and Sixth Objections against his Meditations. In none of those places did he explain its role in his philosophy, or the special pertinence he evidently believed it to have to his physics.

The doctrine presents a variety of difficulties, some of which it may well be impossible to resolve. It is problematic just what the doctrine is, what Descartes thought it implies, what motivated him to adopt it, how he would have met the rather plausible charge that it is incoherent, what his main arguments for it are, where those arguments and the doctrine itself fit into the general scheme of his reasoning, why he did not discuss the doctrine in his systematic accounts of his philosophy and his science, whether it actually does make a veiled appearance in some of those accounts, how it bears upon his attempt to validate reason, what its relation is to his physics, and so on. There is very little agreement concerning these matters among commentators on Descartes’s work.

Most commentators do agree, however, that the doctrine is extremely important. For instance, it is characterised by Alquié as “the foundation of Descartes’s metaphysics,” and by Gilson as “one of the most fecund among Descartes’s metaphysical conceptions.” On the other hand, Koyré believes that it is destructive of Descartes’s whole intellectual enterprise—consistent “neither with his physics, nor with his psychology, nor with his metaphysics, nor with his theory of knowledge.” In Koyré’s judgment, the only way to make sense of Descartes’s thought is to suppose that his adherence to the doctrine was a temporary aberration, which he subsequently overcame.

There is no good evidence to support Koyré’s claim that Descartes substantially changed his mind about the creation of the external truths. On the contrary, I think it is clear that he continued to

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4 Koyré argues that the 1630 doctrine was “bien vite remplacée par une concept beaucoup plus hésitante et incertaine,” citing in support a letter from Descartes to Mesland. He also cites two other letters, to Henry More (K 237-245) and to Clerelier.
maintain more or less his original view of the matter, as he described it to Mersenne in 1630, throughout the remainder of his life. I shall attempt to establish and to clarify the main elements of that view, and to consider some (but by no means all) of the problems of interpretation I have enumerated.

II

What Descartes calls "eternal truths" are truths about essences. The Pythagorean theorem, for example, is (or purports to be) an eternal truth about what is essential to right triangularity. Now to lay down the Pythagorean theorem is to make the essence "right triangularity" what it is, at least to the extent that this essence is defined by that theorem; in other words, it is to create a fact concerning what is essential to right triangles. Asserting that the eternal truths are laid down by God is tantamount, then, to saying that God is the creator of essences. And this is precisely Descartes's view: God is "no less the author of creatures' essence than He is of their existence," he observes, "and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths" (to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, K 14).

In his initial formulation of his doctrine, the only eternal truths to which Descartes explicitly refers are mathematical propositions. The doctrine is not, however, limited to these. Descartes's examples indicate that there are physical, metaphysical, and moral essences within its scope, as well as mathematical ones. Indeed, so far as I can see Descartes intends no essence of any kind to be outside the scope of his doctrine. But whether the intended application of the doctrine is in fact entirely unlimited is a controversial question, to which I shall return.

(K 252-255), to show that Descartes ultimately abandoned the doctrine more or less completely. Now the letter to Mesland (K 146-152) is dated 2 May 1644. Not so vite, after all; and besides, this letter fails to support in any way Koyré's claim that Descartes had modified his views by the time he wrote it. The other two letters were written in 1649. The one to Clerselier has no evident bearing on the matter, while the one to More quite plainly confirms the view Koyré says it refutes. Koyré's argument is so unconvincing that it appears to be motivated less by a desire to follow the evidence than by desperation, engendered by his conviction that the 1630 doctrine makes both Descartes's philosophy and his science impossible.

8 The point of my parenthetical qualification will become apparent in due course.
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III

Descartes suggests that accepting his doctrine is the only way to avoid the conclusion that the eternal truths would be true even if God did not exist, a conclusion which plainly conflicts with the supposition of divine omnipotence.6 But Aquinas and other scholastics neither share Descartes's belief that God creates essences; nor do they suppose that the eternal truths would be true if God did not exist, or that these truths are independent of God in anything like the way intimated by Descartes's analogy to the relation between Jupiter or Saturn and the Styx or the Fates.

Scholastic philosophers such as Suarez and Aquinas sometimes make use, in this connection, of a distinction between two types of essence—real and possible. A real essence is the essence of an existing individual; it is created by the creation of that individual, and it ceases to exist when that individual ceases to exist. A possible essence is just a possibility, which does not, strictly speaking, exist at all. It has only “objective existence,” which consists simply in its being an object of awareness—that is, of God's awareness that He might create an individual of the kind in question. Given this metaphysics, the eternal truths are truths about possible essences.

Now possible essences are not, according to scholasticism, creatures of God. Rather, they comprise the divine essence itself. One consequence of this assignment of possible essences to God's essence is that the necessity of the eternal truths can be derived directly from the necessity that God be what He is. Another consequence is that God's knowledge of possible essences is self-knowledge, which makes Him the exemplar of all His creatures. It is to Himself that He looks, in other words, for a guide in creating.

This theory clearly implies that there would be no eternal truths if God did not exist. Without maintaining that essences or eternal truths are created by God, then, scholasticism can readily construe them as dependent upon Him in the sense of being incapable of existing without Him. If possible essences comprise God's own essence, then, certainly, the eternal truths do not constitute—as the

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6 In his letter of 15 April 1630, from which I have already quoted the pertinent passage, Descartes presents his claim that the eternal truths “have been laid down by God” as though the only alternative to it is the view that “these truths are independent of God.” In his letter to Mersenne dated 6 May 1630 (K 14) Descartes warns that “we must not say that if God did not exist nonetheless these truths would be true,” as though rejecting his doctrine would commit one to saying that.

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Styx and the Fates do with respect to Jupiter and Saturn—an external limitation to God’s power.

Descartes appears to take it for granted that there are only two ways in which God might be related to possible essences and eternal truths. Either God creates them, in which case they depend upon Him no less than do created things generally; or He is dependent upon them, in which case He is, like the gods of the classical pantheon, limited by something other than Himself. But Descartes is surely aware that scholastic philosophy contemplates a third possibility, in which possible essences are neither creatures of God nor realities other than Him which limit His omnipotence. Descartes’s contention that his doctrine alone avoids ascribing an unacceptable independence to the eternal truths may well seem to be, then, a bit disingenuous.

What explains his attitude, I believe, is that he regards the scholastic alternative as simply untenable. Scholasticism envisages a distinction between God’s knowing and His creating, or between the divine understanding and the divine will. It supposes that real essences, like all created things, depend upon a contingent act of God’s will—that is, they exist only because He is their ultimate efficient cause. But it regards possible essences as objects only of God’s understanding—that is, as depending just upon His awareness of possibilities. Since He does not create them, they are in no way dependent upon His will. Now Descartes categorically refuses to admit any distinction whatever between God’s understanding and His will. “In God,” he insists, “willing and knowing are a single thing, in such a way that by the very fact of willing something He knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true” (to Mersenne, 6 May 1630, K 13-14).

Given that the divine understanding and the divine will are identical, God cannot merely contemplate anything, not even His own essence. His will cannot be guided by any antecedent knowledge of possible essences or eternal truths, which He does not create and upon which His creation is modelled. “For there is,” Descartes explains, no idea representing the good or the true—what must be believed, or what must be done or left undone—which we can suppose to have been an object of divine understanding before its nature had been constituted by the determination of God’s will. I am not speaking here merely of temporal priority; I am saying that it was impossible for any idea of this sort to have preceded the determination of God’s will even by priority of order or of
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nature or of reasoned reflection, as they say in the Schools, in such a way that it would have moved God to choose one thing rather than another.7

The scholastic alternative to Descartes's doctrine understands possible essences to be dependent upon God's understanding but independent of His will. If God's understanding and His will are identical, no such alternative is available. This means that it cannot be correct to construe God's essence as providing the exemplar for creation, because doing so relies upon the incoherent assumption that God's knowing is prior to His willing. It also means that possible essences must be either creatures of God, as Descartes maintains, or independent of Him altogether. In my opinion, this is what accounts for Descartes's refusal to acknowledge that scholasticism can offer a viable alternative to his own doctrine.

IV

Identifying the divine understanding and the divine will leads Descartes to the view that God's freedom consists in absolute indifference. Since there are no truths prior to God's creation of them, His creative will cannot be determined or even moved by any considerations of value or of rationality whatever. "It is inadmissible," Descartes declares, "that God's will has not been indifferent from all eternity to everything that has been or ever will be done."8 The divine will is, in other words, entirely arbitrary. There are no prior conditions of right or reason to which it must conform; indeed, there are none to which it might choose to conform. Here is how Descartes describes the situation:

It is not for having seen that it was better that the world be created in time rather than from eternity, that He willed to create it in time; and He did not

7 Sixth Replies, HR II, p. 248; AT IX, p. 233. Descartes does not explain just why it is a mistake to distinguish God's understanding and His will. The following general line of argument would have been available to him, however, given his views on the relevant subjects: in humans, the understanding is a passive faculty; but since it is inadmissible to ascribe any passivity to God, the divine understanding must be construed as active; and this means supposing that, like the divine will, it necessarily has an effect upon its object. It is plausible to conjecture that Descartes came to this theory through his association, just prior to his move from Paris to Holland, with the Oratory of Cardinal Béroulle. The central feature of Béroulle's theology was its particular emphasis upon the unity and simplicity of God's nature.

8 Ibid.
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will that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles because He knew that it could not be otherwise, etc. On the contrary, it is because He willed to create the world in time that its having been created in time is better than if it had been created from eternity; and it is because He willed that the three angles of a triangle equal two right angles that it is now true that this is so and that it cannot be otherwise; and similarly for everything else.⁹

If God is to be compared to a king who lays down laws for his kingdom, He might be compared to a king who is utterly capricious and quite mad. These characterisations are not entirely apt since they suggest an indifference to or a flouting of the canons of rationality, which cannot be ascribed to God’s determination of those canons. In any event, on Descartes’s account God has no reasons whatsoever for His decrees and His choices are in no way submissive to any moral or rational constraints at all.

On Descartes’s account of God’s power and freedom, the eternal truths are no more ultimately necessary than truths concerning real essences are according to scholasticism. All essences, both real and possible, are equally creatures of God’s indifferent will. There is no more reason for any essence to be than for it not to be, and no more reason for any to be what it is than to be otherwise. The eternal truths do not enjoy, as the scholastics maintain, an absolute necessity which derives from being rooted in the necessity of God Himself; for they are, in Descartes’s view, “no more necessarily attached to His essence than other creatures are” (to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, K 15.)

God has established them merely “by the same kind of causality as He created all things, that is to say, as their efficient and total cause” (Ibid., K 14). In short, the eternal truths are inherently as contingent as any other propositions.

This means that God was free in creating the world to do anything, whether or not its description is logically coherent. “Just as [God] was free not to create the world,” Descartes explains, “so He was no less free to make it untrue that all the lines drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are equal” (Ibid., K 15). Descartes evidently thinks that God could have omitted creating the essence “circularity” entirely. In that case there would be no eternal truths about circles: every proposition about a circle would have the status now enjoyed by the proposition that the diameter of the circle on a certain blackboard is one foot. Descartes also evidently thinks that God, while creating the essence “circularity”, could have made it

⁹ Ibid.
different from what we conceive it to be. In that case there would be eternal truths about circles, but they would differ from—and perhaps be the negations of—the propositions that are necessarily true of circularity as we now understand it.

V

There is a rather obvious difficulty in the very attempt to formulate this doctrine. What can it mean, after all, to assert that God could have made it false that the radii of a circle are equal? This assertion seems to entail that it is logically possible that the radii of a circle be unequal. But logical possibility consists in the absence of contradiction, and Descartes knows as well as anyone that a contradiction results from negating the proposition that all the radii of a circle are equal. In any event, he commits himself quite openly to the claim that God could have made contradictory propositions true: “God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore . . . He could have done the opposite” (to Mesland, 2 May 1644, K 151).

What is troublesome in this claim that God could have made contradictions true is, of course, understanding the “could.” The assertion that some state of affairs can be brought about ordinarily entails that that state of affairs is logically possible. Descartes’s statement that God could have made contradictions true seems to entail, accordingly, the logical possibility of the logically impossible. This appears to make very little sense, which is why Geach (among others) characterizes Descartes’s doctrine concerning the creation of the eternal truths as “incoherent.”

Descartes is aware that his doctrine involves a difficulty of this sort. Instead of being disturbed by it, however, he transforms the difficulty into a thesis—the superficially plausible, or at least unsurprising, thesis that God, being infinite, is unintelligible to a finite mind. “It is . . . useless to ask how God could have . . . made two times four not equal eight, etc.,” he writes, “for I freely admit that we cannot understand this.” We should not expect to comprehend God’s infinite power, Descartes contends, and it would therefore be misguided to try to make sense of the dependence upon the divine

11 Sixth Replies, HR II, p. 251; AT IX, p. 236.
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will of essences and eternal truths. In other words, it is a mistake to seek a logically coherent explication of the assertion that God could have made self-contradictory propositions true.

The viability of this position, within the context of Descartes's philosophy, depends upon the value of the distinction he draws between knowing that an infinitely powerful God exists and understanding Him. "It is possible," Descartes maintains, "to know that God is infinite and all-powerful although our soul, being finite, cannot comprehend or conceive Him" (to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, K 15). Now a person's assertion that there is something he cannot understand is often entirely comprehensible, and there may be quite good evidence that it is true. In the present instance, however, the assertion is peculiar and problematical. That there is a deity with infinite power is supposed by Descartes to entail the possibility of what is logically impossible. But if it must entail this, then the assertion that God has infinite (and hence unintelligible) power seems itself unintelligible. For it appears that no coherent meaning can be assigned to the notion of an infinitely powerful being as Descartes employs it—that is, to the notion of a being for whom the logically impossible is possible. And if this is so, then it is no more possible for us to know or to believe that God has infinite power than it is, according to Descartes, for us to understand that power. If we cannot understand "infinite power," we also cannot understand, and hence cannot believe or know, the proposition that God's power is infinite.

VI

Descartes has a reply to objections of this type. Its details are somewhat uncertain, however, and I shall attempt only to sketch it rather broadly.

Descartes regards the scope of human understanding as strictly limited within boundaries defined by the set of logically necessary propositions. The negations of these propositions—that is, self-contradictions—are unintelligible to us; we cannot conceive their truth. But this inability to conceive the truth of a contradiction is, Descartes suggests, merely a contingent characteristic of our minds. It is by an indifferent act of God's will that "He has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive ... an aggregate of one and two which is not three" (to Arnauld, 29 July 1648, K 236). That our minds cannot
conceive such things signifies nothing beyond itself, however, except that God has freely chosen to create us like that.

God might just as well have given us minds of a different sort. If He had done so, some of the propositions we now find inconceivable would have been conceivable by us; and some of the propositions we are now able to conceive would have been inconceivable. From our recognition that we are unable to conceive some state of affairs because its description is self-contradictory, accordingly, we are not entitled to conclude that it was impossible for God to have brought about that state of affairs.

The propositions we find to be necessary—like the Pythagorean theorem—need not be truths at all. The inconceivability of their falsity, which we demonstrate by the use of innate principles of reason, is not inherent in them. It is properly to be understood only as relative to the character of our minds. We cannot escape this character, of course, but we can realize that God might have made it different from what it is. Since God is not constrained by the boundaries within which He has enclosed our minds, the theoretical limits of human reason must be recognised as limitations by which we are bound, rather than as guides to the actual limits of possibility. They are imposed upon us arbitrarily by God’s free creation. So we cannot presume that what we determine to be logically necessary coincides with the ultimate conditions of reality or of truth. The necessities human reason discovers by analysis and demonstration are just necessities of its own contingent nature. In coming to know them, it does not necessarily discover the nature of the world as it is in itself, or as it appears to God.

This line of thought, which contributes to the explication of Descartes’s claim that God’s power is beyond our comprehension, requires that we be able to conceive ourselves having been created with minds different from the ones we have. That is, it requires that we be able to conceive ourselves finding certain propositions conceivable—namely, self-contradictions—which we presently find inconceivable. The question of whether Descartes’s position concerning divine omnipotence is coherent thus comes down to whether this requirement can be satisfied or whether it too is unintelligible. Descartes does not discuss the matter directly. However, he does hold certain opinions which bear upon it and which may enable him to explain how it is possible to conceive that the inconceivable might be conceivable.

There is, first of all, his claim that clear and distinct perception
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determines the will. When a person perceives something clearly and distinctly, Descartes maintains, he cannot help assenting to it: "our mind is of such a nature," he says, "that it cannot refuse to assent to what it apprehends clearly" (to Regius, 24 May 1640, K 78). Second, there is his general conviction that our knowledge of principles, including the principles of logic, derives ultimately from knowledge of their instances. These two opinions provide materials from which it might be possible to construct a theory according to which what is conceivable or inconceivable, what we identify as necessary or as impossible, depends in the end upon the occurrence of certain experiences—our experiences of an inability to refuse assent.

Given such a theory, the possibility that contradictions might be true, or that we can conceive ourselves judging that a proposition is true even while we recognize that the proposition is self-contradictory, could be supplied with a meaningful explication. The explication would refer to the possibility that the experiences from which our conceptions and ascriptions of necessity and impossibility derive might occur under circumstances other than those under which they now occur. When we now attentively consider the proposition that one and two make three, having first discriminated and analysed its terms, we cannot help assenting to it; and that is ultimately why we regard the proposition as necessary. But this experience of a compulsion to assent might not occur under these conditions; and it might instead occur when we consider, in the same way, the negation of the proposition that one and two make three. In that case we would, on Descartes's account, construe the proposition that one and two make three as inconceivable; and the general logical and mathematical principles we adopted would reflect that experience. It is along these lines, I suggest, that a coherent substance can be provided for Descartes's assertion that our inability to understand God's infinite power is due just to a contingent characteristic of our minds, namely the fact that we have the experience of necessity under certain conditions rather than under others.12

12 Neither I nor (to my knowledge) others have explored Descartes's views concerning the foundations of logic thoroughly enough to make it clear whether or not a saving construction of this kind can in fact be accomplished with the materials he makes available. It is worth noticing, incidentally, the apparent similarity between Descartes's views on this subject and those of Wittgenstein. Both seem to locate the ultimate ground of our logical and mathematical knowledge in some sort of experience of necessity. Anthony Kenny has pointed out to me in conversation that, as a consequence of this, Descartes and Wittgenstein (alone among philosophers) make
I want now to consider the important contention that Descartes substantially qualifies his claim that God's freedom is unconstrained by the principle of contradiction. Some commentators argue that Descartes recognizes a class of necessary truths that are not created at all, and that he acknowledges that God could not have made the negations of those propositions true. This is an extremely fundamental point in the interpretation of Descartes's theory of knowledge. If it is correct that his doctrine concerning the creation of eternal truths is less than universal in its scope, then Descartes does not commit himself to the view that God's power is entirely unintelligible to us. Instead he believes that divine omnipotence has certain limits, which coincide with an identifiable proper subset of the set of contradictory propositions. And he thinks that human reason is therefore capable of determining autonomously the inherent nature of at least some aspects of reality — namely, those with regard to which the range of God's power is coextensive with the range of what we understand as logical possibilities. If this interpretation of Descartes's doctrine is not correct — and in my judgment it is not — then that doctrine commits him to certain quite radical views, which I shall identify in due course.

Gueroult is among those who maintain that there are contradictions which Descartes's God cannot transcend. In particular, Gueroult asserts that in Descartes's opinion God can do nothing which would negate His own omnipotence:

God's omnipotence, which by definition implies that nothing is impossible for Him, establishes by the same token a superior order of impossibility — to wit, whatever could be only by the negation of this omnipotence itself. There are then, in spite of everything, impossibilities for God: they are those things that would limit His omnipotence or His being (being and power being the same). In short, God excludes non-being. It follows from this that whatever involves non-being is an absolute impossibility. Thus it is absolutely impossible that God should not exist, that He should be a deceiver, that He might bring it about that what is or was should not be . . . , that He might be unable to do what we conceive to be possible, that He might tolerate atoms, that He might create a vacuum . . . His infinite omnipotence thus creates for God a whole class of absolute impossibilities.  

an emphatic distinction between our grounds for accepting very elementary logical or mathematical propositions and our grounds for accepting more complicated ones.  

On this account, Descartes regards God’s freedom as unlimited by the constraints of logic only with respect to essences other than His own, which is comprised by omnipotence. The divine essence itself, Gueroult maintains, is uncreated. Hence it constitutes a locus of uncreated truths. The necessity of these truths is not an artifact of God’s indifferent will, but is entirely unconditioned.

The pertinent texts do not, in my opinion, support this account of Descartes’s doctrine. On the contrary, I believe they show that Descartes is unwilling to admit any limitation or qualification of God’s power whatever. Consider the following, from a passage Gueroult himself cites in evidence for his interpretation:

I agree that there are contradictions which are so evident, that we cannot put them before our minds, without judging them entirely impossible, like the one which you suggest: that God might have made creatures independent of Him. But if we would know the immensity of His power we should not put these thoughts before our minds. [To Mesland, 2 May 1644, K 151.]

God would not be omnipotent if any creature were independent of Him. Gueroult must therefore ascribe to Descartes the view that it is an absolute impossibility for God to have made creatures independent of Himself. But Descartes does not, in the quoted passage, say that it is absolutely impossible for God to have made creatures independent of Himself. He says only that we cannot think of God’s making independent creatures without judging it entirely impossible that He should do so. And the unmistakable import of Descartes’s remarks is that this judgment is misleading.

The proposition that God might have made independent creatures is, Descartes admits, so evidently a contradiction that we cannot consider it at all without believing it to be necessarily false. But our compulsion to believe it false whenever we consider it is something Descartes plainly regards as endangering a proper appreciation on our part of divine omnipotence. That is the only possible explanation of his recommendation that those who wish to know God’s power rightly should avoid considering the proposition in question. If Descartes thought that a belief in the falsity of this proposition were warranted, he would obviously have no reason to warn us—as he does—against getting into a situation in which we are unable to avoid believing that it is false.

Descartes regards the impossibility of self-contradictory propositions only as a function of the particular character human reason happens to have, rather than as providing us in any way with a
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measure of God's power. Thus he issues the following entirely unqualified caution:

I do not think that we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since everything involved in truth and goodness depends on His omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or that one and two should not be three. I merely say that He has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or an aggregate of one and two which is not three, and that such things involve a contradiction in my conception. I think the same should be said of a space which is wholly void, or of an extended piece of nothing or of a limited universe. [To Arnauld, 29 July 1648, K 236-237.]

Here Descartes speaks of one of the very propositions which, according to Gueroult, he construes not only as contradictions but as absolute impossibilities: namely, that God might create a vacuum. Far from characterizing it as absolutely impossible, however, Descartes limits himself to acknowledging that the proposition is a contradiction. He explicitly renounces the assertion that God cannot make the proposition true. Despite Gueroult's claim to the contrary, Descartes declares that he "would not dare to say" that God cannot make a space that is wholly void.

Gueroult uses the following text, in which Descartes says that it is inconceivable that God should undermine His own omnipotence, to support his interpretation:

It involves a contradiction that there should be any atoms which are conceived as extended and also indivisible. Though God might make them such that they could not be divided by any creature, we certainly cannot conceive Him able to deprive Himself of the power of dividing them. . . . [To More, 5 Feb. 1649, K 241.]

Taken by itself, this text may indeed appear to support Gueroult's claims. The appearance, however, is deceptive. The passage to which the text belongs is devoted only to setting forth what is required by a rational—that is, a logically coherent or intelligible—conception of God's power. But Descartes has already made it clear that, since God is infinite, we can give no intelligible account of His power. Given that God's power is not constrained by considerations of rationality, it is not reasonable to think that God actually is as our need for intelligibility and coherence requires us to conceive Him. Thus the text must not be understood as defining a limit within
which God is really confined, but only as defining a limit to our ability to conceive Him. Our minds are of such a nature, to be sure, that “we cannot conceive Him able to deprive Himself of the power of dividing” atoms. According to Descartes, nonetheless, this does not mean that God actually is unable to deprive Himself of that power.

This way of reading the text is not speculative or tendentious. It is required, it seems to me, by what Descartes says straightforwardly just before the sentences I have quoted:

For my part, I know that my intellect is finite and God’s power is infinite, and so I set no bounds to it; I consider only what I can conceive and what I cannot conceive, and I take great pains that my judgment should accord with my understanding. And so I boldly assert that God can do everything which I conceive to be possible, but I am not so bold as to deny that He can do whatever conflicts with my understanding—I merely say that it involves a contradiction.

Here Descartes openly reaffirms, quite unequivocally, his doctrine that God’s power is unlimited by the principle of contradiction. And he acknowledges that a person may be justified in asserting that a proposition is self-contradictory, without being justified in asserting that it is false.

VIII

Inevitably, Descartes’s conceptions of inquiry and of knowledge are shaped by his recognition that there is a decisive and ineradicable uncertainty concerning the relation between the class of judgments required by rational considerations and the class of judgments that correctly describe the inherent nature of reality. In view of God’s freedom from rational constraints, it cannot be assumed that the membership of the first class coincides with the membership of the second. Descartes must accordingly forswear the hope of penetrating, through the limits of rationality set by the character of the human mind, to an unconditioned apprehension of how things are. As he conceives it, the aim of inquiry is just to arrive at beliefs which it would be irrational for us to doubt because the assumption that they are false involves us in contradiction. But we cannot be so bold as to claim that rational inquiry leads us to the truth as God has created it. God’s truths may be inaccessible to us, for we cannot
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establish that reason is a suitable instrument for discovering them. On the other hand, there is no need for us to be concerned about our inability to discover what is absolutely true. For any absolute truth that conflicts with the beliefs reason requires us to adopt is ipso facto self-contradictory and unintelligible to us. We could not make use of it even if we were somehow able to identify it as absolutely true.

The possible discrepancy between rationally warranted belief and absolute truth does not, therefore, preclude our confident reliance upon the former. In fact, Descartes says, “it would be entirely contrary to reason to doubt what we understand very well because of something else which we do not understand and which we see no need to understand.14 We can reasonably be satisfied with the products of reason without making the absurd attempt to supersede them, by nonrational means, for the sake of beliefs which would in any case be incomprehensible to us.

IX

But what about Descartes’s famous proof that God is not a deceiver, and that therefore no rationally warranted belief—that is, no belief based upon clear and distinct perception—can be false? Does this proof not enable him to eliminate the uncertainty his doctrine concerning the eternal truths arouses with respect to the absolute authority of reason? That doctrine implies, after all, only that God could have made truths of self-contradictory propositions; it does not

14 Sixth Replies, HR II, p. 251; AT IX, p. 236. This statement echoes a passage which has not heretofore been associated with Descartes’s doctrine concerning the eternal truths:

What is it to us if someone should perhaps imagine that the very thing of whose truth we have been so firmly persuaded appears false to God or to an angel and that as a consequence it is false speaking absolutely? What do we care about this absolute falsity, since we by no means believe in it or even have the least suspicion of it? For we are supposing a persuasion so firm that it can in no way be removed—a persuasion, therefore, that is exactly the same as the most perfect certainty. [Second Replies, HR II, p. 41; AT VII, p. 145]

There is some controversy over how this passage is to be understood. In my own view, it suggests that Descartes recognizes the possibility of a discrepancy between what is absolutely certain and what is absolutely true, and that he is indifferent to the possibility that the outcome of successful rational inquiry may be a belief that is false “speaking absolutely.” This way of reading the passage receives some confirmation, I believe, from the parallel text—the “echo”—quoted above.

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imply that God has actually done so. So the necessities of human reason might in fact coincide with God's truths. And if these do coincide, then human reason is competent to determine the inherent nature of things. For the character of our minds would be harmonious, albeit contingently so, with the actual principles of God's creation. According to the standard interpretation of Descartes's theory of knowledge, this coincidence or harmony between the principles of human reason and the eternal truths God has created is precisely what Descartes intends his proof that God is not a deceiver to establish.

In my view, the standard interpretation is untenable. First of all, I believe that the most satisfactory way to meet the familiar charge that Descartes's reasoning is circular requires a construction of his argument to and from God's veracity which makes it impossible to conclude that what is perceived clearly and distinctly is true "absolutely speaking." Secondly, and more pertinent in the present context, the standard interpretation fails to take sufficient account of the radical implications of Descartes's conception of divine omnipotence.

The proof that God is not a deceiver, like any rational demonstration, can establish for Descartes nothing more than that its conclusion is required by the principles of human reason. The proof is designed to show that the notion of a deceiving God is logically incoherent and hence unintelligible, as other demonstrations offered by Descartes are designed to show that the notions of a vacuum or of an indivisible atom are incoherent and unintelligible. But the proposition that God is a deceiver, however offensive to human reason it may be, cannot be regarded by Descartes as any more an absolute impossibility than the propositions—which on his account are equally unintelligible—that God can create a wholly void space or that He can create an atom He cannot divide. In the one case as in the others, Descartes can permit himself to say merely that the proposition involves a contradiction, and that we are consequently unable to believe it when we attend to its logical incoherence. He is not so bold as to deny that God could have made any of these contradictory propositions true.

The inquiry to which Descartes devotes his Meditations is an exploration by reason of its own limits or necessities. Its goal is, and can

only be, to determine what it is reasonable for us to believe—that is, what it would be irrational for us to doubt—and not what is true in the eyes of God or of the angels. Thus Descartes intends his proofs that God exists to establish just that it is irrational to deny the existence of God, and that it is therefore irrational to doubt the reliability of reason.

These proofs necessarily leave open the question of whether their conclusions are true “speaking absolutely” or in God’s eyes. That is, they leave open the unintelligible possibility that God knows that He does not exist. This is perhaps the ultimate paradox that my interpretation entails. But it is no more paradoxical, though it is more bizarre, than Descartes’s refusal to reject, despite his recognition of its logical incoherence, the proposition that God might have made creatures independent of Himself. This too is a proposition which, according to Descartes, we cannot help judging to be entirely impossible whenever we think of it. With respect to the first proposition, Descartes’s recommendation can only be the one he actually makes when he discusses the second: it is better not to think of such things.\[16\]

X

Scholasticism supposes that human reason and divine understanding, while they differ greatly in power, share a common nature which is specified by logic; and that, since God’s understanding guides His will, the principles of logic define the limits of what is possible for God as well as the limits of what is intelligible to us. On this account the universe must be inherently comprehensible, for God could not have made it otherwise. There are mysteries, to be sure, which we cannot understand and which only faith enables us to grasp at all. But these mysteries are understood by God, and He understands them in accordance with the same principles of rational-

\[16\] Despite his repeated and unequivocal professions of Roman Catholicism, and the fact that there is substantial evidence of his piety, Descartes’s religious convictions have always aroused the most dire suspicions. He has been mistrusted on this score, in fact, by practically everyone. The Catholics accused him of being a Protestant, the Protestants thought he was an atheist, and the atheists have tended to suspect that he was a hypocrite. I shall not consider here what light is shed on these matters, or how they are made additionally obscure, by Descartes’s doctrine concerning the eternal truths.
ity that govern our own thinking. Thus their incoherence is merely apparent—notwithstanding that it is an appearance we are unable to overcome—since all truth is necessarily rational.

Descartes's vision, on the other hand, is that the world may be inherently absurd. He disrupts the harmonious connection which the scholastics envisage between human reason and divine understanding, by denying that rationality is in any way essential to God. In place of reason, he sees at the source of the universe sheer unconstrained will or power. This introduces the possibility that the divine is not only remote from us but utterly alien. Reality may not be rational. There may be a discontinuity in principle between what we can understand and what God knows. Rationality may be nothing more than a conveniently collective form of lunacy, which enables those who suffer from it to communicate with each other, but which isolates them all equally from what is ultimately real.

According to Koyré Descartes cannot have persisted very long in the belief that God creates the eternal truths, because that belief implies the impossibility of science altogether; it means that “the clearest reasons could in no way guarantee either the truth or the existence of anything.” Now Koyré is in a way right about this. Descartes's doctrine does imply that science is impossible, if science is construed naively as an attempt to discover the truth “speaking absolutely.” What Koyré fails to appreciate, however, is that Descartes understands all rational inquiry as an attempt to determine only what beliefs are warranted by the principles of human reason. In this limited enterprise, reason is called upon to satisfy no criteria except its own. Since science makes no claim to apprehend the absolute truth, but only to decide what it is irrational for us to deny or what reason requires us to believe, the clearest reasons are exactly and definitively adequate to their purpose.

XI

What Descartes proposes to accomplish by invoking just this possibility that the world is not inherently rational is the liberation of human reason from a destructive anxiety about its own adequacy and its entitlement to independence. The liberation of reason is to be advanced in two ways. First, the assertion that the eternal truths

17 Koyré, op. cit., p. 19.
do not belong to God’s essence removes a serious impediment to our confidence that we can understand them fully. For it means that a claim to understand them fully is not to be understood, as it must be on scholastic assumptions, as a preposterous boast to possess perfect knowledge of God’s essence.18 Secondly, and more important, the assertion that reality as it is in itself may be in principle unintelligible to us exempts reason from having to regard itself as a competitor of transrational modes of access to truth.

My speculation is that Descartes’s interest in the latter consequence of his doctrine concerning the eternal truths derives from a preoccupation with issues which were raised urgently in the leading intellectual controversy of his time—that between Galileo and the Church over the status of heliocentrism. I am not referring to the scientific issue in that dispute, which was whether the sun or the earth is at the center of the solar system, but to the philosophical question at the bottom of the whole conflict: namely, whether science can unequivocally apprehend reality or whether one must rely in the last analysis upon extrascientific considerations in order to determine the inherent nature of things.

The Church claimed that there are logically consistent alternatives to Galileo’s heliocentrism which account, no less completely than his theory does, for all the empirical data. It insisted that science cannot conclusively justify a preference for one of these alternatives over another. Since each is consistent with itself and with the facts, God might for all we know have made any one of them true. We can discover which of the alternatives God has actually chosen only because we possess a Book in which He reveals what He has done.

Galileo conceded that there are coherent alternatives to his theory, which also save all the appearances. However, he maintained that it is reasonable to select heliocentrism in preference to them on the basis of such considerations as simplicity; and he insisted that a theory whose selection is warranted on these grounds is true in the sense of explaining how the world really is. To this the Church retorted, quite plausibly I think, that there is no sufficient reason to assume that God is bound by considerations, like simplicity, which happen to appeal to the human mind.

Descartes was convinced that the superiority of heliocentrism

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does not lie merely in pragmatic advantages like simplicity. He believed that the heliocentric account of the solar system is derivable by demonstrative reasoning from self-evident first principles, and that no account which conflicts with it can similarly be proven. In this he differs from Galileo, whose approach to physics he condemned as excessively empirical. Now if heliocentrism is demonstrable then revelation must be self-contradictory, and therefore unintelligible, insofar as it conflicts with the heliocentric account. This does not mean, according to Descartes, that geocentrism is false “speaking absolutely.” God might have made that contradiction true. But it does mean that the geocentric hypothesis cannot be considered to be in competition with heliocentrism for the endorsement of reason.

Descartes’s response to the controversy between the Church and Galileo is to accept the claims of neither entirely, but to allow to each what he thinks each must be most anxious to salvage from the dispute. He concedes to the Church that revelation provides superior access to the inherent nature of reality. Reason cannot disturb the truths of faith, since it cannot with any legitimate authority claim to have a purchase on the ultimate object of those truths— to wit, the creative power and will of God. By denying that it is a proper aim of reason to discover absolute truth, however, he frees reason from the need to acknowledge any dependence upon what is

19 In a letter to Mersenne dated “end of November 1633,” Descartes refers to the news that Galileo has been condemned by the Church, and says: “I cannot imagine that he, who is Italian and who is even (as I understand) well-liked by the Pope, would have been treated as a criminal for anything except for having sought to establish the movement of the earth. I know that [this doctrine] had been censured previously by various Cardinals, but I thought I had heard that it continued to be taught publicly, even in Rome. And I confess that if it is false, then all the foundations of my philosophy are false, for it is plainly demonstrable by them.” (F. Alquié, op. cit., pp. 487-488; my translation; emphasis added.) In another letter to Mersenne, dated April 1634, Descartes says: “Doubtless you know that . . . [Galileo’s] views about the movement of the earth were condemned as heretical. I must tell you that all the things I explained in my treatise [i.e., Le Monde], which included the doctrine of the movement of the earth, were so interdependent that it is enough to discover that one of them is false to know that all the arguments I was using are unsound. Though I thought they were based on very certain and evident proofs, I would not wish, for anything in the world, to maintain them against the authority of the Church.” (K 25-26, emphasis added.) Given that Descartes thought heliocentrism true, his belief in its demonstrability appears to follow from his assertion that “I do not accept or desire any other principle in Physics than in Geometry or abstract Mathematics, because all the phenomena of nature may be explained by their means, and sure demonstration can be given of them.” (Principles of Philosophy II, LXIV)
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revealed to faith. Thus he agrees with Galileo that science is right-
fully autonomous, while renouncing Galileo’s claim that science
takes precedence over revelation as a description of the inherent
nature of things.

Scholasticism is committed, by its assumption that all reality is
rational, to construing any conflict between reason and faith as in
fact a conflict between a shallower and a deeper insight into what
reason permits or requires us to believe. Descartes’s doctrine, on the
other hand, renders human reason and divine revelation discon-
tinuous. His account seals the one off from the other by assigning a
different objective to each. Thus there is no competition, and no
possibility of conflict, between them. Revelation is ontologically
more profound than reason, since it alone enables us to share the
perspective of God. But this perspective is blinding, and therein lies
the irrelevance of revelation to the rational interests of men. For its
part, reason can do no more than to submit to its own necessities,
without knowing whether these reflect anything beyond a merely
adventitious contingency. But just in this lies a warrant for the
epistemological confidence which the program of rationalism re-
quires.

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