

Divine Simplicity and Freedom in Descartes – Comments on Sarah Patterson’s “Descartes on Modality and the Eternal Truths”

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Abstract. This paper offers a brief response to Patterson’s paper, “Descartes on Modality and the Eternal Truths”, which itself is at least in part a response to Moore’s paper, ‘What Descartes ought to have thought about morality’. After reviewing some relevant points from both Patterson’s and Moore’s papers regarding the question of the divine creation of necessary truths, I focus on the possible consequences of Descartes’ understanding of divine simplicity for this interpretive debate. I argue that, by bearing Descartes’ commitment to a strong form of divine simplicity in mind, we can see how he can both be committed to a voluntaristic account of the creation of divine truths and yet indicate that God could not have created things in another way.

Keywords: Descartes, God, necessity, modality, omnipotence, divine simplicity.

Before I consider Dr. Patterson’s illuminating and interesting paper, I want to begin introducing the questions we are concerned with here by discussing Prof. Moore’s paper concerning a possible tension in Descartes’ treatment of God and modality. On the one hand, Moore notes (2020, 101-2), we have statements in favour of a strong voluntarism, that God created the necessary truths solely by an act of divine will, alongside a claim that the inconceivability of a conceptual impossibility does not entail that God could not have created things that way. On the other, we find the claim that possibility is linked to conceivability and that we can rule out something as impossible for God to bring about on the basis of its inconceivability for us. As it is inconceivable for us that the necessary truths could have been otherwise, we can claim that God could not have created the necessary truths otherwise. On the surface, then, we have a straightforward contradiction, with Descartes stating both that God could and could not have created the necessary truths otherwise.

Moore’s answer to this tension in his paper is to claim that the voluntarism expressed in the correspondence and elsewhere is an unfortunate lapse. Descartes should not have stated that necessary truths could have been otherwise, given his official position regarding the nature of possibility and claims regarding what we can clearly and distinctly perceive, and he was potentially led astray by his desire to not impiously limit God’s omnipotence (Moore 2020, 102-3). Moore argues that the Thomist position that God is not limited by being unable to create the impossible is open to Descartes. While we can say that there are things God could not create, this is merely a claim in reference to what we can coherently conceptualise, and not one regarding a limitation on God’s power (2020, 106-7). The necessary truths are necessary because they depend on God, in the sense that the way that they are can be solely explained on the basis of a decree of God’s will (2020, 107 *et passim*). There are many subtle and interesting points made in

Moore's paper, but I will focus my comments here on the excellent paper by Patterson, though some of what I have to say is relevant to both papers.

Patterson's intention is to incorporate Descartes' gestures towards voluntarism within his official position. The argument here suggests a negative construal of Descartes' account of divine indifference: "God's indifference is understood in terms of the absence of any determining factors". (7)¹ God is indifferent and omnipotent because his decrees are not pre-determined in any way, not because he could have acted otherwise in creating the necessary truths that he did create. There are no alternate possibilities implied by the account, because there are no possibilities prior to God's creative action to be ruled out. As such, there is nothing that is intrinsically possible or impossible, apart from God's decrees (9). In this way, we can claim that God creates the necessary truths solely through his will (in the sense that they depend on his will and are not pre-determined) and that God could not have made the necessary truths otherwise.

A question we could put to this argument is how we are to read Descartes' reference to God being able to 'do the opposite' with regard to the creation of eternal truths. Patterson argues that any reference by Descartes to God being able to 'do the opposite' should be taken as alluding to the divine will not being pre-determined, rather than committing his account to the possibility of God acting otherwise. In addition, we also find the suggestion that Descartes' claim that he "would not dare to say that God cannot bring it about that there is a mountain without a valley" should be read carefully within its context, which reveals that Descartes is unwilling to rule something out without adverting to what we can clearly and distinctly conceive (rather than claiming that he is unwilling to state that God could not have acted otherwise in creating the eternal truths) (11-12).

There is also a concern that Descartes' voluntarism leads to sceptical consequences, which is particularly worrisome when he bases his system on clear and distinct perceptions of what must be the case. Patterson explains that though the eternal truths are freely adopted by God, he is now bound to maintain them due to his unchanging will (on this basis, we can make a useful distinction between the divine undetermined and self-determined power), and thus the sceptical worries regarding changing certainties are avoided (13-15). Finally, Patterson addresses the question of what makes the necessary truths necessary on a Cartesian account. The answer is that these necessary truths are embodied in immutable natures, maintained by God's unchanging will. Thus, the eternal truths can both be necessary and depend entirely on God's indifferent will (18-19). The tension is resolved: the eternal truths were freely created by God as an action solely dependent on the divine will, yet at the same time things could not have been otherwise in that regard.

[1] Unattributed references are to Patterson (2021).

Patterson's paper raises many interesting questions. One possible topic for discussion could be the notion of "indifference" that Descartes is operating with here. As Kaufman has argued (2003b, 401), there are hints that Descartes sees the kind of indifference enjoyed by God as involving the freedom to do otherwise. As I noted earlier, Patterson's paper involves a solely negative construal of divine indifference, based around a lack of constraint. However, is it possible to claim that God has indifference if he is not ruling out various possibilities? Does Descartes hold a merely negative account of divine indifference? I think it would be fair to say that indifference of the will was most usually thought of at the time as involving the freedom to do otherwise and so the burden of interpretive proof is perhaps leaning against Patterson here. We could also focus on the distinction drawn by Patterson between divine undetermined and self-determined power (13). Would Descartes wish to say that God's power is ever used in an entirely undetermined way? Such a claim would seem to make God's use of his power unacceptably arbitrary (amongst other things, potentially undermining the importance of other aspects of the divine, such as his perfect goodness).

Another question that I wonder about is whether it is possible to find an interpretation of the texts in question that rather more takes Descartes at his word. As scholars, we should undoubtedly pause before attributing the kind of lapse to Descartes that Moore wishes to impute to him. Further, while Descartes certainly puts things in terms of the dependence thesis that both Moore and Patterson discuss, it is unavoidable that he also puts matters in terms of alternative possibilities – there are other things that God could have done, for example, he could have made $1+2=4$, but he did not do so (and of course, this links back to the question of divine indifference). So, can we find an interpretation of Descartes that avoids accusing him of a major lapse and perhaps gives a more natural reading of Descartes' references to alternative possibilities and indifference of the will? There are a couple of strands in Descartes' thought that can perhaps help us, and I will discuss these both briefly in turn before I conclude: 1) Descartes' commitment to a strong form of divine simplicity (noted by Patterson (8-9), and 2) the distinction drawn by Conant between conception and apprehension in Descartes' epistemology (1991, 120).

One of the many intriguing points that Patterson raises as potentially significant is Descartes' approach to divine simplicity (8), the claim that God has no parts and his essence is inextricably intertwined with his attributes: "All the attributes which we include in the concept of the divine nature are so interconnected that it seems to us to be self-contradictory that any one of them should not belong to God". (Descartes 1984, 107) Though the doctrine of divine simplicity is generally agreed upon, there is quite some contention in the theological tradition regarding how this plays out in greater detail. Descartes seems to have a commitment to a strong version of this doctrine, according to which we cannot even conceptually distinguish between different facets of the divine (see Kaufman 2003a for an examination of this view). It is this claim that ultimately commits Descartes to voluntarism, for there is nothing logically to pre-

determine God's decision to create the eternal truths. It just happens 'all at once', as it were. But I think we might consider whether this doctrine also might help resolve the apparent tension that we find in Descartes' texts.

As I mentioned earlier, while Descartes certainly does not want to undermine divine omnipotence by holding that God's will is pre-determined by his nature, neither does he want to state that God's will is merely arbitrary. I think a hint of this is found in a quote from Descartes' conversation with Burman, from 1648: "For although God is completely indifferent with respect to all things, he necessarily made the decrees he did, since he necessarily willed what was best, even though it was of his own will that he did what was best. We should not make a separation here between the necessity and indifference that apply to God's decrees; although his actions were completely indifferent, they were also completely necessary". (1991, 348) How should we make sense of this quote? Though it seems paradoxical, Descartes claims the Cartesian God is both free *and* necessitated. Insofar as the divine will is not pre-determined by the divine intellect, voluntarism is true: God created the necessary truths freely by an act of will. Though we cannot conceive of it, we can nevertheless grasp in some sense that things could have been otherwise with regard to the necessary truths and God could have (in some sense) created things in that way (and it is here that I refer to the second strand, where we follow Conant (1991, 120) in distinguishing between conception and apprehension in Descartes' epistemology – I *apprehend* that the eternal truths could have been different, even though I cannot strictly *conceive* of it). However, at the same time, once we grasp the interconnecting nature of divine simplicity, we see that (in another sense) God could not have created things in another way. God's nature as a whole acts as a simultaneous constraint on what he can will, but this is not a constraint that would negate the freedom of his will and a commitment to voluntarism (insofar as the will is not *pre*-determined). It is perhaps in this way that we could combine the convincing argument found in this paper concerning the dependence thesis with Descartes' apparent reference to God being able to act otherwise. Regardless, the importance of Descartes' notion of divine simplicity seems to me to be of particular importance here and thus of something potentially worthy of further discussion in regard to this topic.

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