

# Descartes on Modality and the Eternal Truths

Sarah Patterson  
Birkbeck University of London

**Abstract.** Descartes maintained that God freely created all eternal truths. Yet, while it is impossible for necessary truths to have been otherwise, if they are a matter of God's free choice, then it seems that they could have been otherwise. Adrian W. Moore (2020) offers a solution to this conflict that, he claims, Descartes "could and should" have adopted. This article argues that Descartes's position is in a sense closer to Moore's solution than Moore permits, yet proposes an arguably more accurate account via the Cartesian relationship between omnipotence, indifference, and the dependence of the eternal truths on God. Omnipotence and indifference do not express that God might have created the necessary truths in another way, but rather that God's decrees are in no way determined by anything other than God. Thus, alternative possibilities are not relevant to this account, since there were none before God's creative act.

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Descartes is notorious for his doctrine that God freely created the eternal truths, including the truths of arithmetic. One of the texts in which he voices this Creation Doctrine is a letter to Arnauld of 1648:

I do not think we should ever say of anything that it cannot be brought about by God. For since every basis of truth and goodness [*omnis ratio veri & boni*] depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot bring it about that there is a mountain without a valley or that one and two are not three. I merely say that he has given me such a mind that I cannot conceive a mountain without a valley, or a sum of one and two which is not three; such things involve a contradiction in my conception. (Letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648, AT V 223-4, CSMK 358-9\*)<sup>1</sup>

Here Descartes very nearly says that God can bring it about that one plus two is not three. As Moore notes (2020, 103, n 10), Descartes does not quite say this; he says that he dare not deny it. But in an earlier letter, he is more forthright:

[I]t was free and indifferent for God to make it not true that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories cannot be true together... the power of God cannot have any limits... [This] consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite. (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, CSMK 235\*, AT IV 118)

If Descartes is prepared to say that God could have made it not true that the angles of a triangle sum to two right angles, presumably he is also prepared to say that God could have made it not true that one plus two is three. However, Descartes also describes such truths as necessary:

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[1] Quotations are marked with an asterisk when the translation in CSM or CSMK has been altered.

[I]t is because [God] willed that the three angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that this is true and cannot be otherwise; and so on in other cases. (Sixth Replies, CSM II 291, AT VII 432)

But there seems to be a conflict here. If it is necessary that one and two sum to three, then it is impossible that it should be otherwise; there is no other possibility for the sum of one and two. But if one and two summing to three is a matter of God's free choice, then it seems that it could be otherwise – that there are other possibilities that God could have brought about. Indeed, this seems to be just what Descartes is saying in the passages from the letters to Arnauld and to Mesland. So how should we interpret Descartes's view?

### 1. MOORE'S INTERPRETATION OF DESCARTES

Adrian Moore's paper 'What Descartes Ought to Have Thought About Modality' offers an ingenious interpretation of Descartes's view, defended with typical elegance. The interpretation is guided by what Moore regards as Descartes's core conception of the possible, namely "whatever does not conflict with our human concepts" (2020, 102, quoting Descartes's Second Replies). As Moore points out, if it conflicts with our human concepts that there should be a sum of one and two that is not three, then it also conflicts with our human concepts that God should make a sum of one and two that is not three (2020, 103). Now, Descartes can allow that the mere fact that some proposition conflicts with our concepts is no bar to God's making it true; there is no conflict with our concepts in affirming that (2020, 105). But when it comes to God's making it true that one and two do not sum to three, that does conflict with our concepts, so Descartes should not regard it as possible (2020, 105). Hence, if Descartes thinks that the Creation Doctrine makes it possible for one plus two to be other than three, he is thinking contrary to his own definition of possibility. Since that definition implies that a sum of one and two that is not three is an absolute impossibility that not even God can bring about, Moore argues, passages such as those in the letters to Arnauld and Mesland should be set aside as lapses (2020, 103-4).

What leads Descartes astray, according to Moore? One of the factors Moore points to is Descartes's reluctance to set limits on God's power, something evident in both the letters quoted earlier. Here Moore says that Descartes "could and should" have followed the example of Aquinas, who holds that it is no limitation on God's power to be unable to do the impossible (2020, 106). Aquinas writes:

[T]hat which implies being and non-being at the same time is repugnant to the idea of an absolutely possible thing...such cannot come under the divine omnipotence, not because of any defect in the power of God, but because it has not the nature of a feasible or possible thing. ...Hence it is better to say that such things cannot be done, than that God cannot do them. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.25.3)

Aquinas says that whatever implies contradiction does not have the nature of a possible thing. When it comes to the impossible, there is nothing, so to speak, to do; so it is no limitation on the power of God to be unable to do it. To say that God cannot do the impossible is not to restrict the possibilities that God can realise, to exclude some possibilities from the scope of his power, because there are no possibilities to be excluded.

Moore interprets the Creation Doctrine itself along similar lines. The doctrine is that God freely created the eternal truths; the truth and necessity of any necessary truth depends on God's free choice (2020, 107). But, Moore points out, this dependence need not be interpreted in terms of the exclusion of possibilities. In saying that one plus two is three because God made it so, we need not say that in making it so, God excluded other possibilities; and we should not say that, because there are no other possibilities (2020, 107). The doctrine ought rather to be interpreted in terms of explanatory priority: one plus two's being three is explained by God's decree, but does not explain it (2020, 108). That is how the eternal truths depend on God's choice, and it is compatible with their being necessary truths.

I'm sympathetic to Moore's wish to reconcile the Creation Doctrine with the necessity of the eternal truths, and I agree that thinking of the Creation Doctrine in terms of dependence, rather than the exclusion of possibilities, is a fruitful way of doing this. That is an important point. However, on my reading of him, Descartes already sees the Creation Doctrine in terms of dependence, and he already, like Aquinas, denies that God's omnipotence requires that he be able to bring about the impossible. Indeed, Descartes writes in a letter to More that it is no defect of power in God to be unable to do the impossible:

[W]e do not take it as a mark of impotence when someone cannot do something which we do not understand to be possible...we do not...perceive it to be possible for what is done to be undone – on the contrary, we perceive it to be altogether impossible, and so it is no defect of power in God not to do it. (Letter to More, 5 February 1649, CSMK 363, AT V 273)

As I see it, Descartes's views of God's omnipotence and the eternal truths are closer to the views Moore recommends to him than Moore allows. However, I also see Descartes as holding those views for reasons that are different, I think, from those that Moore attributes to him. For Moore's Descartes, what is and is not possible depends on human concepts: "it is necessary that one plus two is three" means, "in other words", that "our human concepts conflict with one plus two's being anything other than three" (2020, 107). As I read Descartes, what is and is not possible depends not on human concepts, but on the essences freely created by God. So Descartes as I interpret him is in one way close to and in another way distant from Descartes as Moore interprets him: close insofar as he thinks what Moore says he ought to think, but distant insofar as he thinks it for different reasons. The interpretation I offer is motivated by the connection Descartes sees between God's omnipotence, God's indifference, and the dependence of

the eternal truths on God, a connection I explore in the next section. This interpretation will, I hope, offer a way of accommodating the problematic passages in the letters to Arnauld and Mesland, rather than regarding them as lapses.

## 2. THE DEPENDENCE OF THE ETERNAL TRUTHS ON GOD

The Creation Doctrine makes its first appearance in three letters to Mersenne of 1630. In the first letter, it is couched in terms of dependence. Descartes writes:

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. (Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, CSMK 23, AT I 145; emphasis added)

So mathematical truths are just as dependent on God as his other creations, and to deny this dependence is to speak of God in a way that is unworthy of him. But how does Descartes understand this dependence of the eternal truths on God? As Moore says, it is a question of priority. In the second letter, Descartes writes:

I say once more that [the eternal truths] are true or possible only because God knows them as true or possible. They are not known as true by God in any way which would imply that they are true independently of him. If men really understood the sense of their words they could never say without blasphemy that the truth of anything is prior to the knowledge that God has of it. In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, CSMK 24\*, AT I 149)

For Descartes, to say that God knows that one plus two is three because it is true is to insult God by denying the dependence of this truth on him. Rather, we must say that it is true because God knows it – or, rather, God both knows and wills it by a single act.

So far, God's power has not been mentioned; so how is this implicated in the Creation Doctrine? A passage in the Sixth Replies sheds light on this. According to the Creation Doctrine, God freely created the eternal truths. But what kind of freedom is involved? Descartes explains:

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 that has happened or will ever happen [...]. (CSM II 291\*, AT VII 431).

And he adds that "the supreme indifference to be found in God is the supreme indication of his omnipotence" (CSM II 292, AT VII 432). This marks a key connection between indifference and power; indifference is a sign of omnipotence. What is the nature of this indifference? The passage above continues:

[F]or it is impossible to imagine that anything is thought of in the divine intellect as good or true, or worthy of belief or action or omission, prior to the decision of the divine will to make it so. I am not speaking here of temporal priority; I mean that there is not even any priority of order, or nature, or of "rationally determined reason" [*ratione ratiocinata*] as they call it [...] (CSM II 291, AT VII 432)

God's will is indifferent, then, because it is not constrained by any prior ideas in his intellect. Descartes claims that God does not think of anything as true or good prior to his willing it to be so. And he goes on to link this claim to the Creation Doctrine: God did not will that the angles of a triangle should be equal to two right angles because he recognised that it could not be otherwise; rather, it is because he willed that the angles of a triangle should necessarily equal two right angles that "this is true and cannot be otherwise" (CSM II 291, AT VII 432).

We can now see why God's indifference is the indication of his omnipotence. If God understood it to be true that one plus two is three prior to his willing it to be so, he would be constrained to will in accordance with this truth; his will would not be indifferent, but constrained. But his omnipotence would also be compromised, because this truth would be true independent of his willing it to be so; its truth would not be dependent on his decree. The same idea appears in the letters in which the Creation Doctrine first emerges. In the second letter to Mersenne, Descartes complains that "most people do not regard God as a being who is infinite and beyond our grasp, *the sole author on whom all things depend*" (CSMK 24-5, AT I 150; emphasis added). If God is the sole author on whom all things depend, and the eternal truths are things, then God is the author of the eternal truths; their truth depends on him alone as creator. Conversely, if it were true that one plus two is three prior to God's willing it to be so, God would not be the author of this truth. Descartes underlines this by adding that if people truly understood that "God is a cause whose power surpasses the bounds of human understanding", they would see that "since the necessity of these truths does not exceed our knowledge, these truths are therefore something less than, and subject to, the incomprehensible power of God" (CSMK 25, AT I 150). To claim that it is true that one plus two is three prior to God's willing it to be so is to limit God's power by claiming that there are truths fixed independently of the exercise of that power, truths of which he is not the author.

On the view we see here, then, God's freedom in creating the eternal truths, and the omnipotence that this indicates, is understood in terms of his being the indifferent author of those truths. They exist—that is, they are true—because he willed and understood them to be true (so he is their author), and nothing determined him to will and understand them to be true (so he is their indifferent author).<sup>2</sup> If God's indifference

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2] An important qualification needs to be registered here. I take it that it is compatible with Descartes's view for God's act of willing and understanding to flow from his nature. Indeed, it may require it, since Burman reports him as saying that God's decrees cannot be separated from him and that they are completely necessary as well as completely indifferent (CSMK 348, AT V 166). So God's act may be

is understood in terms of the absence of any determining factors, it does not imply the existence of alternative possibilities.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Descartes's conception of God's indifference is incompatible with the existence of alternative possibilities for the eternal truths. The next section illustrates this point by comparing Descartes's view with more orthodox conceptions of the eternal truths.

### 3. AN UNORTHODOX VIEW

One of the hallmarks of Descartes's view is his claim that in God, the act of willing and the act of understanding are the same.

In God willing and knowing are a single thing in such a way that by the very fact of willing something he knows it and it is only for this reason that such a thing is true. (Letter to Mersenne, 6 May 1630, CSMK 24, AT I 149)

[T]here is always a single identical and perfectly simple act by means of which [God] simultaneously understands, wills and accomplishes everything. (*Principles of Philosophy* I.23, CSM I 201, AT VIIIA 14)

[N]or should we conceive any precedence or priority between his intellect and his will; for the idea we have of God teaches us that there is in him only a single activity, entirely simple and entirely pure. (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, CSMK 235, AT IV 119)

This contrasts with the more orthodox view that distinguishes between God's intellect and his will. On the orthodox view, there is some similarity between the creative acts of God and human acts of creation. The human artist's knowledge and understanding—matters of the intellect—enable her to grasp the creative possibilities; acts of will enable her to put her ideas into effect. This division between intellect and will appears in Aquinas's description of how God acts:

[E]ffects pre-exist in Him after the mode of intellect, and therefore proceed from Him after the same mode. Consequently, they proceed from Him after the mode of will, for His inclination to put in act what His intellect has conceived appertains to the will. (*Summa Theologica* I.19.4)

This picture of God as conceiving through intellect and effecting through will dovetails with Aquinas's account of God's omnipotence. Aquinas says that a thing is said to be "absolutely impossible when the predicate is altogether incompatible with the subject, as, for instance, that a man is a donkey" (*Summa Theologica* I.25.3). The idea of a human donkey is the idea of something that does and does not have the essence of a human; it implies

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determined in the sense of flowing from his nature, but it is not determined by his understanding of truths holding independently of his decrees, since there are none. In what follows, I suppress this qualification.

[3] This interpretation of God's freedom is championed in Kaufman (2002), a paper to which I am much indebted.



being and not-being at the same time, so it is "repugnant to the idea of an absolutely possible thing", as Aquinas puts it in the passage quoted earlier. Since it is not a possible thing, there is no idea of it that could be the object of an act of will. Hence, it does not come within the scope of God's power; not (as Aquinas puts it) "through lack of power, but through lack of possibility, such things being intrinsically impossible" (*On the Power of God*, 1.3).

Descartes's view is different. As he sees it, to say that some things are intrinsically possible or impossible is to say that they are possible or impossible independently of God. The picture of God understanding essences through his intellect and effecting through his will must be rejected, because it means that God is limited to selecting among the alternatives compatible with the essences understood through the intellect. That is incompatible with God's indifference, because it means that God's will is limited by prior understanding.<sup>4</sup> It is also incompatible with his status as sole author on whom all things depend. If we think of God as choosing from a menu of possibilities grasped by the intellect, as it were, then his choice is restricted by the author of the menu; he is not the sole author on whom all things depend. If God is sole author, he writes the menu; he creates possibilities and necessities themselves. As Descartes puts it in the *Principles of Philosophy*, "God alone is the true cause of everything which is *or can be*" (PP I.24, CSM I 201, AT VIIIA 14; emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Thus, possibilities and necessities, including the eternal truths, must be the products of God's will as well as being the objects of his intellect. So "his understanding and willing does not happen, as in our case, by operations that are in a certain sense distinct one from another" (PP I.23, CSM I 201, AT VIIIA 14). Rather, God creates truths by a single act that is both understanding and willing.

#### 4. THE PROBLEMATIC LETTERS

How can this understanding of Descartes's unorthodox account help us with the problematic passages in the letters to Arnauld and Mesland? It might seem that we are back to square one. If God creates truths by an act of willing, and that act is free, then surely God could have done otherwise; he could have made it not true that one plus two is three. And Descartes seems to say as much in the letter to Mesland:

[I]t was free and indifferent for God to make it not true that the three angles of a triangle were equal to two right angles, or in general that contradictories cannot be true together... the power of God cannot have any limits... [This] consideration shows us that God cannot have been determined to make it true that contradictories

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4] Aquinas writes that "if God's will is determined to will something through the knowledge of His intellect, this determination of the divine will will not be due to something extraneous", because God's intellect and will both belong to his essence (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I.82.8). For Descartes, by contrast, the determination of God's will by prior truths grasped by his intellect is incompatible with his indifference.

5] This passage is quoted by Kaufman (2002, 36).

cannot be true together, and therefore that he could have done the opposite [...]. (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, CSMK 235, AT IV 118).

If God could have done otherwise, we want to say, surely it is possible that the angles of a triangle should not sum to two right angles, or that one and two should not sum to three. Hence, this is one of the passages that Moore describes as a lapse on Descartes's part.

However, if we interpret "he could have done the opposite" as an allusion to God's indifference—as meaning that his power was not determined by any prior understanding—then it need not invoke any alternative possibilities. And there is good reason not to interpret it as invoking alternative possibilities, because God did not create alternative possibilities. Later in the same letter, Descartes writes that our minds are

[...] so created as to be able to conceive as possible the things which God has wished to be in fact possible, but not to be able to conceive as possible things which God could have made possible, but which he has nevertheless wished to make impossible. (Letter to Mesland, 2 May 1644, CSMK 235, AT IV 118)

Here too, Descartes alludes to things that God *could have* made possible. But we should not interpret this as alluding to a realm of alternative possibilities, including the possibility of one and two not summing to three. God has not created any such alternative possibilities. Rather, we should interpret it as an allusion to the fact that nothing determined God to create as he did.

Let's return to the Arnauld letter, which Moore also identifies as a lapse. Descartes writes:

[S]ince every basis of truth and goodness depends on his omnipotence, I would not dare to say that God cannot bring it about that there is a mountain without a valley or that one and two are not three. (Letter to Arnauld, 29 July 1648, AT V 223-4, CSMK 358-9\*)

Descartes holds that it is impossible for there to be a mountain without a valley (or an uphill without a downhill) or for one and two not to sum to three; and he holds that this is so because of God's decree. But nothing determined God to make that decree; rather, the basis of truth depends on God's omnipotence. So Descartes's "I would not dare to say" can be read, not as a scholastic scruple, but as an unwillingness to say something that could suggest that God was *not* indifferent (and so omnipotent) in making those decrees.<sup>6</sup> Such an interpretation does not imply that the existence of an alternative possibility for the sum of one and two.

##### 5. NECESSITY, POSSIBILITY AND HUMAN CONCEPTS

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[6] This reading is defended at length in LaCroix (1984), to which I am much indebted. See pp. 50-52.



I concur with Moore in understanding the dependence of the eternal truths on God in a way that does not imply the existence of alternative possibilities. But I think that our reasons for eschewing such possibilities are different. Moore says that there are no other possibilities for the sum of one and two because "it is necessary that one plus two is three—in other words, ...our human concepts conflict with one plus two's being anything other than three" (2020, 107). He adds that the necessity of one plus two's being three "holds because of how God has made our human concepts" (2020, 107). Similarly, Moore writes that according to Descartes's core conception of possibility:

When we say that God could not make one plus two anything other than three, we do not describe any limitation on the part of God then. We make an *anthropocentric* claim. We advert to our own human concepts. We say that these concepts would be contradicted by God's making one plus two anything other than three. (2020, 106)

This suggests that, as Moore reads Descartes, there is no more to the necessity of one plus two's being three than its relation to our human concepts. It is because our concepts would be contradicted by one plus two's being anything other than three that there are no other possibilities, and so we should not understand God's creation of this necessary truth in terms of the exclusion of other possibilities.

On the interpretation I have been sketching, the necessity of the eternal truths is not tied to human concepts in this way. A remark in the Sixth Replies provides textual support for the view that Descartes does not tie the necessity of these truths to human concepts. He writes, "we should not suppose that the eternal truths depend on the human intellect or other existing things; they depend on God alone, who, as the supreme legislator, has ordained them from eternity" (CSM II 294, AT VII 436). But though this text is suggestive, it could be reconciled with Moore's reading if God ordains the eternal truths by making human concepts a certain way. Stronger textual support for my reading comes from a passage in the Fifth Meditation. Claiming that existence is inseparable from God, just as the fact that its angles sum to two right angles is inseparable from the essence of a triangle (CSM II 46, AT VII 66), Descartes writes:

It is not that my thought makes it so, or imposes necessity on any thing; on the contrary, it is the necessity of the thing itself, namely the existence of God, that determines my thinking in this respect. (CSM II 46, AT VII 67).

This passage strongly suggests that the necessity of a triangle's angles summing to two right angles depends not on our thought or our concepts but on the essence of the triangle itself, which Descartes regards as created by God.

But what of the passage in the Second Replies that guides Moore's interpretation? Doesn't that show that Descartes grounds necessity and possibility in human concepts? The passage in question forms part of Descartes's response to an objection to his Fifth

Meditation argument for the existence of God. The objection is that existence can be affirmed of God only if God's nature is possible. Descartes responds,

But please notice how weak this qualification is. If by "possible" you mean what everyone commonly means, namely "whatever does not conflict with our human concepts", then it is manifest that the nature of God, as I have described it, is possible in this sense [...]. (CSM II 107, AT II 150)

As Moore notes (2020, 102, fn. 5), Descartes does not commit himself to this understanding of "possible", but describes it as the commonly understood meaning. Moore adds, though, that that context shows that Descartes "has no stake in understanding the possible in any other way" (ibid.). I draw a different moral from what Descartes says about other ways of understanding possibility. He writes:

Alternatively, you may well be imagining some other kind of possibility that relates to the object; but unless this matches the first kind of possibility, it can never be known [*cognosci*] by the human intellect [...]. (CSM II 107, AT II 150)

Significantly, Descartes does not repudiate this putative "other kind of possibility that relates to the object". Instead, he makes an epistemological point: that we know or recognise possibility through compatibility with our concepts. But that epistemological point is compatible with the view that the possibility we recognise has an underlying metaphysical foundation. Compatibility with our concepts captures the extension of "possible", as it were, but that need not mean that it captures what makes something possible.<sup>7</sup> The Creation Doctrine fills in the rest of the story; it tells us that possibilities and necessities are created by God. On the view I am attributing to Descartes, the reason we should not understand God's free creation of the eternal truths in terms of other possibilities is that God did not create any such possibilities, and there are no possibilities unless God creates them.

## 6. CAN THE ETERNAL TRUTHS CHANGE?

If God was not determined to make it not true that contradictories cannot be true together, does that mean that he might now make them true together? Leibniz certainly thought that the Creation Doctrine has that consequence:

[T]he belief that God was the free author...of truth and of the essence of things... opens the door to the most exaggerated Pyrrhonism: for it leads to the assertion that this proposition, three and three make six, is only true where and during the

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7] Compare: Descartes says that he uses the term "thought" to include everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it (Second Replies, CSM II 113, AT VII 160). That tells us the extension of the word; it tells us how to pick thoughts out. But that is compatible with thoughts' having an underlying nature that is distinct from being conscious, such as involving ideas (and so being directed on objects). This is suggested by the definition of "idea" (ibid. and Third Meditation, CSM II 25, AT VII 36-7). Of course, this example is even more controversial than the modal one.

time when it pleases God; that it is perhaps false in some parts of the universe; and that perhaps it will be so among men in the coming year. (*Theodicy* §180, quoting Bayle approvingly)

Descartes addresses this worry in the first of the 1630 letters to Mersenne, through the following imaginary dialogue:

It will be said that if God had established these truths he can change them as a king changes his laws. To this the answer is: Yes he can, if his will can change. "But I understand them to be eternal and unchangeable". - I make the same judgement about God. "But his will is free". - Yes, but his power is beyond our grasp. (Letter to Mersenne, 15 April 1630, CSMK 23, AT I 145)

Here Descartes says that God can change the eternal truths, if his will with respect to them can change. But the clear implication is that his will cannot change with respect to them; the truths, like God, are eternal and unchangeable. Why can his will not change, if it is free? Descartes responds that God's power is beyond our grasp. God has the power to bind himself, by establishing the eternal truths through his free decree.<sup>8</sup> Descartes explains this in response to Gassendi:

[J]ust as the poets suppose that the Fates were originally established by Jupiter, but that after they were established he bound himself to abide by them, so I do not think that the essences of things, and the mathematical truths which we can know concerning them, are independent of God. Nevertheless I do think that they are immutable and eternal, since the will and decree of God willed and decreed that it should be so. (Fifth Replies, CSM II 261, AT VII 380)

LaCroix (1984, 50) makes a helpful distinction between God's undetermined power and God's self-determined power. God establishes the eternal truths through his undetermined power; that is, he is not determined by any prior understanding in creating them. But having established them, he is determined by them; they are immutably and eternally true, and cannot change.

Moore raises the worry that if we treat the letter to Arnauld as expressing Descartes's considered view, then supreme power extends to making contradictions true, and this means that Descartes cannot escape from scepticism (2020, 113). The worry is that if the "deceiver of supreme power" mentioned early in the Second Meditation has the power to make contradictions true, Descartes cannot say that "he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something" (CSM II 17, AT VII 25). Like Moore, I do not think Descartes needs to worry that God might change the eternal truths; and as I have been suggesting, if we read the Arnauld letter as alluding to God's undetermined power, his supreme indifference in creating the eternal truths, supreme power need not be the power to falsify eternal truths or make contradictions true. Apart from this, though, I think that the worry about the Second Meditation is misplaced, because the role of the deceiver in the project of the *Meditations* does not

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[8] As noted by LaCroix (1984, 42) and Kaufman (2002, 38).

turn on the extent of its power. Detailed defence of this claim would take us too far afield, so I shall elaborate briefly (and contentiously).

Two powerful beings are invoked in the First Meditation, an "omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am" (CSM II 14, AT VII 21) and "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning" (CSM II 15, AT VII 22). The latter is the being mentioned in the passage in the Second Meditation, so I shall discuss him first. Now, the malicious demon is not introduced in the First Meditation as a reason for doubt. Instead, the pretence of deceit by such a demon is presented as a device to counteract habitual assent to familiar opinions, opinions that have already been shown to be doubtful for other reasons (CSM II 15, AT VII 22).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the demon's deceit is presented as specifically targeting beliefs based on reliance on the senses, beliefs in the existence of "the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things" (*ibid.*), rather than beliefs about numbers.<sup>10</sup> Given Descartes's broader aims, there is good reason for this. The *Meditations* is a text that is intended to change readers' minds by introducing them to new metaphysical principles, ones "that destroy the principles of Aristotle", as he put it in a letter of 1641 (CSMK 173, AT III 298).<sup>11</sup> In Descartes's view, this change of mind involves the revision of a complex of erroneous opinions grounded in childhood reliance on the senses.<sup>12</sup> The First Meditation doubt plays a crucial role in this; Descartes himself says that "its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses" (Synopsis, CSM II 9, AT VII 12). It is significant, then, that the pretence of deceit by a demon targets both the senses and such preconceived opinions as the belief that we are "so bound up with a body and with senses that [we] cannot exist without them" (CSM II 16, AT VII 25). If the demon is employed simply as a device to enforce doubt, it need not wield supreme power, and is not hostage to questions about Descartes's conception of divine power as it figures in the Creation Doctrine.

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9] Descartes writes, "my habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief... In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary" (CSM II 15, AT VII 22). The pretence of deception by a malicious demon is introduced as a way to execute this plan.

10] This focus reappears when the pretence is reasserted at the start of the Second Meditation: "I will suppose then, that everything I see is spurious. I will believe that my memory tells me lies, and that none of the things it reports ever happened. I have no senses. Body, shape, extension, movement and place are chimeras" (CSM II 16, AT VII 24).

11] In this now famous passage, Descartes writes to Mersenne that the six *Meditations* contain all the foundations of his physics, and that he hopes that readers "will gradually get used to my principles, and recognise their truth" before they notice their anti-Aristotelian character (Letter to Mersenne, January 1641, CSMK 173, AT III 298).

12] This interpretation is developed more fully in Patterson (2012). For other interpretations stressing the role of doubt as a tool for cognitive reform in the *Meditations*, see Carriero (2009), Garber (1986) and Hatfield (1986).

Let me turn to Descartes's invocation of "an omnipotent God" who may have created me so that "I go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square" (CSM II 14, AT VII 21). Unlike the demon, this being is explicitly introduced in order to provide a reason for doubt; so doesn't the scope of that doubt depend on what Descartes means by "supreme power" in the context of the Creation Doctrine? I think the answer is "No". Descartes himself says that this doubt can be motivated without recourse to the notion of a being of supreme power. Initially, he motivates the doubt by invoking the figure of an omnipotent God "who made me kind of creature that I am" and who might have "created me such that I am deceived all the time" (CSM II 14, AT VII 21). But he goes on to provide a reason for doubt addressed to those "who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than believe that everything else is uncertain" (ibid.). Those who reject so powerful a creator must posit some less powerful cause for their existence, such as "chance or fate or a continuous chain of events" (ibid.). And Descartes argues that "the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time" (ibid.). This yields a dilemma: if we originate in an omnipotent creator, that creator has the power to give us a deceitful nature; if we originate in a less powerful cause, our natures are also likely to be so imperfect as to lead us astray. The source of Descartes's sceptical worry, then, lies in the possibility that we have natures that are so imperfect that we are deceived all the time.<sup>13</sup> The possibility of a being of supreme power is not required in order to motivate this worry, and so it is unaffected by questions about what exactly such power amounts to in the context of the Creation Doctrine. What is relevant to Descartes's worry about our natures as knowers is God's role as creator of those natures, not God's power over what it is we know. For these reasons, then, I think that the interpretation of the Creation Doctrine is irrelevant to the dialectical role of the powerful beings invoked in the *Meditations*.

### 7. HOW DOES GOD CREATE ETERNAL TRUTHS?

When Descartes unveiled the doctrine that God created the eternal truths in the 1630 letters, Mersenne evidently asked what necessitated God to create them. Predictably, Descartes responds that nothing necessitated him to create them:

[H]e 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. And it is certain that these truths are no more necessarily attached to his essence than are other created things. (Letter to Mersenne, 27 May 1630, CSMK 25, AT I 152)

Here we see again God's indifference; nothing determines God to create as he does. But Mersenne's question reflects the worry: if God is not necessitated to will the

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<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason that Carriero, who provides further textual evidence for this interpretation, refers to the doubt as the "imperfect-nature doubt" (2009, 56).

eternal truths, what makes them necessary? This worry is expressed in this passage from Suárez:

Those enunciations are not true because they are known by God [i.e. are in the divine intellect], but rather they are thus known because they are true; otherwise no reason could be given why God would necessarily know them to be true. For if their truth came forth from God Himself, that would take place by means of God's will; hence it would not come forth of necessity, but voluntarily. (Suárez, *Metaphysical Disputations* 31.12.40)

The worry is that if the truth of the eternal truths depends on God's will, then they cannot be necessary. As we have seen, Descartes rejects this claim. For him, the eternal truths are necessary not because God is determined by them, but because God wills and understands them to be necessary, and thereby creates them as such. What then is it to create eternal truths? It might seem pointless to ask, since it would certainly be no surprise if we were unable to comprehend this. But Descartes's remarks suggest that he does have a story about what God does to create eternal truths. In explaining to Mersenne that God is the total and efficient cause of the eternal truths, he writes that God is

[...] the author of the essence of created things no less than of their existence; and this essence is nothing other than the eternal truths. (CSMK 25, AT I 152; emphasis added)

This suggests that God creates the eternal truths by creating essences, or what Descartes elsewhere calls "true and immutable natures" (Fifth Meditation, CSM II 44, AT VII 64). So rather than essences pre-existing in God's intellect, as they do for Aquinas, God brings them into being by a creative act that combines both willing and understanding. However, this view is compatible with Descartes's holding that the eternal truths exist in God's intellect, an interpretation for which Rozemond (2008) makes a strong case.<sup>14</sup> Seen in this way, then, Descartes's view of the ontology of the eternal truths looks quite traditional; it is his view of their origin that is unorthodox. But despite the unorthodox character of the Creation Doctrine, if we interpret Descartes's more provocative statements about God's powers with respect to these truths in terms of God's indifference, we may be able to see how the eternal truths can depend on God's will and yet be necessary.

*s.patterson@bbk.ac.uk*

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<sup>14</sup> Rozemond concludes that "the view that the eternal truths have objective being in God's mind seems to fit nicely into Descartes's various remarks about their status" (2008, 53). She adds that the view accommodates their status as eternal, accommodates Descartes's distinction between God's creation of these truths and his imprinting them on our human minds, and enables him to avoid the claim that they have a real existence distinct from God (*ibid.*).



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